Burning Rubber

by Bedlamwolf

Summary

It's never just another case, particularly not when conspiracies are involved. The corpse of a modern pirate shows up on a naval base, a continent away from where he was last seen. Signs show he had unusual abilities; so did the UNSUB. What role do two black haired brothers play in all this? Can the team figure out just what is going on here before it's too late? M for themes.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Aces Wild

EIGHT YEARS AGO

Tony looked at the kid sitting across his desk. The teen's whole look screamed 'Rebellious youth' to the cop and he was sure the look he was giving him could peel paint. In fact, he was positive the brat had stolen the whole 'tude from some bad 1970's tough-boy movie. Ripped jeans, tight tank-top covered by a well-worn leather jacket... The busted lip just completed the look.

"So, you say your name is 'Ace'...?" He prompted, looking over his notes. Not that there was much to go on. Kid looked scrawny, fourteen, maybe fifteen years old. He had been in the middle of a nasty fight with one of the local gangs when the cops had rounded them all up, and by the 'middle of' Tony ment they were wailing on him. Not that you'd know it from his cocky ass, or the limp the gang members were sporting.

"Yeah. Ace. Got a problem with that," dark gray eyes darted down, taking in his name plate, "Detective DE-NOSE-O?"

Tony rolled his eyes, "As if I haven't heard that one a million times before, top-deck. Got a last name to go with that?" Really, the only reason Tony was involved was because that particular gang was suspected in a local murder.

"Yeah. Course I do." The kid smirked, slouching. DiNozzo was sure if it wasn't for the handcuffs, his hands would be in his pockets, too.

There was a pause. "Well, are you going to tell me what it is?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I gee, I don't know. Maybe so I could call your family?"

"Let me think about that for a second." Ace hummed for a moment, "Yeah, nope. don't feel like sharing."

Tony ran a hand through his very disheveled hair. This kid is a real pain in the ass. "Fine then, Ace-of-spades," he caught the glint of humor in the kid's eyes, "mind telling me what you were doing taking on five guys twice your size?"

"First, the biggest had maybe sixty pounds on me, tops. Secondly," The boy scratched the side of his freckled nose with his middle finger, "How about, 'No' ass-hat."

"Fine then. You can just spend the night in lock up until we get this all sorted out." Tony snarled, shuffling his papers together as he stood.

The brat had the audacity to snort, "Good luck with that. You can't keep me here."

"Oh, and why is that, Mr. smarty-pants?"

Ace began in a tone that one usually used for explaining things to small children, "Because, Detective, I am a minor. It's against the law to keep me here over night."

Tony rounded on the teen, wagging a finger at him, "Ah-ha! But you won't tell me your last name, so I can't contact a parent or guardian for you, so I can!"
"Damn." Ace frowned, "Forgot about that." dark eyes blinked up at him, "Oh! You can't keep me here because I am the victim! HA!" He crowed.

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, none of your officers saw me hitting the other guys, right?" He gave DiNozzo an infuriating shit-eating grin, "and I'm sure they all claim they fell down or something."

"You're going to be a lawyer someday, aren't you?" Tony sighed as he sat back down. He hated to admit it, but Ace was right. None of the gang members had admitted to actually being beat up by a kid years younger than them. Typical gang-macho bull-shit.

"Nah. I'm just too fond of getting into trouble as my Gramps would say. I'd be a horrible lawyer." He held up his wrists and raised his eyebrows. Tony took the hint and removed the cuffs, expecting the kid to take off for the door the moment they were off. Ace surprised him as he settled in his chair instead, "So, whatcha got to eat?"

A fellow detective came up behind DiNozzo and tapped him on the shoulder, "Tony, someone's here to pick up your..." his eyes danced over the teen, taking in the lack of handcuffs. "witness."

Ace visibly tensed as Tony asked, "Oh, who?"

"Claims he's an uncle. His name is Teach Marshall." Both detectives looked at Ace, who was now gripping the chair like it was a life line. He looked anything but happy to hear that name.

"You know this guy?" Tony raised an eyebrow, not buying the whole 'uncle' thing, "Or do you want us to get rid of him?"

"Huh?" The boy blinked at him, obviously surprised by the offer. He smiled a little ruefully before shaking his head, "Nah. It's ok. I know..." He growled out the word "Uncle" with great distaste "real well." The teen stood. "Might as well go say 'hi' to the drunken sot."

Tony nodded to Detective Scott, taking over and leading the teen to the waiting room. As usual, the place was semi-full of the less-respectable of society waiting to pick up the ne're do wells. His green eyes fell immediately to a man standing off to the side. His black hair was long and greasy, kept out of his face with a bandana. Even from across the room, DiNozzo could smell the alcohol on the man's clothing. He marked the man as a criminal on sight.

The moment the drunkard's eyes spotted Ace, who stood next to the detective, radiating distaste, his face broke into a grin, revealing missing teeth. "Ace my boy! There you are." There was a dark gleam in the man's eyes, "Thank you Officer, for finding my boy."

"Actually, Ace here was brought in with a gang of thugs earlier today. The five of them seemed intent on beating the crap out of him after they, how did they put it again... fell down some stairs for no reason. Don't suppose you got any ideas on why that would be, would you, Mr. Marshal?"

"Please, Call me Teach! Mr. Marshal makes me sound old...As for why..." He looked over at the mop of dark hair, now lowered, "Who knows? Ace has always been a bit of a wild one. I knew he'd turn up eventually though. He always does...Isn't that right, Luffy?"

"L. Luffy?" Ace choked out. From behind the rather large figure of Teach came a boy, black hair, big, trusting dark brown eyes that watered slightly at the sight of Ace. A purpling bruise could be seen spreading across the boy's arm from under an oversized t-shirt. His shorts were also a size or two too big, giving him a look of being much younger than he was.
"Ace!" The boy, Luffy, sniffed, reaching out to the older teen.

"Hey there, kiddo, that's some bruise you've got." Tony cajoled "You ok?" The boy sniffled and stared at him wide eyed before looking back and forth between Ace and Teach. Tony could feel the tension in the air as the kid nodded.

"Luffy's a real trooper. Took a bit of a spill, but the kid's like rubber, isn't that right, Luffy-boy?"

The man laughed, a dirty sound, "So no need to worry, Officer, he'll bounce back in no time. Especially with his big brother looking out for him so he doesn't have any more accidents."

Anger danced across Ace's face before it vanished completely, "Yeah. Fine." The teen sighed, shoulders slumping. He walked over to his brother and gave him a one armed hug. Tony thought he could make out him asking if the younger was alright and the slight nod.

He didn't miss the smug look on Marshall's face, though, like the man had just won the jackpot. "Well, thanks again. I'm sure you've got all sorts of important things to get to, so we'll just get out of your hair now. Come on, boys." He turned to leave, a hand firmly on Luffy's shoulder steering him.

"Hey Ace!" Tony grabbed the kid's wrist before he walked out the door. The boy scowled at him, mouth open, more then likely ready to let loose a string of biting remarks. DiNozzo turned his wrist up and placed his card in his hand, "Here. Take this. I don't know what you and your brother are mixed up in...and it might not be any of my business," Ace snorted, "Ok, yeah, it probably isn't. But I'm a cop, alright? I can't just let you walk out that door without at least offering to help. It's up to you if you take it. That's my personal number on that card. Call me anytime, day or night, alright?"

The freckled youth pulled his wrist free and sneered at him before looking at the door where Teach was waiting eyebrow raised and a sick grin, hand still on his little brother. "Bug off, man." He snarled making a fist and crumpling the card, letting it fall before running to catch up to the man.

DiNozzo sighed as he watched them go. As the door swung shut he reached down and picked up the discarded card. "At least I tried..." he muttered to himself as he opened it back up. He stared at it in surprise for a second and reread it a few times. "Cho-ming Chinese...Damn that kid is good." He smirked, "Alright, who want's take-out?"
For Ducky to call Gibbs down to the morgue was not that unusual. Not that Gibbs ever needed the call. After all, he was Gibbs. For Ducky and Gibbs to then disappear in a meeting with the Director and then the whole team to be called in to speak with Vance...that was unusual. And a little scary. McGee shared a look with his two friends and partners as they headed up to the command deck. It was a lot like being called to the principal's office in high school. Even though he knew he didn't do anything wrong, he still felt confused and vaguely guilty. It was obvious from their expressions that the other two were equally confused, and Tony for one was feeling very guilty. With him, he was probably running through every little thing he'd tried to write off as a work expense over the last month or something.

As the three agents filed into the room, Ducky, Gibbs and Director Vance stopped talking. The men were tense as Vance nodded to Ziva to shut the door behind her and, a true shock to the team, lock it. Gibbs, his usual brisk self handed a stack of file briefings to Tim: who naturally took one and passed the other two his partners, curiosity piqued. This was turning out to be like the start of one of his books. Opening the case file, he came face to face with a very dead, very burned person. He winced.

"What you have in front of you is one Moria Gekkō," Ducky explained, "Despite appearances, he did not die in a fire. Oh no, actually, he was shot and beaten. The burning occurred post mortem, probably an attempt to hide cause of death."

"So what was he?" Tony paged through the notes, looking at some candid shots of Moria while he was still alive, "Other than ugly that is."

Gibbs took a sip from his cup, "What makes you think he's not a Marine?"

"Well, the candid shots, for one..."

McGee cut Tony off before the other could get going, "Come on, Boss, this doesn't exactly read like a log of service" he held up the documents, much of which had been blacked out, "it's fishy. If he's Marine, he's way undercover."

"He's not," Leon turned on the monitor, a grainy video showing Gekkō forcing a family below deck at gun point appeared, "for lack of a better term, he's a pirate. Homeland security and the CIA have been after this guy for years."

Ziva looked up from the dossier, "I do not understand. Why are we looking into the murder of a pirate, then? His death is a good thing, yes?"

"While we try not to think that, yeah, the world is a better place without scum like him in it."

Vance smirked. "The problem is, the last blip the CIA had from him, he was sinking ships off of Hawaii. The next thing we know he showed up dead, on fire in the middle of Naval Weapons Station Earle, in New Jersey a week later and we've got no clue how he got there."

"Then why all the cloak and dagger?" Tony nodded to the door. "It have to do with all the ink here?"

"Gibbs?"

The ageing lead agent took another sip of his 'coffee' and sighed. "When I was on tour, I became
friends with a man. Sengoku had this ability to grow larger and golden. When like that, he was incredibly strong, and difficult to hurt."

"Like the Hulk?" McGee couldn't stop himself from asking.

Gibbs stared at him, "Yeah, Tim, like the Hulk." he said dryly.

"Boss..." Tony chuckled, "You're joking, right? Do you even know who the Hulk is?"

"Big green guy, anger issues. Sengoku didn't like being teased about it..." Gibbs smirked, "Really didn't like the green dye in his shampoo."

The team just looked at him. "Ah, this is called 'pulling our leg'!" Ziva snapped her fingers, "Very good Gibbs, but what you are speaking of is not possible. People can not suddenly grow larger and change colors like the Hulk. We are not puffer fish!"

"Actually, My dear," Ducky held up a hand, "It is quite true, and very possible I am afraid." Now it was the doctor's turn to hand out a dossier, "Forgive the rather...disheveled appearance. I put these together from my own notes on the subject. It's all rather hush hush. I myself had completely forgotten about it until Mr. Gekkō ended up on my table last night. Poor Abby was most distraught."

"What are you talking about Ducky?" Tony opened the file, "Because, this looks like one of McGee's conspiracy theories, and frankly, you're scaring me."

"Well good." The doctor replied, "Not that you're scared, DiNozzo, but that it looks like a conspiracy. Because that's what it is."

"No way!" Tim started speed reading.

"Yes, Timothy. Except, unlike many of the ones you seem to find fascinating, this one is very much real." To the looks of disbelief he continued, "Well, as most good conspiracies start, it all began during World War Two. The Nazi party was attempting to create a super soldier of some kind. The experiments were wide ranging and horrendous. One particular man, working off of notes taken from Einstein, managed to create a substance. It gives a person amazing abilities. That is, if it doesn't kill you outright. They were called 'Demons' and 'Monsters' when they first appeared on the battlefield. There are drawbacks, however. For example, users can not swim for some inexplicable reason. Also, to a person, they develop an allergy to..."

Tony cut him off, "Alright assuming you're not joking, and that's a BIG if, what's this got to do with our dead pirate?"

"Ah, yes...Moria Gekkō was one of these 'Devil-fruit' users as they are called. They crop up from time to time. After the war, the substance all but vanished, popping up on the black market now again under the name 'Devil-fruit'. I assume they got the 'fruit' part of the name from the 'Apple of Knowledge' from the story of Adam and Eve." Ducky fell silent for a moment, probably caught up in the past before continuing, "Traces are faint after the user dies, and the charring of the corpse did not help us, but some signs remained. Enough so that miss Sciuto came to me with her findings, which I confirmed. Moria had the ability to take shadows, and possibly separate his own, as ridiculous as that sounds."

"Yep," Tim put in, still reading, "that does sound kinda crazy, Ducky."

"I knew you would say that. As did Abagale. Which is why we prepared this. Eyes on the screen, Timothy." He hit play.
"Hi guys. So...Ducky and I kinda figured you wouldn't believe this...and by the time you have your little meeting, the dead guy's powers would go poof! So... We're going to do SCIENCE!" Abby bounced on screen in front of the dead body. "Now, I noticed this when I was working with some clothing of his that still had flesh attached, but I figured that would be too small for you to see. Ducky, catch me if anything goes wrong."

"Oh, Do be careful." came the nervous off screen answer.

"I'll be fine." She nodded, "Right. Here we go." The goth woman walked with obvious trepidation over to the dead body. As she approached, her shadow stretched out ahead of her towards the corpse, despite the fact that that was where the light source was. It should have been impossible. When the shadow touched Moria’s, Abby became pale and swayed slightly. Her shadow stretched out, pooling around the autopsy table, the legs becoming pencil thin. Then they snapped. Abby swooned, and Ducky ran on camera, catching her and dragging her a few feet away from the table. She remained separated from her shadow for almost a minute and then it zipped back to her. "Woah...kinda like a head rush when it's all at once like that..." She muttered.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah...just a little light headed. I won't be doing THAT again, that's for sure." She looked up at the camera, "See? Totally real, McGee. I don't know how, but Ducky's got some nifty notes on it. I swear we're not hoxing you guys."

The video ended. Vance spoke, "So there you have it. Your job is to find out how a 'Devil-fruit' user managed to appear on a navy base when he was last seen in the Pacific and why."

"No," Gibbs answered, "we also gotta figure out how someone got close enough to off him."
Ace shaded his eyes as he once again lamented the loss of his hat. It hadn't been the best of hats, but it was better than nothing and he'd been too busy running around doing jobs for his 'Uncle' Teach to get another. Luckily, this was the last one for a while. He was starting to worry about his little brother. With an antsy sigh, he gave the coded knock on the door and waited.

Coughing could be heard within the building, as someone came towards the door. There was a thud against the door, almost at face level, "No, Stronger. Bad dog. You're supposed to be a guard dog..." Wheezed the voice, "Really, you should wait to attack till the door is open, or bark at least." The door opened a crack, revealing a very tall man with lank hair and sunken eyes, "Why, look Stronger! It's Marshall's favorite little errand boy. Oh, or is that second favorite errand boy, Ace?"

The over-sized dog pushed its way past its owner to stand in front of the young man, growling in a pathetic manner at him. Most people would still be intimidated, however, since the creature's maw was level with his face. "You shouldn't feed him french fries, Doc Q. It's really not good for a dog." The dark haired man said instead, shoving the dog's face to the side and ignoring the jibe. The beast was a sickly looking as it's master. Both looked like they were about to keel over at any moment. "You know why I'm here. Let's just get this over with."

"Ah. Yes. This month's stock has been flying off the shelves as it were, you can say." The sickly man laughed, pushing his dirty lank blond hair out of his face, "So sales are up. It is lucky for us that there are so many misfortunate ones, eh, Stronger?" His dog woofed in response. He smirked at Ace, "But then, you are one of those unfortunate ones with no luck, aren't you, Ace?"

He glared at the man, "Shut up, you shitty quack." Ace hated this man. He hated everyone associated with the guy Luffy called 'stinky Blackbeard'. If it was up to him, he'd have absolutely nothing to do with any of them. No, he thought, I take that back...I'd kill them.

Doc Q. reached into his heavy oversized coat he wore at all times regardless of the weather and pulled out a thick envelope. "Here's the Boss's cut, as usual...plus a little extra for the supplies he sent. Tell him my experiments are still ongoing, and I could use some more test subjects."

Ace took the envelope and shoved it deep into his pocket, "Why not tell him yourself. I know you've got a phone in there somewhere, you freak."

"It's much more fun to make you tell him though." The man smiled. "Oh, look at the time. I've got customers coming in an hour or so, I think. Scat you street-rat." Doc Q waved him off before shutting the door in his face.

"Yeah, nice to see you too, Asshole." came the shouted reply as an orange and black boot kicked the door, sending Stronger barking up a storm as Ace turned to leave. At least the job was done and he could head back home.

It was a short walk to where he had parked his motorcycle, his helmet and jacket left carelessly on the seat. If one thing could be said for working jobs under Teach, it was that people knew better than to mess with his underlings. That meant the local gangs took one look at the bone star and three skull logo on his jacket and helmet and his shit was safe. He smirked as he shrugged on the jacket, despite the heat. A few years ago while Ace was still living at Blackbeard's, his little brother had decided to test exactly how much protection the mark offered, and while he'd been away doing a job with their 'Uncle', Luffy had moved all their stuff out onto the street under a tarp with the 'flag' as Marshal called it. Apparently it was there for the whole week they were gone, and
no one had dared to touch any of it, not even the big screen TV. His mood soured, Blackbeard hadn't seen the humor in it, however, and Luffy had paid the price for his prank. Ace just hoped his idiot little brother had behaved himself this time as he pulled on his helmet and started his bike.

Really, it was lucky for him that he had managed to convince Teach to let Luffy stay in New York and not move around constantly. Yeah, true, it meant he had to do all sorts of extra jobs for the creep, but it was worth it. His little brother had a chance of finishing high school. If he ever managed to go to class, that is. He probably had way too many absences then was good, but that man swore he'd take care of it, so long as the boys did what he said. It was important to Ace that his brother got an education. He himself had a GED and was taking some college classes online, but the chances of him getting a legitimate job, hell, of either of them getting a real, full-time pays-the-bills-job was zilch. Not with that man around. Ace just liked to learn, it was a hobby. He was smart, too, when he wanted to be. He'd teach Luffy himself, but he usually ended up so frustrated...it was just safer for everyone if the public education system tried to force the basics into that thick skull.

Added bonus of Luffy being in one place, and the older brother was not going to think about it in terms of keeping him on a short leash, it meant he was able to rent them a place the moment he hit eighteen. Teach might legally be Luffy's guardian, but dammit to hell if Ace was going to let Luffy live a moment longer with that man then necessary. Right now, he was really looking forward to returning to their well worn two room apartment. It wasn't much, but at least the bed would be lice free, and he would have a hot shower for a change. If he was lucky, he'd be able to pick up a some part time work in a day or so. He should have a few weeks in the city at least; summer was starting after all. Marshall would wait to send him back out till Luffy was out of school for a bit if he stuck with the usual. That way, he could send the both of them without the younger brother being too unruly and botching a job again. For now, though, it meant the two of them could blow off some steam. So long as Teach didn't arrange a 'family trip' this summer, the man was looking forward to it. Ace hated those trips the worst, there was only so much he could do to protect his brother as it was, and when Teach was there, the man forced Luffy into doing things that Ace would have rather his brother never known about.

That was all a worry for another day, however. Right now, he just had to hope he made it home before traffic choked up the roads too bad. He was sure Luffy would be whining for a souvenir, as usual. Luckily, he was ready for his bro this time. He just happened to have lifted a really nice jacket while on a job a few days ago. He was sure no one would miss it. After all, he lit up the place when he was leaving, and military gear held up the best to the shit his brother got in to. Hopefully, this one would last till Christmas at least.
Vance had decided it was a better use of manpower to send Gibbs with his usual team up to the base, opting to leave a very annoyed Abby where she was to go over particulates taken from Gekkō. She brightened considerably when the good doctor agreed to tell her everything he knew about the mysterious Devil-fruits. Ducky had seen the team off, cautioning Gibbs to be incredibly careful. Not that he needed the reminder. He remembered what it was like when Sengoku was involved in things. An investigation that seemed like it was going to be tricky on it's own was going to be a hell of a lot more complex thanks to Moria being a Devil-fruit user. Lucky for Gibbs, it was Vance's job to cut through all the red-tape. He just had to find answers.

The trip up to Naval Weapons Station Earle was long, but not as long as it could have been if Tony or Tim had been driving. Which was why Gibbs didn't let anyone else drive. On the down side, it was four hours of listening to the 'children' bicker in the backseat. You'd think they'd spend the time going over the information Ducky had put together, but other then giving it a quick reading over they ignored it. Gibbs knew it had to do more with how ridiculous the whole thing seemed, but still. He expected some questions at least from McGee.

When they finally arrived at Earle, he was about ready to smack all of them. Tempting, but he didn't give in. Instead he nodded to Tony and Ziva to follow him as Tim grabbed the cameras and gear. They were quickly met by a Major with blond hair and a large build. The years had not been kind to him, ageing his strong face into one of fierceness. Following behind him was a Sergeant, probably in his late twenties, thin as a greyhound next to the Major. Despite this, both men bore more than a passing resemblance.

"I am Major Morgan, and this is Sergeant Helmeppo."

"Gibbs. This is Anthony DiNozzo, Ziva David and Timothy McGee. Heard you had a bit of a problem?"

Helmeppo smiled a bit worriedly, "Yes sir. Really hoping you could help, Sir. I take it the body arrived safely?"

"Well, as safe as can be expected," Gibbs hedged, "Wanna tell me what happened?"

The Sergeant looked to the Major who nodded, "Why don't you explain, Sergeant, you've done most of the footwork on this so far."

"Thank you, Sir." The younger blond returned his attention back to Gibb's team. "If you'll follow me then. Two nights ago an unidentified man broke into Earle. He took the route we are currently on carrying with him a dead body later identified as Moria Gekkō. They reached a building that was a charred husk. "He then gained access to a storeroom where he dumped the body and committed arson."

Tim snapped some photos of the charred remains of the storeroom spread all over commenting, "That looks a bit more than arson to me."

"Yeah, awful long way to go just to dump a body, too." Tony added, nudging some debris with his foot.

"Someone," Growled out Morgan, "had apparently been storing hazardous materials in this storeroom. Who and why is currently under investigation." he said in a tone that promised dire
consequences for such foolishness.

Helmeppo continued, "We don't think the suspect was aware of the explosive nature of the items in the storeroom. We also believe he was working alone."

"Did you check the surveillance footage," Ziva said while eyeing a security camera.

"No good." The Sergeant said, "He's not on any footage."

That got Gibbs' attention, "So you're telling me that whoever did this managed not only to sneak onto base lugging a dead body right up to a storeroom avoiding all cameras?"

"No, sir." The man stared back Gibbs, ignoring Tony's crack about how fit the suspect had to be. "We know exactly what route he took, sir. We've even found where he entered the base." he hedged.

"Then what exactly are you telling me, Sergeant?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. At this point he was expecting to be told they had footage of his shadow or something. Even that, Abby could work with. "Do you have him on camera or not?"

"That's the thing, sir. All the security cameras along the route are dead."

"You're kidding, right? All that government funding, and you can't afford new cameras?" snarked Tony.

"How did he know where the cameras would be dead?" Ziva put in, "Perhaps it was an inside job?"

The man was quick to deny such a possibility, "No, no. They were working fine! The cameras on base work on a remote feed. All footage is sent to security, and the camera's themselves work on both the power grid, and a solar backup battery. There is just no way all twelve cameras would just die like that." He looked at Tony, "When we took them down and checked, the wiring was fried in each one. What does that?"

"Maybe some kind of laser device. He could point it at the camera and be shorting them out. Burning the wires. It's a possibility Boss." Tim put in, once again surprising Gibbs with his knowledge.

"Uh huh. Alright. So he came here." Gibbs gestured to the remains of the storeroom. "Then what? Dumped the body and lit a match? Walk me through exactly what you think happened." He did not miss the look the Major gave his officer.

"Why don't you go get copies of all the footage we have for Gibbs, huh?" Sergeant Helmeppo nodded and left.

"What footage? Footage of empty streets?" Tony muttered under his breath, only to be elbowed by Ziva as she moved closer to the storeroom.

"Well, we assume he had a hand torch or something similar." Major Morgan picked up the tale, nodding to the door the Ziva was now eyeing critically. "As you can see, the lock was burned out."

Ziva snapped a picture, "It was neatly done."

"Yes well. After the suspect gained entry, they apparently dumped the body right inside the door and proceed to set fire to the building. We assume he used an accelerant given the time frame, though our forensic team has been unable to find any traces yet. We're hoping you guys have better
luck."

"Abby's good at that." He just hoped the evidence that was already on it's way to Abby was not contaminated too badly by the rescue workers. None of this was something the Sergeant couldn't have told him, however. The former marine stepped in closely to Morgan and looked him in the eyes, "Now why don't you tell me why you sent Sergeant Helmeppo away?"

"I don't want him spreading this around." He looked sharply at Gibbs, "There was a witness."

"And you're just telling us now?"

"What Private Coby saw just shouldn't have been possible. To be honest, I thought the boy was seeing things." The man shrugged, "He's been under a lot of stress, and he was right there when the storeroom blew, so. Well, you were a marine. You know how it is, Gibbs."

"Yeah, I do." Gibbs leaned back, looking again at the wreckage of the storeroom. Debris had been scattered everywhere, despite the effort to clean it up. Someone was going to be in a lot of trouble. The Major had been right; there was no way what was supposed to be stored in here would have exploded like it had, even if an accelerant had been used. He could see where some pieces had landed on the roofs of nearby buildings, alighting them as well before people had responded. If it wasn't for this section being a major thoroughfare, the fire would have spread a lot further. Being caught near a blast like that, sometimes your mind played tricks on you. "So, what changed your mind."

Morgan smirked, "Our suspect may have got all the cameras coming in...but he missed one on the way out." He started walking, and naturally the team followed. Soon they were at the far side of the storehouse. Cleanup was obviously slower on this side, and his team got to work immediately. "Tech guy noticed it early this morning. Of course, the angel sucks, and it's just our damn luck the the camera itself got taken out by debris before we got a good look at his face..." he spat.

"So, what's on the footage then?" McGee asked, pausing from his documentation.

"Some weird shit." The man shook his head, "I don't even know where to begin. Just...Damn. Wish I hadn't given Coby a short leave, but the kid took a pretty hard knock to the head during this, so doctors didn't give me much choice. He'll be at that medieval festival though, if you need to talk with him. I think you're going to want to, really." Moran pulled out a cigarette box and raised an eyebrow at Gibbs, who shook his head. "Sorry. Wife says I should quit. Anyway. Apparently our suspect got hit by some flying debris. According to the Private, it was more like shrapnel, though. He said it went right through him."

All members of his team stopped and looked at Morgan. "Then where is his body? There should at least be blood." Ziva said.

"That's the weird part. He got hit right where you are standing, Miss David. You see any blood? Coby swears it passed through him, and I've looked at the footage. It sure does look like that to me, but it could just be the bad angel. He just keeps going as if nothing happened."

"I do not see blood, but I do see something." Ziva waved Tim over. He snapped a few pictures before she bent over to pick up the item in question. "What do you suppose this is from?" She held the badly burned remains of an orange hat and offered it to Gibbs.

Taking it he could see what was left of a logo on it. It seemed to be a skull and bones motif, though pieces were singed off. Idly Gibbs wondered if the hole in the middle of the logo, right where someone's forehead would be, happened before or after the hat came off it's owners head. "I don't
think this belongs to one of your men, does it, Major?” Morgan eyed the hat before shaking his head in the negative. "Then I guess this belonged to our suspect. Good work, Ziva. Bag it for Abby."
The only reason the door woke him up was because Ace had been listening for it all night. Despite this, he didn't bother to move from his rather contorted position on the well-loved sagging couch. Instead, he stared at the faded fabric of the back cushions that smelled vaguely of burned popcorn as his little brother let himself into the apartment. When the older brother had come home the night before to find the place stuffy and empty he'd thought about going over to Teach's joint and grabbing Luffy. Not knowing why the other was there however, quickly changed his mind. If Luffy was there for a job, he'd just cause problems and get them both in trouble. So, instead he waited. He waited, and waited until he had obviously fallen asleep.

Ace could hear Luffy move past the couch towards the bathroom, dropping his bag at the door oblivious to the body on the couch. That told him he had definitely missed his bike parked out front as well. He knew, then, that his little bro had been with Marshall for 'training' as the man called it. Punishment was more like it. "What did you do this time to piss him off?" he sighed.

"Ace?" Luffy jumped slightly, his face radiating joy as he launched himself over the back of the couch onto his brother. "ACE! When did you get back?" he cackled.

"Uph! Jesh, Lu, what the hell?" He laughed as his brother landed on top of him, tickling Luffy as the couch creaked dangerously, "Around the couch, you moron, not over it. I got back last night. Which you would have known if you were here like you were supposed to be." Ace continued, pushing his brother off him, "Doughnuts on the counter."

"Doughnuts! Awesome! I'm starving, you know? Two dozen, no way! Ace, you're the best!"

"Hey, half of those are for me you pig! Bring the box over here." He chuckled as Luffy made an exaggerated effort to walk around the couch, a chocolate creme already stuffed in his mouth and two sodas balanced on top of the box. It was the breakfast of champions, that was for sure. "So what the hell did you do this time?" Ace snagged a jelly right from his brother's hands and smirked and he bit into it.

Luffy pouted for all of two seconds, before going after another with a shrug, "Nothing much."

"Luffy..."

"Damnit Ace, seriously, it's not a big deal!" The younger brother grumbled, running a hand through his disheveled hair. He huffed when he saw the dark eyes settle on the scar under his eye. "I just...flushed his stash down the toilet again. You should have seen it, Ace, it was amazing! There was so much of it, I thought the thing was going to explode! " He laughed, "Probably should have waited until he wasn't there, though."

Ace slapped his face unknowingly smearing frosting across his freckles, "When will you learn not to antagonize the man, Luffy?" Feeling his brother shift closer he growled, "I just got frosting on my face, didn't I?"

Luffy snorted, "Yep." Ace could literally feel the grin directed at him, "Want me to clean it off?"

"No, thanks." He held up a hand to forestall any attempts the younger tried at cleaning him, "Napkin."

The napkin was handed over, "Spoilsport. Ace, you gotta stop worrying so much. Blackbeard just did his usual crap, you know?"
Ace's stomach dropped, and suddenly he wasn't hungry anymore. Marshall's 'usual' when it came to dishing out punishments, or just being a sick bastard, was testing exactly what Devil-fruit abilities he and his brother had or did not have. Of course, he was very thorough with the tests, which were often painful, frightening, and humiliating. Just thinking about his own experiences with these so-called 'training' sessions was enough to make him sick, but his little brother was all he had in the world...

Luffy interrupted his train of thought, "Oh! Did you know rubber doesn't conduct electricity?"

"Yeah, I kinda knew that," he choked out, swearing to himself for the millionth time to make Teach pay for his brother knowing that.

"Wow, Ace, you're so smart!" the other beamed, "Blackbeard wasn't so smart. Kept trying all sorts of," Luffy interrupted himself, "Hey! That would be why nothing happened when the radio fell in the tub that time, huh?"

Sometimes the mental sidesteps the younger took really gave him a pounding headache, "Hhh...Wait, what now? When did you have the radio on in the bathroom?" For that matter, when was the last time they'd had a bathtub? He waved a hand, "No, never mind, I don't want to know. Forget it. So the reason you were late was because our dear 'Uncle' Teach was trying to electrocute you with no success?"

"Yep." Luffy laughed, "So how was work? You had to meet up with Van, right? What was that all about anyway?"

"Eh, nothing for you to worry about, Lu. Auger just had some cleanup for me to do is all. Lost my hat, though." Ace said, downplaying the whole thing. He could tell Luffy didn't buy it for a second, "Stopped by Doc Q's on the way back, guy still looks like a walking corpse. Stronger's still alive, if you can believe it. Whatcha been up to while I was gone? Other than pissing off Teach, that is?"

Luffy frowned, "I don't like it when you lie to me Ace." he whined before letting it go. "Sucks about your hat. Let's see...I ate plenty of meat. Sanji was practicing for a competition or something, so I got eat all his mistakes! Um...did some stuff for Teach...don't give me that look! It was all small time crap anyway. Overheard him talking, he going to be gone for a while, something about a big job...Graduated..."

"What? I thought that wasn't until next week!"

"Nah, something about no snow days or something." Luffy waved a hand vaguely while rummaging on the table for something, "Yasopp was there taking a crap-ton of pictures of his son. You know, Usopp. So was Nami's ma, that ex-marine biker-chick that decked you that one time. Anyway. They both took pictures for you, so here." He handed his brother a thick envelope.

Ace numbly took the it, wishing he could have been there for his little brother, "That was nice of them." He couldn't believe he had missed it. Marshall had probably planned it that way though. "I'll have to thank them."

Luffy nodded, "Blackbeard didn't want me to go at all, but I told him you'd be really pissed if I missed my own graduation just for some stupid job that could wait a few hours and went anyway. It was boring as hell, though. Why didn't you tell me it was going to be so lame?"

"It's not lame! It's a milestone!" He snapped back, annoyed both that his brother was missing what the big deal was, and that he'd apparently gone on a heist or something right after graduating high school. "Well, at least you have your diploma. Right?"
"They said they mail it now. Something about kids going crazy, I donno, wasn't paying attention. I
made sure to ask if I was getting one though. I am. Don't worry." Luffy laughed,

"The principal's exact words were 'And risk dealing with you for another year? You Graduate! God
have mercy on us all.' Isn't that funny?"

"Hilarious." He flipped through the pictures, finding a number of them were actually good. That is,
the ones where Luffy wasn't snoring, or goofing off with his friends instead of paying attention to
the speaker. "Anything else I should know about? Blow anything up, get arrested?"

Luffy waved him off, "No, even better! I almost forgot!"

"Oh great."

"Thatch called. He said him and Marco,"

"He and Marco." Ace corrected, perking up a bit. It had been a while since he'd heard from those
two.

"got something to talk to you about. Told him you'd call back when you came home."

"Any idea what it is?" He rolled his eyes as Luffy shook his head, "Fine, it's...nine. Thatch should
be up by now. Go shower, I'll see what those two want." He waited for his brother to shut the door
before pulling out his phone, staring at it contemplatively for a moment. True, Thatch should be
up, but he wasn't sure what he was doing, he could be working. Not that Ace knew what his friends
did, their relationship came with a strict 'don't ask, don't tell' policy on both sides. "Well, Lu did say
I'd call..." He smirked before dialing and being subjected to a Nickel Creek ringback tone while he
waited for the other to pick up.

A voice warily answered the phone, "...Hello?"

"You lost your old phone again, didn't you? It's Ace."

"Ace? Man, do you know what time it is? HEY! YES YOU, I SAW THAT! DROP IT! DROP. IT.
NOW. Sorry about that. Whacha callin' for? And really, what time is it?"

"No worries. I don't even wanna know what you're up to. It's a little after nine. I just got in last
night, and Luffy told me you called, so I'm calling to find out what's up."

"Nine? Damn, where the hell is everyone then I wonder." Thatch sighed, obviously annoyed,
"Anyway, I called because the renfaire is going to be starting back up..." he said with considerably
much more cheer.

Ace didn't even let him finish the sentence, "No."

"Oh come on, Ace! Think of all the fun you had last time! And the meat Luffy could eat...Ah,
here's Marco and the guys. I'm going to pass the phone off, I've got to get to work." He heard some
muffled mutterings for a few seconds before another voice was on the phone over the din of
shouting in the background.

"Ace, you still there, or you hang up in a snit again?"

"I only did that once, Marco. Not that it mattered, you called every minute for the next hour to
bitch at me for hanging up on you." He shifted the phone and started cleaning up the soda cans and
box from the doughnuts.
"You deserved it." Marco laughed, "So Thatch tell you what's up?"

"I'm not doing it."

"Aww, You know you want to. Luffy said you'd be all for it." He could feel Marco grin into the phone, "Do you really want to crush your brother?"

"Right now, yes. What have I told you about corrupting my baby brother?"

"Hey, that's harsh. Besides, all I was able to get out was 'renfaire' and the idiot screamed 'MEAT!' in my ear. I don't think that counts." There was a pause as Marco let him think about that. The man knew Ace well enough after a few years to know that if Luffy was all for something, Ace was probably going to be in as well. "So, you going to help us out? We're thinking of doing 'buccaneer pirates' again this year, and Thatch and I could really use you two. Luffy can do his tumbling jumping shit and you do your juggling. That's all we're asking."

"You so owe me for this, Marco." Ace gripped, though there was no feeling in it, "When do we start?"

"Haha! I knew you'd do it. We're heading up this weekend, and running all summer. Need a lift?"

"Nah. Got some shit to straighten out first. I'll see you there. Now excuse me while I go have a little chat with Luffy about agreeing to things for meat. Again." He hung up on laughter, smiling to himself. The summer was definitely shaping up to be interesting.
Abby stared intently at the video on her high resolution screen. She'd managed to clean up most of the graininess that was caused both by the camera already being damaged and the unreliable lighting over the last three hours. All she was waiting for was for the last filter to run, hoping this one would clean up the color a little bit, and cursing the cheap equipment the base used as she listened to the heavy metal that her sound system blared out. The moment her computer competed the cleanup she hit 'play', knowing she had but minutes at most before Gibbs arrived to see the final version of the footage, as well as any other discoveries she had. It really was a mixed bag of discoveries at that, and Abby hoped Gibbs knew what to make of it all, because honestly, she was a little lost.

As the video came to the end she heard the door open and didn't even bother to turn around, "Gibbs! You've got to see this!"

"I take it you got something for me Abbs?"

"I've got a couple of things for you, but you're not going to believe this!" She waved him over, turning around, noticing that he wasn't alone. Tony, Ziva, and Tim were with him. "This video is insane, guys."

"Well, show us what you got, then." Gibbs smirked, handing her a Caf-pow which Abby just placed on the table and placed play.

*The screen was still a little grainy and jumped in a few places. At first, all it showed was an empty, dark street. A young marine could be seen crossing the upper corner after a moment. He stopped, looking off camera. In the direction he was looking suddenly lit up, and the marine fell back, only his feet being visible. A shadow appeared on the bottom right, followed by a man wearing dark pants, a t-shirt and a light colored hat on long-ish hair. He had something tucked under his arm. The suspect calmly diagonally across the camera away from the source of light which was obviously the fire, apparently not noticing the marine. Suddenly the camera shook and the light increased. Debris shot across the screen skidding across the street. Two pieces flew at the suspect's back and the camera fuzzed slightly and shook again as it was apparently hit by something. When the image cleared, the suspect was holding his hat, now obviously damaged, as was his shirt. He however appeared to be fine. He dropped the hat and turned towards the direction of the camera, but just as he did, a piece of roof from the storage room slammed into the lense, killing the feed.*

McGee was the first one to speak after the video ended. "What was that? Did he? But, that's not possible!"

"Of course it isn't, McGee. Neither is stealing shadows. What else you got for me, Abbs?" Gibbs acted as if the video wasn't that shocking, but Abby could tell that he was was still processing what he had just seen.

"Right. Right. Well, as you'd expect, most of the samples sent over by Earle were already compromised by rescue workers attempting to put out the fires. So most of the stuff they sent from the streets were basically no good. I can tell you they really need to repaint their buildings with something safer. The wood from the storage building still had lead based paint if you can believe it." She then pulled up a chemical chart on her screen obviously thanks to Major Mass-Spectrometer, "As you can see, somebody was storing nitroglycerin in canisters within the building. Really, the suspect had to have walked right past them a few times when he was starting
the fire, they would have been hard to miss."

"So he had to have used an accelerant then, right? Canisters like that are built to take a beating, they should have survived a simple little fire." Tony mused.

"That's just the thing. I ran the particulates from the storage unit through every machine I have. Twice. Other than trace elements of nitroglycerin on top of the charring there's no signs of any accelerant used. I've got no clue how he got the fire so hot so fast to cause such an explosion. I can't even tell where the fire started, and that's weird. There should be burn patterns at least. According to the video, there was maybe five minutes at the most from when he first started the fire to when it exploded. Judging by how calmly he was walking away, I don't think he was expecting the fireworks, either."

Ziva raised an eyebrow, "Ok, now that is weird. I have never heard of such a fast explosion without the use of accelerant."

Abby then held up the hat Ziva had dropped off the day before with the videos when they had gotten back. Not that there was much of it left. The hat at some point had been a simple bucket hat, if a ridiculous orange color. "Now this tells us some things. No DNA unfortunately. But under the logo was an NYC one. This particular logo is only found in a shop by the New York Harbor, and the hat itself was a giveaway for Halloween last year."

"Hmm, guess that explains the orange, huh?" Tony eyed the hat, or what was left of it.

"Yeah, sure does. They had orange and green. I called and checked. They gave away thousands of them. So, kind of a dead end there. I mean, the store's kind of small, so it's probable the guy's a local or something, but that just means he lives in New York. But what I really wanted to show you were two things. The first is this, the logo he added on top." Abby had removed the logo and scanned it into the computer at some point and now pulled it up onto one of the many screens, "It's actually a gang logo, or part of one anyway. If you fill in the parts that are missing like this," she demonstrated, "you get a really cool three skull and bone star. The three skulls could represent past, present and future, or maybe something like the Hindu god Shiva with different facets of gang's power. Anyway, this logo has been popping up all over the place in New York over the last seven or eight years. The cops haven't had any luck in catching any of the gang members or even getting any reliable information on them. They're like ghosts or something, but they seem to have become more active in the last few years. I've also got hits on it in a few other cities like LA and Miami."

"Uh-huh. What's the other thing?"

Abby picked up the hat again and turned it upside down, showing them the under part of the rim on the left side. "This is kind of interesting. I might not have found any hair in the hat for some reason, but see this burn here? At first I thought it was caused by the fire or something, but someone put this patch of leather to make this spot more durable, but the leather's been burned though. Under the leather, the hat fibers show signs of repeated burning over a long period of time. I talked to Ducky and he thinks it's possibly a nervous habit, or maybe an ownership mark. He says if the guy has another hat, it'll have the same kind of burn in the exact same spot, though, so that should help identify him. We can't tell you how the burn was made, though. Sorry I don't have anything else for you, Gibbs."

Gibbs gave her a one armed hug before heading for the door, "Good work, Abby. Come on team."

Tony looked up from where he'd been watching the video of the suspect apparently being hit by debris again, "Where we going, boss?"
"To a renfaire. Got some questions to ask Private Coby."

"Gibbs, you can't seriously be thinking that this man is one of these so called 'Devil-fruit users' can you?" Ziva's disbelief was evident in her tone as she fell into step with the man she respected most.

"I don't know yet, Ziva. That's what I'm hoping to find out."
Faire Game

It was another broiling hot day as the two brothers rode up on Ace's trusty bike, which he called 'The Striker' instead of going with Luffy's suggestions of 'Hell's Cycle' or 'Ghost Rider'. He felt particularly lucky that his dear Uncle Teach was planning on being away for business for most of the summer. Ace had been given the usual evasive answers when he'd reported in, dropping off Doc Q's cash. Short a couple hundred, of course. Strictly payback for making him miss Luffy's graduation. Judging by the look in Blackbeard's eyes as he counted his take, the man was well aware of the younger man's skimming, but he said nothing on the matter. Instead he'd rambled on about 'increasing his sphere of influence' by taking a long trip to several undisclosed locations. Naturally, he'd eyed the usually drunk man warily, expecting to be ordered along, little brother in tow. He was pleasantly surprised when Marshall had instead ordered the two of them to keep a low profile, well, for them at least, saying he had a different group in mind to go with him. That meant he would get to enjoy the dubious pleasure of working at a renaissance faire for almost no money just because his stupid brother was easy to bribe for the summer. He should have taken more money.

Speaking of his brother, Ace wondered if maybe he should get one of those backpack leashes for Luffy as he parked the bike and caught the back of his shirt as he took off. Ok, yeah, people would look at them both like they were retarded, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about the little idiot wandering off any time he saw something shiny before they found Marco or Thatch. The two had sent a text the day before to remind Ace that he'd promised to help and that they'd pitched two tents in the player's field. Since it was still a good hour or so before the faire was to start, they should be easy enough to find. Particularly since both men were relatively tall with distinctive hair.

"Ah! I see a blond pineapple!" Luffy slipped his brother's grasp and took off towards a guy dressed in a loose blue shirt with just a patch of brilliant blond hair at the top of his head, tackling the man from behind in a flying leap. "Marco! I found you first! Got any meat?"

Marco didn't even jump as the much smaller youth clambered up his back, drawing an exasperated sigh from the older brother who was now stuck lugging both of their bags. "Hey Luffy! Glad you guys could make it, and no, sorry, don't have any meat on me yet. Shops haven't even opened, you dork. Thatch might have some food. He's in the tent changing. Ace! Long time, brother!"

Marco's grin was infectious and Ace found himself smirking back as they attempted to crush each other's hands in what would look like a simple handshake to most. "Who's fault is that, rooster-boy? You guys totally ditched out on New Years, man. My little bro threw one hell of a birthday party for me, and you missed it. Can't believe it."

"I know, I know! Thatch hasn't let me forget it, either. You know how it is, though. Last minute freelance project came in, and the boss wanted it done yesterday, so we didn't have a choice. I'll make it up to you, I swear it, man."

Ace laughed, knowing very well that neither Thatch or Marco worked in freelance for anything. It was all code, probably for something illegal. When he had met the two a few years back he had been picking up his brother from Blackbeard's in a bad part of town. Didn't take an idiot to figure out they weren't there selling magazine subscriptions that day. Ever since the three of them always answered with 'freelance work' if they were suddenly busy. It was safer that way for everyone. "Hey don't worry about it. I'll tell you, though, it was something. Don't ask me how, but he got strippers."
"Luffy? You've gotta be kidding me! That's funny!" Marco snorted before pausing, "Hey, wait a second...where is Lu?" Both men looked at each other blankly for a second.

"WHAAA! JESUS! LUFFY! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD I'M GETTING CHANGED IN HERE!"

"Ah. Never mind."

"Hi, Thatch. Got anything to eat?"

"NO! Go away!"

"Fine fine. You don't have to be such a baby about it." Luffy came out of the tent pouting at his brother and Marco, "At least I didn't ask if he 'had meat'...I mean, I could of."

His brother smacked him. "Where do you learn these things?"

"Ummm...Super Franky. I think."

"Isn't he the guy who got arrested repeatedly for walking around in a speedo all the time?" Thatch asked, coming out of the tent shooting Luffy a dirty look as he finished tying the laces of his pants. He turned to Ace when Luffy nodded "It was all over the papers for a while. I'm surprised Luffy knows him, He's in his thirties, and hard to find, real nut-case. I hear he designs ships for the nouveau-rich or something."

Luffy laughed, "It was so funny when he got arrested! He was all 'I'm SUUUUUUUPER!' in the holding cell, I thought I was gonna bust a gut! Ever since I met him, he's let me hide out sometimes at his place when Ace isn't around. You know, 'cause our Uncle has those moods."

"Here Lu, go get changed," Ace tossed him some clothes while pulling out his own outfit in an attempt to redirect the conversation onto safer ground. Last thing he wanted was for his friends to ask why his brother was in a jail holding cell. The teen caught the cloths his brother tossed at him to change into, continuing to laugh and pose like Franky. Ace had only met the man a few times, but he had to admit the impersonation wasn't bad as he kicked his brother into the tent. "You guys got the supplies and stuff, right?"

Marco held up a bag, "Right here. Got some juggling knives, pins and some of those sticks you can light on fire. You said your brother didn't need anything, so I'm holding you to that. I still wanna see him parkour sometime, though. Ah, probably be a good idea if he didn't really try that here. Not so sure how sturdy the stalls are, you know? Got that Luffy?"

"Eh? Yeah yeah. No climbing all over the buildings. Ace already told me if he caught me doing that he wouldn't get me any food." The teen griped as he came out of the tent and started stretching. His clothes, unlike Ace, Thatch and Marco who were dressed mostly in leather, were just cloth, which allowed for greater range of movement. The boots he'd bought himself the year before having fallen in love with the supple leather work. He smiled up at his brother as the elder went into the tent.

It wasn't long before Ace emerged from his tent, attaching a leather bag to his hip containing plenty of money. He knew the only one he had to worry about swiping it was his oh-so-innocent little brother, and fixed the teen with a hard stare. "No stealing. I mean it, Lu. Not from me, or anyone else here, you got that? This isn't like home and I'm not covering for your ass."

"You are really no fun, Ace. Not even a little? I promise I won't keep anything. Nami taught me this new move and I really wanna try it out!" He grinned, pulling on his beloved straw hat to complete his look.
"NO!" All three of the older guys shouted, Marco and Thatch having been introduced to Luffy's bad habit long ago. Ace constantly complained to them that his brother, who he was quite sure did in fact understand the difference between right and wrong, seemed to have a mental block when it came to stealing things he wanted. Of course, his upbringing didn't help, nor did the fact that one of his long time friends was a bit of a pickpocket when things were tight at home for her family.

"Let me put it this way, I catch you with something that isn't yours, or something you don't have a receipt for, and you get no meat for a month." His little brother looked at him in true horror before sighing in defeat. "Now that that's out of the way..."

Marco grinned as Thatch lead the way calling, "Time to woo the ladies with our pirate act and make the guys ridiculously jealous. Follow me!"
"You wouldn't think finding a marine would be all that difficult at one of these things." Ziva grumbled as she once again eyed the people around them.

"Well, it isn't. See? There goes another." Gibbs hid his smirk as he nodded to another marine who went by dressed in period garb, "Problem is none of them are the marine we are looking for."

Tim didn't bother looking up from the schedule of events and map of the faire, "His roommate said that he would meet up by the reserved parking, he just might not have arrived yet."

"Hey, Mc-Duke, you probably feel right at home, right?"

"Actually Tony, I'm not that familiar with renfaires. My sister was into them for a while, but it's not really my thing."

"You're kidding?" Tony blinked at him, "A geek thing you aren't into? I mean, come on! It's people dressing in costume! Like that comic stuff you do, right?"

McGee have him a dirty look, "No, nothing like that. For one thing, very few people are trying to be a specific person..." He could tell Tony wasn't listening, instead distracted by a three guys who walked by, two dressed like elves, one in armour and one in robes carrying a harp. The third man had a furry-wolf helmet on and tufts of fur sticking out around his cloths, "You know what? Never mind."

"Well, unlike Comicon, a lot of people here know how to use their weapons." a voice chimed in from behind, "Though it seems we've been getting a lot of anime and game fans at this one the last few years. I saw a good Desmond Miles Altaïr lurking over by the jousting pit. That makes two Final Fantasy, a Half-Prince group and an Assassin's Creed costume I've seen today here. I'm Private Coby. Sorry about making you come all the way out here."

They eyed the young man in front of them. His hair was a very light strawberry blond, almost looking pink in his military cut. He still had some baby-fat, but his eyes shone with determination behind his glasses. "You know why we're here?" Gibbs asked, clarifying.

"Sir, yes sir. You would be agent Gibbs, sir?" Gibbs nodded, earning a relieved smile, "Helmeppo said you would at least listen to me, sir. He's a good friend of mine."

"We watched the footage of what happened." The ex-marine said, "Just looking for some clarification."

Coby looked surprised, "I didn't know if any of it had actually been caught on camera. Helmeppo said something about some bad footage, but, I wasn't sure. I'll tell you what I can, sir, but I didn't get a good look at his face. The fire was behind him."

"That's fine, anything you can tell us will help," Ziva smiled at the obviously nervous private.

Tony obviously couldn't contain his question anymore, "Hey, is it true that the stuff actually went through him? I mean, that's like, impossible, right? It had to be the camera angle."

"No sir. I did get a good look at that, and unless the suspect is super fast, it did appear that the debris passed through his body. It looked like impact was the back of his head and his right shoulder. Knocked his hat clear off. Thing was on fire, even, I heard him cursing about that."
"And you're sure that's what you saw?" Tim clarified.

"Yes, sir. I might not have been right on top of him, but the angle I was at, I definitely saw something leave the front of his shoulder and his head, knocking his hat off. Scared the shit out of me, I'm not afraid to say. I think it was way more terrifying than if he'd just died. It was like a horror movie or something."

"You said you heard him cursing?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow, "What did he sound like?"

"Young, maybe early twenties. Pissed off. I got the feeling that he really wasn't expecting the building to explode. He said something about jobs I think."

Gibbs nodded, reassuring the nervous private that he was doing a good job as Tony jotted what he said down, "Anything else you can tell us?"

"Um...His hair was dark, really dark, and he was fairly tall, though you could probably tell that from the footage. I'd say, six foot to six foot three, around a hundred and sixty pounds maybe. Ah, and he had something under his arm, it looked like a fatigue jacket. I'm not sure why though. I think he swiped it from the store room." Coby shrugged, "That's all I can remember, Sir."

"That's plenty. We've taken up enough of your time. Thanks."

"Sorry I couldn't be more help, Agent Gibbs."

"Nah, you were plenty of help. Just do me a favor and keep what you saw to yourself, alright?"

He shook his head, leaving, "Who would I tell, anyway? No one would believe that kind of shit is possible, sir. I don't believe it, and I saw it with my own eyes. I'm just going to do my best to forget I ever saw anything that night."

Ziva watched Coby leave before turning to Gibbs, "So it's true then? Our suspect is another one of these...devil-people?"

"Devil-fruit users, Ziva. Looks that way. Still doesn't answer the question of how and why though." Gibbs sighed.

"We don't even know what his powers are, do we boss?" Tim asked. When Ziva and Gibbs looked at him, he elaborated, "I mean, all we know is he was hit with burning debris that passed through him. Is he able to go intangible? Or can he not be hit from behind? Does it have to do with the fact that the debris was on fire? His hat did have scorch marks on it, after all."

Ziva chewed on her lower lip as she thought about that. Timothy was right, all they knew was the man was dangerous in a whole new way. She turned to find out what DiNozzo thought only to find him over by a parked bike several yards away. "Honestly you are like a child. Tony would you get away from that bike?"

"Boss, I think you should see this." Tony called out, drawing the group over.

"What?"

He pointed to the bike he had been not-so-covertly eyeing. It was bright yellow, and obviously built for speed, despite having room for two to sit on it. No brand name could be seen anywhere on the bike, suggesting it was possibly a custom job. On the seat there were two matching helmets. On the back of the solid black helmets three half skulls glared, facing left right and center resting on an eight point bone star. "Look familiar?"
"Yeah." Gibbs nodded to McGee who went to pull out his camera.

"HEY! What are you doing to Hellbike?" Shouted a voice, "Crap, that's not what he calls it...Er... sounds like fighter, matches, lighter...Striker! I mean, what are you doing to Striker?"

Ziva eyed the boy that came running up to them, glaring. He was short with messy black hair and dark brown eyes. A straw hat hung from the back of his neck by a string, apparently knocked off his head as he ran to them. He was wearing what she took to be period garb, loose pants that came to his knees, and a lace-up tunic that was left open, revealing a remarkably muscular body on one so young. Under his arm he held a leather cowboy hat "Is this your bike?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Me? No way! I would never name it something so lame as The Striker if it was. It's my bro's." He eyed her suspiciously, "Why? What were you doing to it anyway?"

"It's just such a nice bike. My friend Tony here pointed it out to us. We know someone who is very into motorcycles, and we were wanting to find out more about it."

The boy looked them over and then glanced at the motorcycle. His face broke out into a big grin, "Why didn't you say so? My brother had it made a few years back, I don't know anything about it though. My job's just to sit still and hold on. I think he's afraid I'll break it or something." The teen laughed.

"Wow, your brother can afford a sweet custom bike like this?" Tim asked, holding up his camera, "Think he'd mind if we'd get some pictures?"

"I don't see why not. Just don't touch it, ok? He's temperamental about who messes with his bike. That's why we left the helmets like that." The dark haired boy nodded at the seat as he placed the cowboy hat on a handle like a hat rack and opened a saddlebag, pulling out what looked like some beads and charms.

Tony looked at the helmets, "I don't get it."

"The logo on the helmet is kinda a warning to leave shit alone, right? I thought everyone knew that. Idiots. Anyway, I've got to get back to work. If you wanna ask about the bike, you should check out the pirate show." He stuffed his new items in the cowboy hat plopped the straw one on his head and trotted out of the lot without a backwards glance.

"People must know what that logo means, He left the side bag unlocked."

"Saddlebag. They weren't locked to begin with, either." Tim corrected as he took pictures of the bike from all angles. He then pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the license plate, looking at Gibbs, "I'll have Abby run it, though if she's right and this gang mark is showing up everywhere I don't think it'll help much."

Gibbs nodded, looking over the schedule. The next pirate show was in an hour on the other side of the faire grounds. "Well, let's go find out more about this bike. My gut says that kid knows more about this mark then he was letting on."

The four of them wandered the renaissance festival for the next hour, slowly making their way over to the glade where the pirate act was going to be held. Their stroll took them through the market area, where most stalls were quite busy selling a wide selection of custom made goods from leather-wear to cute little puppets. Ziva found herself fascinated by the various weapon-smith shops containing a wide variety of swords, though none were live weapons. Some stalls had what she learned were called criers who beckoned customers, usually with slightly lucid phrases.

"About fifteen minutes. We're right there, the pirate show is going to be going on right over there in that empty spot. There's a stand selling food and drinks, I think. It doesn't look too busy." Tim pointed out a half a shed with a counter in front. There was a sign with a rooster crowing hanging on the roof.

"Oh thank God. Anyone else want something to drink?"

"I will go with you, Tony. I think we could all use a drink, and maybe something to eat if they have it. Gibbs, Tim?"

"I'll ask around, see if I can find that kid again. If you could grab me a soda and maybe some fries though?" Ziva nodded at his request.

"Something to drink. I'll wait here."

Just before they got to the counter, a tall man with a patch of shocking blonde hair beat them to it, "Sorry, don't have a lot of time." He smiled lazily at Tony's disgruntled look before turning back to the barkeep.

"Oh, sure that makes it fine to cut us off. Rude." Tony muttered, though Ziva elbowed him.

Both were ignored by the barkeep and the strange man, "Uh, let's see...I'll have one three beers and a root-beer, oh, and four bottles of water." The barkeep nodded to the woman he was working with and she quickly started filling cups. She wondered how he was planning on carrying it all. The man stepped to the side to wait and Tony and Ziva stepped forward.

"Four regular sodas and three orders of fries, please." Ziva said with a smile, gesturing at Tony to pay, causing her partner to grumble as the barkeep laughed.

"I like you, lady." The man said, grinning, reaching under his counter and pulling out...a wooden roster. Ziva just stared at it, causing the man to grin wider, and the guy waiting for his beer palmed his face muttering. "You're staring at it."

She looked at him, and then at Tony who shrugged, confused, "Well, I can't help it. You just smack it on the counter like that."

"You like it?" He smirked, putting their sodas and the blond's beers on the counter.

"Er, it is a very nice roster?" the Israeli said awkwardly, feeling that she was missing something. Tony shrugged at her, grabbing the fries.

"Well, it IS big. And wooden." The blond drawled as his waters were placed on the counter and he paid. Tony made a choking noise.

"Ah. So you like wooden cock?" The barkeep snorted, and Ziva blushed slightly, getting the joke. "I'll be sure to tell Straw-Hat, Marco."

"Tell him lies like that, and you're a dead man walking, Tom." Marco shook his head, "Next time, ignore the roster, miss. YO! Cowboy up!" He shouted over at the field where two men were finishing setting up, hefting a water bottle.
The one wearing an orange cowboy hat that looked vaguely familiar looked over with a glare, "Not funny, bird-brain!" He snapped back, catching the bottle that flew at him one handed.

"I thought it funny," Marco winked at Tony and Ziva, whipping another bottle at the man without looking, who caught it as well. "Really, he's got no sense of humor, does he?" Another bottle when whizzing towards the cowboy hatted guy, who was now juggling them, gaining the attention of all around, "What pirate wears a cowboy hat, anyway?" He called, tossing the last bottle and picking up the four cups before heading over to where his friends were.

"I'm impressed. Well, I guess that answers how he was going to carry all that," Tony whistled.

"Yes. I guess he is part of the pirate show then?"

"You got that right. Better hurry, show's about to start." The barkeep laughed, shooing them away.

When Ziva and Tony found Gibbs and Tim, the two had situated themselves right in the front. Gibbs was watching the man who was still juggling the water bottles while the others stretched very carefully. Tim tapped her shoulder, pointing at a black haired youth in a straw hat who was making his way through the crowd, obviously trying to sneak up on the juggler. He stage-winked at people, and shushed them as he approached. As he broke out of the crowd he rushed the other, only to be clocked in the head by a water-bottle. He fell backwards dramatically, doing a backwards roll and landing with an umph.

The two men who had been warming up looked on, the one with the forward sweeping hair raised an eyebrow, "You're almost late, Straw-Hat."

"Hehe, Sorry, Thatch. I went to go get some meat. Hey! Water! Thanks, Cowboy" He chugged the bottle with a grin.

"Not you, too!" Cowboy muttered, tossing two bottles at Thatch and Marco, "That's the last time I let you three buy me a hat, no matter how nice it is. You guys are a bad influence on him." He muttered drinking his own water.

"Always so serious, right everyone?" Thatch grinned, "Well now, the show's about to start, so welcome, one and all to the 'Problem about Pirates', also known as 'How to Arrrrggeeeeivate Your Friends' time."

Marco looked at his friend bemusedly, "Straw-Hat come up with that one?"

"Yep, I sure did!"

"Nice one."

"Thank you." the audience laughed as the cowboy wearing hat man sighed, trying to hide a smile.

"I'm Thatch, this is Marco, and the grinning idiot is our cabin boy, Straw-Hat. He's too stupid to remember his name." Everyone chuckled, "Anyway, our friend here, 'Cowboy' doesn't really like his name. Which is a shame, because it's such a nice name. Throughout the show, we're going to be looking for a better name, what do you say?"

"Mr Hot-pants!"

"Sex-on-a-sick!"

"Screwed!"
"Very good suggestions." Marco laughed, "Last group wanted to call him 'Bob'."

"I liked Bob!" Muttered Cowboy sullenly, only to be ignored.

"On with the show, then?" Thatch began, unsheathing his saber, "Who here has seen the show Hercules? Ah, a good number of you. Good. Well, this is nothing like that. Too bad."

Marco hooked his foot in the hilt of another saber laying on the ground and flipped it up into his hand, "Well, I guess it could start the same way...how did it go again? This is the story of a time long ago!" He swung around and there was the ringing sound of two swords clashing as his blade met Thatch's.

"Well, pirates are all about myths and legends! I'll give you that." The brunette parried and slashed at the other's chest.

"Who care's about the land though? It's all about the sea. And she can be a cruel mistress." The blows came fast and furious now, Marco seemed to have the upper hand.

"Pirates played with other people all the time for sport." Thatch grinned.

"Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh is right!" He pulled out a second blade and the tables turned "HA! That's for drinking the last of the grog, you yeller-belly-son of a snivelling dog!" He crowed, disarming his opponent with a flourish. The crowd clapped. Ziva was very impressed as well, swordplay had never been her forte but she knew enough to know that both of them were not playing around. What she had just seen was not some well choreographed and planned mock-battle, but an actual practice. She eyed them with new respect, and waited to see what else would happen.

Straw hat tapped Marco on the shoulder, "Wow, you lost."

"Yes, I did. Thanks for pointing that out. Beer?" Marco panted.

"Does that mean you're gonna buy me food later, Thatch?" The younger guy grinned, handing over the beer.

Marco snatched the mug and kicked at the teen, "How the hell does that work? I lose and he has to buy you food?"

"Yep!" Straw-Hat did a front flip assisted by the kick and came up right in front of Thatch, who'd put away one of his swords, "Bet I could beat you."

"No way, you idiot." Thatch snorted and swung his blade, only to have the teen roll between his legs and come up behind him and tap him on the shoulder.

"You missed."

"Hold still!" Thatch mock-growled.

When he swung around, the boy leapt with a yelp, vaulting off his attackers shoulder, drawing a gasp then a chuckle from the crowd. "That was scary!"

While much more comical than the sword fight, the amount of skill displayed as the teen deftly avoided each swing by shifting, rolling, flipping, and even cartwheeling away was impressive. Finally both stood panting looking at each other, The grown man obviously a little more worn out,
"did you come here do dance or fight?"

Straw hat smirked before putting his hands up in the air and gyrating his hips, belly-dancing. A few of the women in the audience whistled appreciatively, causing him to grin wider, "I can do that, too. Wanna learn?"

Suddenly the guy with the cowboy hat was next to the dark haired teen, blushing slightly. It clicked with Ziva why the hat looked familiar, it was the same hat the boy had been carrying earlier when they had met him by the bikes. He took the straw hat off the top of the other's head and pushed it in his face, shoving him enough to make him fall. Everyone chuckled. "Forgive my brother, he's an idiot. Belly dancing..." he shook his head, pointing a dagger at his brother, who was joined by a laughing Thatch. "just sit there and no more dancing. Marco? Marco, stop laughing, it wasn't that funny."

"Hell yes it was. You didn't see the look on your face, Cowboy." He winked at the audience, who predictably went wild with 'awes' and laughter.

"Stop calling me that, and get over here!"

"Fine, how about, Easily-embarrassed-by-little-brother?" Marco grinned tossing a dagger at his still annoyed friend.

Cowboy causally caught the dagger without looking and flipped it and the one he was already holding up in the air, pulling four more out of his belt to join it, he juggled all of them with ease without looking. While he was doing that, Marco picked up some pins and started flipping them up into the air until he was juggling all six. Sharing a look, both men took a few big steps back and then started cross juggling, soon all twelve pins and knives were dancing back and forth at different times and at different heights.

Then Marco nodded to Cowboy, "Ready to show them some cool stuff?"

"I thought that's what we were doing all day, you idiot." The other grinned back, nodding.

Cowboy caught a pin and tossed it straight up while continuing to juggle the rest. Everyone's eyes followed the one pin predictably when they heard a thunk as it fell to the ground at his feet.

"Shit. That's impressive." Tony muttered next to her, eyeing the hilt of the knife buried in the pin. The dark haired man tossed the rest of the pins in rapid succession, five more dull thunk's ringing out. Everyone eyed them appreciatively, not noticing at first that Cowboy was now juggling three new items.

"Need a light?" Marco asked, walking over.

"If you would." He held out one of the items, still flipping the other two one handed. In moments he was whipping three burning batons up and around with ease, "you wanna try?"

"Hell no." Ziva thought she heard something muttered about beginner's luck before he continued louder, "Look at the time. Well, while my friend courts third degree burns, I just want to thank you for coming out to see our little show. Unlike some of the performers here, this isn't how we make our living, we're doing this mostly for fun, but if you liked what you saw, tips are welcome. We do have to feed the cabin boy, after all. He's a bottomless pit. Please enjoy the rest of your day at the Faire, and remember to tell your friends!"

They waited for the crowd to disperse, watching Cowboy as he caught all three flaming batons and whipped each one hard and fast enough to put them out before handing them to Straw-Hat who
grinned at him before ducking behind a tent, intent on cleaning. The four of them, well actually the three of them, made idle talk about the show as they watched the cleanup, ignoring the looks of the performers as Gibbs calmly sipped his soda. Finally it looked like the two hat wearing performers were alone as the others headed off towards the eateries. Gibbs nodded to his team and they stood, casually walking over to them.

"Wow that was so cool what you did with the fire-sticks." They heard Straw-Hat laugh.

"Uh huh. Listen, ...where the hell did you learn to Belly-dance?"

"Oh, I was watching the girls down at the gazebo earlier. It looked cool so I asked if they'd show me. Hey, it's you guys! These are the guys I was telling you that liked your bike!" He waved at them, grinning.

"That was quite an impressive show." Gibbs stated, coming to a stop.

Tony nodded, "Yeah, that sword fight...and that thing with the juggling...kid, how the hell do move like that? It's like you have no bones!"

Straw hat grinned, shrugging, "Dance lessons."

"Isn't that kind of, I don't know. Lame? Not that I'm complaining about the results." Tony frowned.

"I dunno. I took dance for a couple of years, it was a lot of fun. Except, all the girls got all giggly and weird in class. Being the only guy kinda sucked, too, so I quit."

Cowboy had watched the exchange warily, "So, why exactly are a bunch of cops interested in my bike again?"

"Cops? You didn't tell me you were cops." The teen pouted.

Tim spoke up, "Actually, we're NCIS. That stands for.."

"Naval Criminal Investigative Service, right?" Cowboy said, getting a surprise nod out of Tim, "Ch. Navy and marine Cops, but still cops. What do you want?"

"Off duty 'cops'." Gibbs said, glancing over the prickly young man, "We were just admiring your bike. Got a friend back home who's a big fan of custom jobs, so we thought we'd ask you if you could tell us some more."

He smirked, "Striker is a nice bike, isn't she?"

"Huh? It's a she?"

"All bikes are she!" He slapped his brother.

"Must have cost a pretty penny, or did you build it yourself? I build boats, myself, Cowboy, was it?"

Cowboy grimaced, "I hate that nickname. Name's Ace, juggler extraordinaire. Straw-Hat here is our tumbler, Thatch is our swordsman and Marco is our knife-thrower. But if you've seen the show, you know that."

"My names not really Straw hat though! Just here! Like a superhero."

"Yeah, I think we kinda figured that. Wanna tell us your real name?" Tony asked.
"It's a secret."

"Ah."

Ace put an arm on his brother's head, leaning on him, "Hush you idiot. I didn't make Striker, though I did have a lot of input on it's design specs. Took a few years to save up for it, but it was worth it. Guy who built it actually usually does ships and stuff, but he did it as a favour, really. Rides like a dream, great mileage, too.

"Don't suppose you could give us a name for our friend?"

"Sorry, no can do. He's kinda a very private guy." He looked up and over, noticing his friends, "And there's our meal. We've got to go, feed the fire and all that."

"MEAT!" Straw-Hat shouted, lunging towards the other two, grinning like a fool. His brother shook his head and followed. Ziva watched as Marco and Thatch looked surprised for a moment and glanced at them before turning away and herding the brothers off

"Get any pictures of him?"

"Took a few during the show, why?" Tim asked, "Wait, you don't think that..."

"Let's get those pictures to Abby." Gibbs turned and left, expecting his team to follow.
3 1/2 YEARS AGO

Ace had just turned eighteen, and gotten his first apartment, something he'd been saving up for since the brothers had first found themselves stuck in this situation. He'd been so excited to get out of that crappy place Teach called home he'd snuck out early in the morning on his birthday, leaving just a note for Luffy saying he'd be back as soon as he found a place for them to stay. It really hadn't taken anywhere near as long as he was expecting, either. There was just one problem. In the week he'd been gone looking for a place to stay, Marshall had apparently taken his displeasure over the older boy's disappearance out on Luffy. When the freckled teen had arrived to pick up his little brother he had been frightened at Luffy's condition, the boy was blue, he was so cold. Furious, he'd snatched up his unconscious brother, burying the little voice in his heart that said it was his fault for leaving the trusting child behind like that and ran.

He hadn't noticed right away when his running had attracted attention, though looking back, he should have known better. For all that they looked very much alike, he had probably looked like a kidnapper at the time. His younger brother was significantly smaller than him, and weighed almost nothing in his arms as he ran. His brother was so still and stiff in his arms as he ran, not even muttering as he was apt to do in his sleep. Ace knew it wasn't a good sign, that Luffy was in serious danger, but he didn't know what to do, clutching the only real family he had closer to him as he deliberately increased his body temperature. When Ace had realized he was being tailed, he had naturally assumed it was some of Blackbeard's men, and had run that much harder in an attempt to lose them. Instead he'd gotten lost himself, cornered in a dead-end. He eyed the wall in front of him knowing he could probably make it up to the roof if he really tried, but not with Luffy hurt.

A voice snapped out from the far end of the alley, "Hey! You! Unless you're spiderman, there's nowhere left to run!"

"M...Marco...Please don't say that. Don't give him any ideas, k?" panted a second voice. Ace didn't recognize either voice. "You heard him, fella. Now...give us the kid, alright?"

"Not on your life!" He growled back, spinning around to face the two.

"Nice, Thatch. Real Nice. Worked like a charm." One said, resting a hand on a wall as he caught his breath. He was tall, taller than Ace, with just a small patch of blond hair at the top of his head.

"Hey, what do you want from me?" The other replied, hands still on his knees as he recovered from his marathon chase. He looked a lot like an extra from Grease with his pompadour hairstyle, though the dark beard suggested his lighter brown hair might be dyed.

"How about, 'Give us the kid, and we might not beat the stuffing out of ya?' or even 'Give us the kid, or else!' would have worked."

Ace hugged Luffy closer to him, his dark gray eyes boring into them, daring them to come one step closer. He could fight them, but to do so with his brother in his arms would put the boy in extreme danger. Rubber became very brittle when it got too cold, one punch and Luffy could end up with a broken leg, or worse. The other option was to put the unconscious boy down; but it was January, and the ground was freezing, which would only make things worse. He couldn't just give up though. He owed it to Luffy, who trusted him and loved him no matter what he did. "I won't let you take him!"
"I don't think you have much choice in the matter." The one with the darker hair, Thatch, said, "His dad's probably worried, right? So just make this easy for everyone..."

"THAT MAN ISN'T OUR FATHER! HE'S NOT FAMILY!" came the shouted interruption. Silence reigned as Ace pushed up against the wall. He had shocked himself with his words, words he had made Luffy promise never to say. If Teach found out...He hugged Luffy tighter, shivering slightly.

"Family or not you can't go kidnapping someone from their legal guardian, brat."

He was doomed, they were going to tell Teach what he'd said, and then that man would do something horrible to Luffy. He couldn't let that happen, he had to stop them, even if it meant killing. "I hate that man! He's not fit to be guardian of a fly, let alone my baby brother!"

"Then that's a matter for the courts..." Marco came close and Ace actually growled at him, causing the man to frown.

Thatch put a hand on his friend's shoulder, seeing the panic in the teen's eyes, "Ah, come on, Marco, he's practically a kid himself."

"And that boy he's holding is sick, Thatch," grumbled Marco. "Listen, punk, I don't care about your sob story. You said that's your brother, right? Well, you obviously kidnapped him, running around in January with him in his boxers like that. I'm taking him away from you for his own good. Now, you either be a good brother and hand him over so I can take him to a doctor, or I beat the snot out of you and take him anyway."

Ace didn't know his eyes suddenly got a murderous glint to them as he shifted Luffy slightly in his arms. He stared at the two men, not feeling brave so much as fully committed to keeping his one treasure in life safe at all costs. "You so much as touch him, and I'll fucking kill you."

The two exchanged a look, knowing the young man in front of them was deadly serious about his threat. Whether or not he could actually pull it off was another matter, but that didn't mean he wasn't incredibly dangerous. Thatch smiled as disarmingly as he could as Marco backed off, "Ok, ok, how about the three of us take your little brother to the hospital, then? We won't touch him at all, alright? But, really, he doesn't look so good. If you won't let us take him back to where you got him," Ace glared harder, which Thatch ignored, "we need to get him to a doctor."

The dark haired teen chewed his lip eyeing them. The more they talked, the less likely it became that they worked for Blackbeard. That man would never want Luffy to go to a hospital, they'd ask too many questions there. He'd just order his goons to bring the boy back. He still couldn't risk taking Luffy to a hospital, though. The last time Ace himself had seen a doctor, he'd almost been sent for major testing. Apparently breaking the thermometer's heat gauge was not a good thing as far as the doctors were concerned. Not like it was his fault, really. Luffy was rubber, there was no telling was the doctors would do to him. All he could see was his brother being dissected like a lab frog in science class. He thought fast, "No. No doctors, no hospitals. It's against our religion."

"What religion?"

Ace didn't even bat an eye, "Amish."

"Bullshit," coughed Marco. "Sorry, I think I'm coming down with something. Might be contagious. Off to the hospital with the lot of us then."

"Would you believe he's scared of hospitals?"
"Then it's a good thing he's out cold."

"Please. He'll be fine if I can just get him into the apartment. I think. I hope." The body in his arms stirred slightly, "Lu? Luffy?"

"MMM'M'awke, 'Ce. Par'men?" The boy muttered burrowing his face into his brother's chest, further muffling his words, making it harder to translate.

"You need to wake up more than that, bro. Come on, stay with me. Yeah. Got an apartment yesterday. It's not the best, but it's got two bedrooms, just like you wanted. And a fridge. Full of meat." He frowned when that didn't get any response, Luffy was always excited for meat.

"Luffy, come on, wake up. I know you're cold, but you gotta stay awake." Ace lightly shook his brother eliciting a moan from the boy as he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where's your apartment?" Thatch asked, worried. He obviously decided that while not ideal the apartment would have to do.

Looking around Ace pointed with his chin, "Two blocks that way. Damn. Almost made it. Right across from a restaurant, second floor."

"Mind if I take the keys and turn up the heat? Marco here will walk back with you and make sure no one messes with you, alright?"

"Yeah. Fine. Normally I'd threaten to beat you down if you touch my stuff, but nothing's in there yet except for a crap load of steaks, so it doesn't matter. I just wanna get Luffy away from that guy and warm right now. Keys are in the right pocket." He nodded to Thatch as the man held up the keys and jogged off towards the apartment as he rubbed his brother's back. "You still awake, Lu?"

"Mnnn. S'rry...Teach...note..." The boy muttered, his hand coming up and holding onto his brother's jacket.

"Huh? No! I'm sorry I left you with that man! I know better!" Ace rested his chin on the mop of black hair, missing the look Marco gave them out of the corner of his eye at the word 'Teach' as he shut his eyes and took a few calming breaths. He was worried, Luffy should be shivering if he was cold, but he wasn't. Ace didn't think that was a good thing. The walk seemed to take forever, with the older brother constantly checking to make sure his sibling was awake. Finally they reached the apartment. "Lu, we're here. You still ok?"

"Accecccc'sssss Warm."

"Yeah, that's nice." He eyed the door and debated kicking it in.

As luck would have it, Marco took pity on him and knocked. Hearing his friend say it was open, he turned the handle and pushed open the door, holding it for the two brothers. It was a tight fit, however, and Ace's arm brushed against him, "Hey, he isn't kidding, you really are warm."

"I have a high normal body temperature." The young man grumbled, making his way over to the rather pathetic couch and gently laying his brother down before covering him with blankets.

"Aren't you supposed to treat hypothermia with a warm bath?" Thatch came out from the kitchen with a large mug of steaming soup, "I got a few cans from the neighbor. Chicken noodle. Eat it, you look a bit pale yourself, kid."

He warily eyed the soup before he stood and gratefully took it. Truth be told, he still didn't trust
them, but somehow he doubted this man would poison soup. He just didn't seem the type. He tossed back half the mug, enjoying the warmth. "Thanks. Thatch, right? And you're Marco? I don't want to risk putting Luffy in the tub, we've had... issues with him and water. He'd probably drown, with my luck. I'm Ace, by the way."

"Maybe you should have gotten a place with a shower then." Thatch laughed, making a second mug for the slowly warming teen. "Mind telling us what you two were doing out there?"

"It's private."

"Hey, kid, I think we deserve more of an answer then that." Marco glared at him.

Ace sipped at the soup, debating what to tell them, and how much was actually safe. In the end, he settled for a half truth. "It's nothing. Our Uncle has a bit of a tempter. I forgot to tell him I was looking for an apartment, and he took it out on Luffy."

Both men looked at him incredulously, and then at the pile of blankets in which Luffy stirred, "You're kidding, right? He's just a kid! What is he, like twelve? What the hell did he do to him?"

"Fourteen, actually. He's going to be fifteen in a few months. As to what our dear Uncle did...Who the hell knows."

"Rrrrrooooooofffff. In my b-b-b..." Luffy naturally chose that moment to wake up.

"That's...Inhumane." Thatch gasped, handing the shivering youth a warm mug of soup. "You just don't do that to someone, let alone a kid! You really should call the cops."

"Nu-uh." Luffy shook his head, "Worsssss that way."

Marco crouched down next to the teen, looking him in the eyes, "Worse how?"

"Thanks for your concern, but I think you should leave now." The elder brother growled, trying to pull him away from the now nervous younger brother.

The blonde took a deep breath, trying to reign in his anger so the jumpy brothers wouldn't think it was directed at them, "In case you haven't noticed, I'm just trying to help. Don't you want help?"

The younger boy just shook his head stubbornly, refusing to answer, his eyes wide with fear. It was obvious that something, or someone had him terrified to even attempt to try and get help, and the older brother wasn't much better. His sudden rage was just as telling. He looked ready to kill them for upsetting Luffy, moving to block him from their view. Marco shrugged, sighing. Turning away was the hardest thing he had ever done, but he did it.

"Ok then, we'll just leave, alright?" Thatch smiled wanly at the glaring youth, heading to the door that Marco already held open for him. He shared a look with his friend and set his shoulders, turning to face Ace again. "Here. I know you probably don't know anyone in the area yet, so if you need anything, this is my number. Call if you need anything, alright? And I mean anything. Even if it's just a jug of milk or something."

Ace stood there with the number in his hand glaring at them as they left, shutting the door behind them. They were all the way down the stairs when they heard the door slam open and they turned. There he was, still glaring at them from the top of the stairs like an angry stray cat. "Why?" He snapped at them, "Why the hell do you guys care?"

"Because you're a good kid, I guess, and you're trying really hard to take care of your brother."
Marco lazily answered for the both of them. At first he wasn't sure if he'd said the right thing; Ace continued to glare down at them for a few moments, then some of the intensity faded. He nodded and turned, leaving them staring at where he had been. Marco wondered if Ace knew how to really interact with other people at all as they heard the door shut. "I think we need to tell Pops about this."
There was no preamble as Gibbs came into the room, "Whacha got for me, Abbs?"

"Gibbs!" The goth woman squealed in excitement, turning away from her computer, "You found him! I don't know how you did it, he was like the proverbial needle in a haystack, but you found him."

Gibbs looked at the screen where a shot of Ace was up, face turned to the side as he said something. Next to it, there was an enlarged image from the security footage of the suspect, the only partial shot they had of his face. Across both images flashed "35% match" Gibbs pointed to the screen, "That doesn't seem conclusive, Abby."

"I know, but I also compared the couple of shots Tim sent of his back and a few side angles, and the match was a lot higher. This is the guy Gibbs!" She waved at the screen, now showing the other comparisons, and she was right. The matches ranged from 75% to 93%. It still wasn't enough to arrest the guy, though, even if his gut was telling him that this was the guy. Vance had ordered him to be as careful as possible in this case, and honestly, if Gibbs was right about Ace, he wasn't going to leave anything to chance. Still, it might be enough for the Director to sign off on some surveillance.

"What else could you find out?" The man smirked as he handed her a Caf-pow.

"Well, a whole lot of nothing, really. I gave what I could find to Ducky to do his psychological profile on." She pulled up a side-by-side shot of the two brothers. "Ace and his younger brother Luffy, no last name, were adopted about seven years ago by a man called 'Teach Marshal'. Before that, it's like they didn't even exist, I can't find records of them anywhere, so I'm pretty sure that their birth certificates are fake. I really looked Gibbs, I mean, Luffy isn't exactly a common name, and I looked into all of them I could find. So, before they were adopted, I've got nothing. In fact, given what a slimeball Marshal looks like, I'm surprised I've got anything at all after they were adopted, or how legal the adoption was. This is not the kind of guy people adopt kids to. He's got a record a mile long, and he's got ties into all sorts things, nothing that anyone can prove, though. No picture of him, sorry. He hasn't been seen in person for quite some time."

She pulled up a shot of just Ace, one where he was juggling the knives, a smirk on his face, "The older brother has a sealed juvi record, and dropped out of high school part way into his sophomore year. His grades were surprisingly good up to that point, but he had a lot of absences. Like, he was out more then he was in. Ace has since gotten his GED and is enrolled in a whole slew of internet college courses. He's doing well, too, but the classes are all over the board. He's been arrested a few times, drug-running, assault, theft, and, unsurprisingly, arson. He's been suspected a lot more than he's actually been arrested. We're not talking about localized, either, he's been arrested once in Alaska, Miami, and Texas, he sure gets around."

"What about the little brother, do you have anything on him?" Gibbs asked, leaning in as Abby happily pulled up a picture of the smiling teen.

"Luffy is just as interesting, to say the least. He just graduated highschool this year with a horrible attendance record and poor grades. I called the school, and technically he still lives with Marshal, though apparently he spends most of his time at his brother's. He has a juvi record as well; burglary, theft, assault, drug-running, destruction of property. He once smashed up a police car when one of his classmates was arrested for shoplifting. Luffy seems to get taken in for questioning a lot, but for some reason, charges tend to be dropped. He's also been seen in the
company of some very shady people, though unlike his brother he doesn't travel much. Both
brothers seem to have difficulty holding jobs, tending to do part-time work or manual labor. Ace
and Luffy have been seen at the scenes of some pretty bad crimes over the last few years, both
together and separately. Most notable was when their apartment building burned down two years
ago. Apparently both of them risked their lives to rescue the other tenants that were home at the
time before fleeing the scene." She turned and looked at her long time friend only to find him
leaving, "Gibbs? Gibbs! Where are you going?"

"To see Vance," The man replied as he headed to the elevator, "Do me a favor and tell Ducky to
meet me there, Abby."

Vance was not exactly surprised when Gibbs came into his office, and stood there waiting for the
Director to get off the phone. Nor was he surprised when Ducky came in a moment later carrying a
thin folder in his hands. He knew that it had something to do with the case he had his best team
working on. With a sigh he got off the line and buzzed his secretary, "Hold all calls for me, will
you Cathy? I'm not to be disturbed." Leaning back in his chair he eyed the two in front of him,
"Well?"

"We've got him." Gibbs calmly stated, a slight smirk on his face as he dropped a file on Vance's
desk.

He opened the file and started flipping through the sparse information, "Then why are you here
and not picking him up?"

"You mean besides the fact he's probably a Devil-fruit user?" came the sardonic reply.

Vance raised an eyebrow and leaned forward, "Let me guess, you don't have anything conclusive
yet. Your gut tells you this is the guy though, right?"

"Well, Abby's sure it's the guy, but the photo match isn't one hundred percent." Gibbs hedged, "We
could always bring him in anyway."

"Ducky?" Leon turned his attention to the other man in the room, noticing as the aging doctor
flinched ever so slightly at the suggestion.

Ducky hummed a moment looking at his file before looking up at Vance, "From what little data
Miss Sciuto has been able to procure, I suspect that this Ace character is in fact quite the dangerous
young man with an explosive temper. I think it best if the team not rush into things. I believe it is
very likely that Mr. Ace is currently involved in something illegal, or has been recently. If he is not
our suspect, he will still be highly confrontational, so I would suggest being very sure that we have
the right man. Much like a caged animal, I would not be surprised at all if he attempted to attack
someone if he were to be brought in for questioning."

"Do you think he's one of these...Devil-fruit users as well?" The Director of NCIS stared hard at
him, demanding nothing less then a completely honest answer.

"It has been many years since I have had any contact with anyone who had such abilities, and the
few cases I have heard about since have all been many years older than Ace, a fact I assure you I
find most troubling. Despite this, if this young man does indeed turn out to be our suspect I believe
it is highly likely he is either a Devil-fruit user himself, or is working closely with someone who is
one. However, I can not at this time offer even an educated guess on what his abilities could
possibly be. A word of caution, Director, even what may seem like a relatively benign ability can
turn deadly when used by the wrong type of person." Ducky warned. "In fact, I remember this one
man had the ability to slow objects down for just thirty seconds. For the most part, a completely
useless ability, but this man found a way to turn it deadly. He would slow down his opponent just enough to make his own attacks more effective, rendering them unable to dodge...

Vance's eyebrows rose slightly as he thought of the implications of such an ability. "All right then. Obviously, you think this," He looked at the photo attached to the file in front of him of a cocky young man in a cowboy like hat, "Ace fellow is our guy or you wouldn't be here in my office. If you don't think you have enough to bring him in and hold him, then I suggest you go get enough to. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal." Gibbs smirked, getting exactly what he'd wanted; tact permission to take his team and do some subtle investigation into the mysterious Ace. Now all he had to do was get them packed and ready to head to New York for a little reconnaissance. He looked at to his right at Ducky, wondering if maybe he'd be able to convince the doctor to go along so he'd have someone who actually understood the full impact of the case.

"I'm sorry, Jethro, but I believe I will be staying here with Abby. She has informed me that she had taken her search for Ace and Luffy global, and I wish to see if I can be of assistance."

"Let me know what you find out." He nodded, inwardly sighing. It was going to be a long, long investigation.
Bouncing Around Town

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Luffy loved his older brother. He really, truly did. Just not at seven o'clock in the damn morning during his summer vacation when Ace was dragging him out of bed. At seven in the morning, it was more of a strong dislike of the man. "Ear-ly!" he whined into his pillow as he contemplated throwing another alarm clock at his brother. Probably not a good idea, the last two had left melted puddles of plastic on his rug.

"Come on, Luffy, quit being such a kid. Get up! It's Monday, and we've gotta get to work." Ace gave the mattres a hard kick, obviously annoyed. "Chang's market opens at eight, and you've got to be there right?"

Of course, what Ace didn't know, because Luffy sure as hell wasn't going to tell him, was that his little brother had managed to get himself spectacularly fired by Mr. Chang on Thursday. Apparently the man had a problem with Luffy eating the stock. Of course, the teen had pointed out that if he'd been allowed to go out for lunch, he wouldn't have been so hungry that he'd ended up eating all that delicious food. Totally not Luffy's fault at all. Mr. Chang disagreed, rather loudly, however; and Luffy, in his haste to get out of the way of the man who was attacking him with a broom had tripped, knocking over a shelf...and things had kind of gone down hill from there. It was his fifteenth job this year he'd been fired from, too. He sighed into his pillow, "Fine, I'm up, I'm up."

Ace turned and started to leave the room, knowing Luffy would follow. "About time. I was just gonna get the water, Lu. Coffee's on, wanna cup?"

"Ye-yeah." He yawned in reply stumbling over to the bathroom for a fast shower to help wake him up. He wasn't surprised at all that the little stall shower was already wet; Ace kept weird hours after all. Turning on the water he stepped into the heated stream, "What'ca up to today?"

"Got a job welding some supports together for a construction crew in the morning. Might stick around there and see if I can pick up some more work, too. Oh, and Thatch said Shakky might be willing to hire me." He handed Luffy a cup of coffee as his brother came into the kitchen still wet from his shower- if you can call it that- and pulling on his denim shorts. "How the hell can you get those on when you're wet?" he shuddered.

Luffy looked up at him, blinking in confusion, "I donno, I just do. Anyway, I think I'm going to hang with the gang after work." or just hang out with the guys all day and maybe try and find some kind of job. Or at least earn some cash. "I promise we'll stay out of trouble. Zoro will be with me, it'll be fine."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I'm not picking you guys up if you end up in Jersey again. Three times is enough. Have one of Zoro's friends pick you up." He glanced at the clock, "Ah, shit, I'm gonna be late if I don't leave now. Lu, don't forget to lock the damn door. I'll see you tonight." And with that, Ace raced out of the apartment, shoving his new hat on his head.

Luffy watched him go before he took his cup of coffee over to the couch and turned on the TV. He thought passingly of maybe stopping by Chang's and seeing if he could get his job back, but he knew it would just be a waste of his time. With a sigh he flicked through the channels, stopping briefly on the morning news. He was relieved to see that Ace's last job, whatever it was, wasn't on
the news. Maybe his brother was just being paranoid about those cops, because Luffy sure hadn't
done anything too bad recently. He grumbled again at the ridiculously early hour, they'd just gotten
back from working the renfaire sometime late last night or possibly early morning. It was almost
worth going back to bed, but with his luck, Ace would be back for lunch or something. Sighing the
teen snagged a shirt lying haphazardly on a stool and shrugged into it before heading towards the
door. Zoro would probably be up and in his usual spot, or at least, he'd be in the usual spot,
sleeping.

As he came to where he usually ran into Zoro, Luffy looked up. There was a lot of yelling going
on, and by the looks of it, the Black Cat gang seemed to be the ones shouting at someone. Luffy
kind of knew these guys, but only because the idiots in this gang had thought it was a good idea to
mess with Usopp's family deli. Something about them needing 'protection' or some such bull. He'd
set them straight quick enough. *He* was all the protection Usopp's ma needed, unless Blackbeard
was involved. But that guy didn't bother with shaking down small time delies, for all that he ate
almost as much as the brothers' did. Ever since his little 'chat' with the Black Cats, they'd avoided
him and his friends. So it was a bit of a surprise to see them here, so close to his apartment.

As he approached, he spotted Zoro in the middle of the crowd. The man was obviously annoyed,
attempting to ignore the man screaming obscenities inches from his face. He scowled, running a
hand through his vibrant green hair, his eyes roaming the street. A smirk appeared as Zoro spotted
his younger friend. Zoro forcefully shoved the man in front of him away, palm in his face,
effectively shutting him up. Naturally, with Zoro, he used a bit more force than necessary, and sent
the man sprawling on the ground. "Oy, Luffy. Took you long enough."

He plastered his trademark goofy grin on his face in response, "Hey. What's going on?"

"You! Don't you know what he did?" One of the gang members grabbed Luffy's arm, "Thanks to
him, our boss is in jail! He's a friggin' Narc!"

Luffy blinked at him, "What's a Narc?"

"A sell out! A snitch!" Hissed the one who'd been in Zoro's face, adjusting his strange heart-shaped
glasses.

"Oh. Hey, Zoro, are you a Nare?" Luffy cocked his head to the side, eyeing his friend, "Because,
that's not cool, you know."

Zoro adjusted his jacket, giving the teen a disgusted look, "Do you really even have to ask? Of
course not, Luffy. You're such an idiot."

"Didn't think so." He turned back to the glasses-man, Jango, he thought his name was, "Zoro isn't
the type anyway."

"You of all people should know better than to hang out with the likes of him." Jango put his arm
around the teen's shoulders and turned him away from the group. He leaned in and whispered,
"Word has it he's a cop!" as if imparting a great secret.

Black eyes blinked slowly as the teen frowned in thought, "Yeah so? You say cop like it's a bad
thing. Besides, you don't have any proof that he is one, do you?"

"B-but..."

Luffy laughed, pointing at his disgruntled friend, "What cop has green hair, anyway?"

"He's undercover, you dolt!" came the shouted reply as Jango forgot it was supposed to be a secret.
Luffy had that effect on people.

He closed his eyes, apparently considering this possibility, "Nah. I don't buy it. He's way too mean to be a cop. I saw him beat up a bunch of punks just last week. Besides, if Zoro was a cop, don't you think I'd be the first one he'd arrest?"

Really, there was nothing they could say to that. Luffy's reputation was well known as a troublemaker, and it was no secret on the streets that his juvi record didn't touch half of the crap he was somehow involved in. Not that he wanted to be involved with it, really. It just wasn't healthy to say no to Marshall, and Luffy had learned that one the hard way. He gave them his wide-eyed idiot stare until they left, grumbling the whole time. Finally he turned his attention to Zoro.

"Thanks, man."

"Shishishishi. You make a lousy cop anyway. Always breaking rules and shit."

"I wouldn't be breaking the law if someone didn't keep dragging me into things." Zoro grinned back, lightly punching Luffy's arm, "You'd think I would have learned my lesson the first time."

"Where's the fun in that?" whined the teen. "It's more of an adventure this way!"

"Speaking of adventures, how was the faire?"

"Not bad. Lots of meat. Ace almost burned down the tent by accident when I showed him a new trick I learned."

"Did you tell him you got fired?"

"Er. No. I kind of thought I'd wait till I had another job. Or money. Or he's sleeping. Or maybe, just, you know. Not tell him. Cauz, he's gonna be pissed."

The man just shook his head, "Yeah, and holding off is just going to make it so much better, Luffy. You should just tell him, I'm sure he'd understand. Well, come on, let's make the most of today at least. Usopp should be free, though that shitty cook said he was busy today."

"Wrong way, Zoro, the deli is in that direction." Luffy laughed as his friend turned a little pink and quickly corrected his direction, "What about Nami?"

"Eh, who knows? Said she might be able to slip away from Arlong, but I wouldn't count on it. Now there's a bastard I'd love to bring down."

"Speaking of...did you really bust the leader of the Black Cats?"

"Hell no. That was Johnny and Yosaku, it was their little pet project. Couldn't have happened to a nicer con-artist. Of course, those two idiots had to go and find me yesterday and tell me all about it, never mind I was working at the time. Ruined a great sting, and Jango heard them."

"Ah. I see." The teen nodded easily, arms behind his head as he walked alongside his friend.

Zoro eyed Luffy critically, "No you don't. You don't get it at all, do you?"

"Nope. It's a mystery."

"That's what I thought." He shook his head, his three earrings jingling, "You are such an idiot, you know that? Why do I even bother trying to explain it to you?"
"I donno. Ace says the same thing a lot. Then he makes funny noises and faces before he goes and gets milk."

"Milk?"

"Yep. Milk. It's really weird, too. Because, we always have plenty of milk, so I don't know why he has to go out to get more suddenly. Ace is funny that way."

Zoro laughed, "Luffy, sometimes I really feel sorry for your brother. Listening to you, it's really hard to picture him as some bad ass villain, you know?"

"HEY! What's that supposed to mean? Ace is awesome! He's the best brother in the world, Zoro, and he could totally kick your ass with both arms tied behind his back!"

"Hey guys, what's going on?" called a voice from across the street, causing both to look up to were two people were deftly loading a fruit display outside of a relatively small deli. One of the workers had his wild black hair covered in a do-rag, the tail end of it still desperately attempting to form an afro-like plume. He waved at them, thumbing his rather prominent nose, "You two fighting again?"

"Ah! Usopp!" Luffy waved back, darting into the traffic with practiced ease, ignoring the screeching tires and blaring horns. Zoro followed at a more sedate pace, glaring at the cursing drivers, causing them to swallow in fear. "Usopp, you know that Ace is the best, right?"

"Is that what this is about? Really? Of course your brother's pretty cool. I mean, he's not as cool as me, but he's still got some moves. Guys, I want you to meet Konno Takashi. He's my cousin or something I think." He nodded to the other guy loading apples into the display. The guy also had dark hair, covered by a hat, though his seemed much tamer than his relatives. There was more than a passing resemblance between the two.

Konno glared at him, "You think?"

"Well, mom was kind of vague, you know?" He shrugged, "Anyway, he's just moved to the city, so we're letting him stay with us while he finds his feet."

"More like 'making me work long hours for crap pay' you jerk."

"Hey! We're giving you a place to sleep, too, you know!"

"Sleep? How can I sleep? You snore like a chainsaw, man." Konno smirked, turning his attention back to Luffy and Zoro as he put the last apple on the display. "As my cousin told you, I'm Konno. He's told me all about you guys. At great length. Repeatedly." He laughed, "Anyway, I've just enrolled in college here and aunt Banchina's letting me hang till classes start, ya know?"

"Wow, Usopp, your mom's name is Banchina?"

"...Luffy you're an idiot."

"So, what's the plan?" Zoro's voice cut through the bickering before it could even begin.

"Well," grinned Luffy, "I was thinking' we'd hit Sanji up for some food, then maybe troll the park for some money, because Ace doesn't know I got fired."

Usopp whistled, "Again? What's that, like the tenth time this year?"

"Fifteenth, actually. Anyway, after that, I dunno, maybe just chill? Shakky's has a DJ tonight I
think."

"That sounds great and all, but Usopp has to work. So, you guys go have fun." Konno's hand closed on his cousin's shoulder as he waved a hand at the other two, a vaguely annoyed look on his face.

"Aww, come on, man. Just for the day, can't you cover for me? I mean, you're here anyway, right?" Usopp wheedled, "It's not like you had any plans in the first place."

Luffy looked at his friend's target, begging, "Please? I swear I'll be your friend for life, Conehead!"

"You can't even get my name right!"

"Just give it up, they'll bug you all day until you do, you know. They're like children that way. Or rabid dogs." Zoro smirked at him, earning an incredulous look. He'd obviously known this was going to happen the moment he'd met the guy.

"I hate you right now." he muttered, before continuing louder, "Fine. But you owe me a six-pack. And not some domestic crap, or I tell Auntie B, you son-ova-bitch. Now scram before I realise what a bad idea this is." Both Luffy and Usopp cheered, high fiving each other as Konno muttered darkly, despite the smirk on his face.

It wasn't much longer before the three left for Sanji's, though Usopp was a bit of a worry-wort, reminding his cousin to call in case of anything going wrong. In the end, Zoro had just grabbed the teen by the hair and dragged him away after Luffy, who was already halfway down the street, screaming about meat.

Sanji was quick enough to chase the trio out of the restaurant, claiming that because the place wasn't open, he didn't have to deal with unruly customers. The three took it reasonably well, especially when the blonde gave in to the incessant whining at the kitchen door and provided what Luffy had long ago dubbed "Pirate Lunches" to hold them over, explaining that Zeff was on a warpath this week over some big name reviewer coming to town, so he really didn't have time to ditch out. They might have pushed the matter, but that didn't mean he was about to let his most promising apprentices go gallivanting just because. Instead, he chased them out after an hour of bullshit, sending the three off to 'wreak havoc on some other poor soul' he said with a laugh.

Luffy, Usopp and Zoro wove deftly through the crowd, making their way to the better parts of town. Usopp kept suggesting new parkour tricks for his more flexible friend to try in the park, even begging to see some of the tricks he'd picked up at the renfaire. Zoro's eyes darted back and forth as he trailed slightly behind the two, worry lines etched between his brows. He felt as if they were being watched, something that wasn't too unusual when travelling with Luffy, but the fact he couldn't locate the watcher was odd.

Zoro didn't even notice as his friend slowed down, instead he continued on. The teens attention was fixed on an oriental woman. She was apparently frantic and she clutched a small picture in her hands. Luffy watched as the woman desperately approached people on the street corner. He'd actually come to a full stop, a frown on his face as he listened to her pleading voice as another person brushed her off. It was a painful reminder of all the times he had needed help, and there had been no-one. No one but his brother, that is, and look where that had gotten them.

Usopp noticed his friend had stopped and circled back, eyes seeking out what had caught the air
head's attention, "Luffy, something wrong? You know that lady?"

"Nah." He shook his head, eyes squinted in thought. He knew he was going to help, but he wanted to be sure he knew what was wrong. No need to make the same mistake again, after all.

"Well, what's the problem?" Zoro asked, coming up to them. Usually, if something caught the young troublemaker's attention, it bared paying attention to.

Luffy started over to the woman, "She's lost her kid. I think."

"Woah, you speak Chinese?"

"Not really. Ace does, though. He's got these stupid audio lessons he does at all hours..." The group was almost to the woman, "So I hear them a lot. She's either lost her kid, or is looking for a milk stand."

"Well, judging by how she's acting..." Usopp nodded, "but we don't know anything about a kid, do we?" They'd reached the woman who quickly grasped Usopp in a desperate grip as she babbled something at him in Mandarin before shoving a wallet picture at him.

Zoro plucked the photo from her hands, "This kid, I've seen him. He was over at the park, eh, eight blocks back."

Usopp did a double take, "How the heck did you notice that?"

"Unlike you, I'm observant." He handed the photo back with a nod. "Tell her, Luffy."

"You sure, Zoro?"

"He was on the jungle gym. Ripped jeans, striped shirt." The man gave him a droll stare.

"Hmm. Wǒmen kàn dàole nǐ katsikísio gála más en la Ròu taco stand." Luffy grinned. After a moment the grin faltered as the woman stared at him in a vaguely freaked out manner.

"Hehe...oops."

"Oops? What did you say to her?"

"Uh. I don't really know. I thought I told her where we saw her kid. But I could have told her something about meat. Or tacos...and I think I might have thrown in some Greek." He scratched the back of his head as his friends just stared at him, "What? Ace is the genius, you know. He told me to never, under any circumstances, speak to anyone. Said I could start world war three with 'hello'."

"So what are we going to do?" Usopp asked as the woman continued to hover. All three men looked at each other and said "Call Ace!"

Ace picked up on the third right, "Ouch! GAH! Damnit, Lu, this had better be important."

"You ok?"

"Just put a hole in my damn pants is all. What is it?" He growled.

"Got a woman here, she's looking for her kid, and we saw him over in thirty-fourth little playground. You know, the one with the really cool slide?" He really hoped his brother didn't ask why he had been by the playground, which was at least an hour away from where he was supposed to be.
"Yeah...So? Luffy, I really don't have time for this right now, I'm trying to weld a frame over my head and get it to code with SUB-PAR SUPPLIES, fucking cheap-bastard!" A bang and a slam could be heard in the background as Luffy held his phone away from his ear.

"Well...The thing is...she's kinda speaking Chinese. And, well...I don't." He laughed sheepishly, "I tried, but I think I told her something about meat and goat milk, maybe with some Greek thrown in. So...

Ace sighed, and Luffy grinned at the woman as he heard his brother shift around, "Hand her the phone." She was very confused for a moment when she took the phone. Her face slowly lit up and she started to nod.

"Xie xie! Xie xie!" She said handing the phone back as she took off towards the park.

Luffy put the phone back up to his ear, "Ace?"

"Still here. Told her that you saw her kid and where he was, but that you're grasp on languages was shameful, which was why you called me. Now let me get back to work."

"M'k. Bye, Ace." Luffy grinned as he pocketed the phone, "My brother is the coolest ever."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't wanna be you when he realizes you got fired. Again." Zoro laughed at the face Luffy made as he threw an arm around his shoulder. "Come on, you idiot, if he's in the warehouse district, let's head over to the park now. That way, we'll be harder to find."

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Translation of Luffy-Speak: "We saw your goat milk over by the meat taco-stand" In a mix of Mandarin, Greek, and Spanish. Thank you, Google translate. Luffy is NOT allowed to speak to people in other languages for a very good reason.

Asian woman: "Xie xie! Xie xie!" is "Thank you! Thank you!"
Timothy once again was amazed at how smoothly things were going. The matter of getting the warrant was easy. With the heightened state of alert the country was in, all you really had to do was suggest terrorist activities, and a judge was more than happy to sign off on a search warrant, if not for an arrest. Director Vance had procured one as well as a base of operations, while the team was still on their way up to the city. Thanks to Gibbs's Driving skills, they'd arrived early in the evening. That had given them plenty of time to set up in the shoddy little apartment across the street before the brothers had arrived at around three A. The neighborhood itself wasn't exactly on the respectable end of the spectrum, with the sound of gunfire and sirens not being too uncommon. Surprisingly enough however, the crime rate took a sharp drop right in front of the apartment building they were watching. Sure, there was a mugging down the street, and Tony has pointed out a drug deal, but the whole time the dealer had been warily glancing at the building, as if expecting someone to come rushing out from it.

As the team waited for the brothers to arrive they hashed out how they would handle the surveillance. The warrant and Vance's orders made it imperative that they get into the apartment, but since they had no clue when the brothers were due to actually arrive, Gibbs thought it was better not to take any unnecessary risks. Instead, they'd attempt entry the next day. McGee and Ziva would be in charge of discovering what they could about their suspect by going over the apartment with a fine tooth comb, pictures only. They didn't want to alert him if at all possible. Tony, being a former street cop in Peoria, had a better chance of blending in with the crowds in the city, a must when tailing someone as obviously weary as Ace. Gibbs told them that he would follow the little brother, Luffy. When asked why, he shrugged and had replied that something felt funny about the kid.

Ziva had been on watch when the brothers had finally arrived home, rousing the team to some form of wakefulness as the two dark haired youths stumbled blearily off the canary-yellow bike left parked out in the open with helmets listlessly hanging from the handles. They'd watched as the two made their way to the front door, yawning as they vanished, only to reappear in the now lit apartment a short time later. The bags they carried barely made it in the door before the elder brother headed to the far corner of the apartment, leaving the other to shut and lock the door before following. He returned a short while later, a sour look on his face before he turned his back to the window and the lights went out. The team shared a look before deciding they'd learned all they could from the strange behavior and calling it an evening.

Just three short hours later Gibbs woke his team. Their target was up and moving, going about what seemed like a normal morning routine for him. He stumbled into the kitchen, and made a pot of coffee. Opening the fridge, he pulled something out and gave it a suspicious sniff before promptly eating it. He vanished from sight again only to reappear steaming-wet in boxers as he made his way over to the television, grabbing his coffee on the way. It was debatable if Ace was actually watching whatever news show was on, as his attention seemed to be riveted on a book he had precariously balanced on his lap. After almost an hour, he looked up with a wince in the direction of what Tim assumed was a bedroom and put the book down before storming into the room. When he came back into sight now fully clothed he poured another cup of coffee, obviously talking to someone out of view. Moments later a damp Luffy emerged tugging on jeans, apparently just out of the shower. He took the proffered cup of coffee as the two chatted for a few minutes before Ace raced out the door, hat in hand.
"Wow look at him go. Wonder what lit a fire under his ass?" Tony mused right before Gibbs slapped the back of his head.

"Get going and find out."

"Fine, fine, I'm going...It's a good thing he isn't taking the bike." Tony bitched as he pocketed his keys, wallet, and holstered his gun. "Bye, Boss. Don't mess up, Probies."

"I think maybe we should be saying that to you, Tony."

Tony rolled his eyes as he pulled the door shut, "Whatever. I'm in my element. You guys get all the boring work."

The remaining brother stood there a moment before turning his attention to the television and flicking through the channels at random. He'd watched a bit of one broadcast only to cut away to a different channel showing what seemed to be the exact same thing for settling on the news for a while. None of them were sure if he'd fallen asleep watching it when he stood, grabbing a shirt from a stool and left the apartment, heading for the street. Gibbs was already out the door by the time Luffy reached the street, a muffin magically in his hand that he was happily munching away on.

"Where did the Muffin come from?" Ziva looked at her friend and coworker, obviously confused as Luffy had only been out of site for a few moments.

"Muffin fairy?" Tim said, getting a weird look, "Sorry, it's something my sister says. Maybe he got it from someone else in the building. I mean, he must have. There goes Gibbs. Are you ready?"

"Let us get this over with as soon as possible. I believe Gibbs' gut, there is something very wrong with these two, and I do not like it."

"You and me both, Ziva."

The building the two brothers lived in was very worn down, the perfect picture of a slum-lords holding with it's shoddy exterior hiding an even cruder decor. The elevator was broken, if it had ever worked, and the stairs were covered with graffiti. Three flights later, the two agents finally arrived at a nondescript door. They'd both half-expected to see the iconic bone-star and three skull logo underneath the room number, so much so it was conspicuous in its absence. Tim had been expecting Ziva to have to pick the lock. Really, what kind of fool left their door unlocked in New York City, let alone the kind of neighborhood this apartment was located in? Apparently a straw hat wearing kind of fool, not that Luffy'd been wearing the hat when he'd left.

All Ziva had to do was turn the handle, and they were in the rather small apartment, shutting the door behind them. The Israeli pointed to a note tacked to the back of the door which read 'LUFFY! DO NOT FORGET TO LOCK DOOR!' and calmly said, "I think he forgot."

Tim shrugged reading the sign before snapping a picture of it, "Yeah. We'll just lock it on our way out, I guess."

"Alright. If Ace came home first, I'm sure he'd become suspicious anyway to find the door unlocked. This is a really small apartment."

The two moved away from the door into the main room. The place had an open floor plan, with the kitchen being in one corner of the larger room with a counter separating the two. "What do you suppose these are for?" McGee wondered, gesturing with the camera in his hand. Where a dining table would normally be, a giant bean-bag rested on top of some gymnastic type mats.
"I would assume sparing. Give me a hand with these?" Ziva moved the bean-bag over to the door, and grabbed a corner of the top mat. If the mats were laid out, the rest of the open space in the room would be completely taken up, though currently the ratty carpet was remarkably clear, considering two young men lived there. Quickly the two opened up one the mats to get a better look at them. The mat itself looked a little worse for wear with the foam sticking out in spots and light scorch marks on it.

Tim snapped pictures, wondering what exactly they did to get the mats in such a condition. "I'll tell you one thing, I'd hate to live below these guys."

Ziva eyed them critically, "These mats are very good, even if they are worn out." Her gaze drifted over to the side. Against the wall were two long staffs as well as target-pads used in fight training. A phone number was posted on the wall next to the equipment for a supply company. "I wonder why they train here and not go to a gym? There is not a lot of room, after all."

Tim could only shrug, "Who knows? Maybe Gibbs will be able to figure it out. Come on, we've still got to check the rest of the apartment. Let's see if we can find anything he could have used to start that fire on Earle." The two folded the mat back up, being sure to place it exactly how it had been with the beanbag on top before moving on.

What little space remained for the livingroom was taken up by a sagging couch that had seen better days, a low table and a surprisingly nice flat-screen TV with multiple gaming systems attached to it. The couch smelled vaguely of burnt popcorn for some reason, and had little tiny burns on it.

"Maybe one of them smokes?" Tim frowned, fingering one of the bigger burns on the arm of the couch.

His partner shook her head, her attention already on the table, "I do not think so. I don't smell any cigarettes, can you?" Upon further examination, the table turned out to be two end tables that had been placed together. She lifted a fat envelope that was sitting on the corner and opened it, revealing a large number of photographs. "Looks like someone graduated." She held out the pictures for him.

Paging through them he almost laughed, "More like he goofed off though it. This Luffy sure seems like a carefree type of guy."

"The complete opposite of his brother, I suspect." Her attention was on the book Ace had been reading earlier, opening it to where the bookmark was, "'Child Psychology and You.' Hmm, Strange reading so early in the morning, don't you think? 'Psychological abuse can be harder to spot. A child will develop a myriad of coping mechanisms in order to deal with the abuse, often making it difficult to even tell when they are suffering.' I wonder why he is reading this."

"Well, Abby did say he was taking a lot of college classes. Look at this, it's a scorecard. Ace, three-thousand nine hundred sixty two. Luffy, one-thousand five hundred and seventy. Looks like Ace is winning, by a lot."

"That does not surprise me. Do you recognize this magazine? There's a whole stack of them." She held up the top one. The Magazine was large and glossy, showing a motorcycle on a beautiful scenic road. 'Backroads' written in bold across the top.

"Sorry, motorcycles aren't my thing." Tim said, taking a picture.

Over against the wall was a desk with a laptop, actually tied to the desk. A printer sat empty of paper next to it, a note stuck to it reminding someone to buy paper. "Huh. I used to have to do that.
in college. Bolt my Laptop down. My roommate kept moving it on me. I guess they share this one. Luffy would have needed something to do papers on, too."

The wall next to the desk was taken up by a bookshelf, full of books. The titles ranged from popular manga and children's books to the classics. Scattered throughout were more educational books on everything from psychology to astronomy. One shelf seemed dedicated to 'how to' type books. Books on welding, sailing, carpentry, making beer, gardening, knitting, sewing, gymnastics, fencing, lockpicking, and bomb-making were neatly arranged by category. The two of them shared a look as they took a picture of the shelf before pulling out the books for a cursory glance. Putting the books back on the shelf, the next thing they saw was a whole collection on Rosetta Stone learning aids for six different languages.

Ziva shook her head as they took more pictures of the shelves before moving on. "The more I see, the weirder these two brothers seem. Why is there only one bedroom? Wouldn't they normally sleep in separate rooms at this age?"

"Well, it's possible that this was all they could afford." Tim mused, following her into the tiny room. The beds took up most of the space, both being up against a wall. The dressers stood side by side, doing obvious double duty as nightstands. A few brightly colored rugs were on the floor. Toeing a lump on the floor, Tim left Ziva to go through the drawers as he checked out the strange substance. It was hardened and stuck firmly to the rug. It seemed to be plastic of some sort. Looking around, he spotted a similar mark on the same rug and took a picture, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

A disgusted sigh drew his attention to his friend, "I have found nothing except for some smelly socks and an old candy-bar. Have you?"

"Not really. All that's left is the bathroom and the kitchen, right? I'll check the bathroom, you get the kitchen."

The bathroom as small, containing a curtained off shower stall, a sink with a cabinet under it, and a toilet. He carefully checked under the sink, just in case the brothers had hidden anything there, though he doubted it. Clean as it was, the bathroom was really too damp for any kind of explosive or incendiary device. He even checked the tank of the toilet, thanking Tony in his head for telling him about how some drug traffickers were known to hide their stashes there. It too was empty. The mirror hid a medicine cabinet, fully stocked with pill bottles, drawing a whistle from McGee. Carefully he took out each bottle, jotting down what it was and the dose as well as taking photos of them. Some of the bottles had big X marks on them, and about half had an 'A' while the other half had an 'L'. Tim assumed the ones with the X were medications that were no good, or were for something else, and so took special care to get the names right on them. The remaining bottles seemed to be duplicates, many being full of Armodafinil, marked just with an 'A', and Amphetamine-Dextroamphetamine, marked with 'A' or 'L', depending on the dose. All the bottles were either from a Doctor, Hiluluk or a Doctorine, Kureha. Tim had a feeling the name were aliases of some sort.

There were also a large number of caffeine tablets and stimulants. Tim recognized a lot of them, having used them himself at work as well as on his personal time to get writing done or leveling in a game. Most were just over the counter ones you could find at any pharmacy, but a few seemed to be homemade pills, the bottles ranging from 400mg to 600mg. Taking down notes, he ran a hand through his hair, worried. Tim was no doctor, but even he knew that a lot of Caffeine could be dangerous, and there was no way those pills would be legal. If that was what they were, that is. Both brothers had a record for drug trafficking, and so far he'd found no illegal drugs, or even a lighter. Part of him was tempted to take the bottles so Abby could test them, but instead he took out
one pill in each bottle and placed it in an evidence bag before returning them to the cabinets.

When he reached the small kitchen it was to find his fellow agent making a face at the nearly empty refrigerator. It was obvious by her stance that she was agitated, "There is nothing here. Nothing at all. I checked the cabinets, under the sink, even in the freezer. No explosives, nothing to make them with, no food. Not even a cockroach. He is like that man, you know, the magician...?"

"Hoodini?"

"Yes! Him! Hiding things. I am beginning to think Gibbs is right, and this Ace is a Devil-berry..."

"Fruit," he corrected. Her English always suffered when she was upset.

"Fruit user. I do not like it." She grumbled as she headed to the door, before coming to a stop.

"What? what is it?" he asked, noticing the confused look on her face.

"McGee...Was there a light-switch by the bedroom?"

He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the room, confused. "No, not that I noticed. Why?"

"Are you quite certain?"

"I'll go check if it'll make you feel better," Tim had to stop himself from rolling his eyes as he checked, "nope. none."

"So then, this is the only light switch for this room, correct?" She turned it on as he voiced his agreement, "Then how did Luffy turn off the lights from all the way over there?"

"Who knows? Clapper?" Tim clapped, "Or not. Maybe a remote. Let me check something." He pushed a table out of the way in order to see the socket the lamp currently on was plugged into.

"Well?"

"Huh. Well that's odd. There's no receiver, so I don't think he was using a remote. I've got no clue how he did it. Maybe he threw something, his back was to us after all. But his aim would have to be amazing."

"I think this might be something to mention to Gibbs. There is something just not right about this." Ziva shook her head opening the door. Holding it open for Tim she continued, "This kind of mystery is more Abby's thing, I feel like I am out of my depth." After they shut the door she made sure to lock it, heading back to the base of operations across the street. Hopefully they'd hear from the others soon, but for now all they could do was wait.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to say that the magazine that Ziva found, "Backroads" IS a real magazine, and it's really good. The full title is "Backroads Motorcycle Touring Magazine" in case you want to go look for it, since it's a smaller publication. I personally DO NOT ride a motorcycle, but I do read this, and I know the people who put it out. The real
reason I put this in is not because I know them, however, it's because they tour the world on their bikes, and the stories they tell are very real, with a good helping of dry-witty humor in them. I could easily see Ace reading them and laughing out loud as Brian talks about how he confused a monkey with his bald head, or the doctor's killing the power on the grid to do an X-ray for his broken leg in a small town in South America.
All fired up

Ace glowered at the sleeping form of his younger brother, then at the alarm that had been blaring for the past *ten minutes*. Luffy, he decided, could probably sleep through just about anything, except for lunch. For food, he'd get up, but Ace wasn't feeling particularly kind at the moment, not after he'd spent most of the night driving home with the idiot snoring on his back. Not to mention there wasn't much left in the fridge except for mold. Instead he ripped the covers off his brother with an overly cheerful, "Rise and shine, idiot!"

The mop of dark hair rose, and dark brown eyes blearily focused on the alarm clock that had been reflexively silenced. "Ear-ly!" came the response as the head flopped back into the pillow. Luffy cracked open an eye, giving his brother a look, more than likely he was contemplating throwing another alarm clock at his brother.

Ace raised his eyebrow in response, half daring him to try it. It wasn't *his* rug, after all. His brother just sighed gustily and closed his eyes again. "Come on, Luffy, quit being such a kid. Get up! It's Monday, and we've gotta get to work." Ace gave the mattress a hard kick, seriously getting annoyed. How on earth did Luffy ever get to school? "Chang's market opens at eight, and you've got to be there right?"

"Fine, I'm up, I'm up." came the groan into the pillow.

Ace smirked as he turned to leave, knowing Luffy would follow. "About time. I was just gonna get the water, Lu. Coffee's on, wanna cup?"

"Ye-yeah." his sleepy brother replied as he stumbled into the bathroom as he prepared a cup of coffee. He heard the shower come on a second later, "What'ca up to today?"

"Got a job welding some supports together for a construction crew in the morning. Might stick around there and see if I can pick up some more work, too. Oh, and Thatch said Shakky might be willing to hire me.' Whether or not she would remained to be seen. Legally, he wasn't old enough to work at the bar after hours, but the woman had a way of overlooking little facts like that if they were inconvenient for her. Handing Luffy his cup of overly-sweetened coffee he couldn't help the shudder that rolled through him. The mere thought of pulling on jeans while wet just made his skin crawl, and he never understood how the other did it. "How the hell can you get those on when you're wet?"

Luffy looked up at him, blinking in confusion, not getting what the problem was at all, "I donno, I just do. Anyway, I think I'm going to hang with the gang after work. I promise we'll stay out of trouble. Zoro'll be with me, it'll be fine."

For obvious reasons, hearing that the *undercover cop* was Luffy's idea of backup always made him want to slam his head into a wall. He'd tried slamming *Luffy's* head into a wall over it more than once, but even he had to admit after all this time Zoro wasn't that bad of a guy. Except for the getting lost standing still, that is. "That's what I'm afraid of. I'm *not* picking you guys up if you end up in Jersey again. Three times is enough. Have one of Zoro's friends pick you up. Ah, shit, I'm gonna be late if I don't leave now. Lu, don't forget to lock the damn door. I'll see you tonight." He called, snatching his new hat off the counter and flying out the door at almost record speeds.

He was on the street in under five minutes, almost a new record. Ace sighed, looking lovingly at *Striker* before taking off at a fast walk towards the warehouse district. He'd love to take his bike, but given the early morning traffic, the trip would take twice as long as on foot. He didn't have that
kind of time to waste. The job was supposed to be simple enough, Don Krieg's group was working on repairing and converting an old factory as part of some rehousing plan that was bound to fail eventually. That was not something he was worried about though, all that mattered was it was a job. Krieg was a skinflint and more than a bit of a bastard, but he knew that Ace was one of the best at welding so the man had agreed to hire Ace. At crappy pay, of course, but it was a job.

Ace made reasonably good time despite the amount of foot traffic. He got there a few hours before the workers were expected to arrive, just as planned. If things continued to go according to plan, he'd be all done building the supports they'd need for work well before anyone else showed up. He found the note that Krieg's foreman Gin left with instructions for exactly what they needed, as well as a welding mask, gloves and a torch. With a smirk he picked up the torch and mask, cockily leaving behind the gloves.

"Not that I'll be needing those," He smirked peeling off his shirt and hat as well and leaving it by the gloves. He liked that shirt, and really didn't want to have to run back to the apartment later to change. With skill that was only slightly less impressive than his younger brother's he swung himself up onto the scaffolding and got to work. After only twenty minutes, he was ready to break something. In typical Don Krieg manner the man had gotten the cheapest supplies available, Ace was sure that this crap wasn't even legal to use. Even the torch was a piece of crap, the flame it gave off was inconsistent and constantly went out, much to his annoyance.

As the flame once again went out a sound reached his ears. Somebody had been messing with his phone when he wasn't looking again. That was the only reason that he could think of for his phone to be cheerfully singing *Macarena* and he personally blamed Thatch. Now that raised the question of just who had this new ring tone. With a sigh, he resigned himself to actually answering the phone, since it wouldn't have been the first time Thatch changed an important number's song. He was still pissed over the whole *Barney* incident, actually. Glancing at the screen as he hit answer, his hand dipped, and the torch's hot nozzle bumped his thigh,"Ouch! GAH! Dammit, Lu, this had better be important."

"You ok?" came the evasive response.

So, it probably *wasn't* important. Good to know. "Just put a hole in my damn pants is all. What is it?" He growled, eyeing the new burn hole in his jeans with distaste.

"Got a woman here, she's looking for her kid, and we saw him over in thirty-fourth's little playground. You know, the one with the really cool slide?" Luffy began, sounding ready to describe the park in great detail if Ace didn't agree to knowing which one he was talking about. The teen was intimately familiar with most small parks, going around dusk to practice his 'super-cool moves' and as much as he'd deny it, the older brother usually went along to try a few himself.

"Yeah...So? Luffy, I really don't have time for this right now, I'm trying to weld a frame over my head and get it to code with *SUB-PAR SUPPLIES*, fucking cheap-bastard!" The freckled man kicked the T-section he'd just finished before the phone rang, ostensibly testing the joint, but really just venting. He winced a bit as his kick sent the stupid thing off the little walkway and down to the ground resulting in a satisfying *CLANG!* without breaking. Unfortunately, that meant he'd have to go get it.

"Well...The thing is...she's kinda speaking Chinese. And, well...I don't." He laughed sheepishly, "I tried, but I think I told her something about meat and goat milk, maybe with some Greek thrown in. So...

Ace sighed, as he sat on the walkway, legs dangling over the ledge. Trust Luffy to make things difficult. Then again, she must have been really desperate if she hadn't run away after hearing his
He could hear the jostling of the phone at the other end before a woman's voice sounded in his ears. He smirked to himself imagining her confusion before he began, "Ma'am, sorry about this, I know you don't know me. The idiot with the stupid look on his face that mangled your language says you're looking for your kid. He was trying to tell you that he saw him over at the playground on thirty-fourth. It's a small park with a really big slide, kinda hard to miss. Anyway, sorry about this again, and I hope you find your kid soon."

"Xie xie! Xie xie!" She thanked him, her voice growing farther away.

Next thing he knew, Luffy was there on the phone, "Ace?"

"Still here. Told her that you saw her kid and where he was, but that you're grasp on languages was shameful, which was why you called me. Now let me get back to work."

"M'k. Bye, Ace." The line went dead. Ace grinned, trust his brother to drag him into helping a random person.

Pocketing the phone, he easily leapt down from the scaffolding and picked up the T-section before clambering his way back up. He still had a lot of work to do, and an insanely short amount of time to do it in. Swinging his leg up onto the small walkway he picked up the torch and went to light it. The flame was brilliant, and short lived however, reminding him of why he'd been annoyed before the phone call. He eyed the empty building, listening to see if anyone had snuck in while he'd been distracted.

"Cheap fucking bastard. Bet he's gonna cut my pay too. Screw this, I'll use my own tools." He looked around again before tossing the offending tool out of reach and flexing his hand. He concentrated briefly on his right pointer, and the finger flared to life. He knew that he shouldn't be doing this. Ace only ever had three rules that he held himself and Luffy to, the first being never use your abilities where others could possibly see. But, they really needed the money. So long as no one saw him and he didn't tell Luffy everything would be fine.

With those thoughts in mind he brought up the flaming appendage to the next joint that needed welding and upped the heat until he saw the metal start to warp around each other and eased back just a bit on the power. In this, he had an advantage to using a blowtorch or any other tool, he had complete control and flexibility of the heat-source. Not to mention the welds would be smooth as glass when he was done. It also went a lot faster, and Ace practically flew through the work despite the extra care he was taking to make the welds as strong as safe as possible. Before long he was laying on his back, welding the last support into place, torch and mask forgotten as molten drips fizzled on his skin in a way that made him twitch. With a smile he put out his finger and admired his handiwork. It wasn't the best job he'd ever done, but that was because of the poor materials and not his skill. He yawned, wondering when the crew would show up.

The next thing he knew he was falling face first off the scaffolding, "Shit!"

Reacting instantly he burst into flame, using the sudden weightlessness to buy himself enough time to bring his feet down and prevent face planting into the cement. He knelt there for a second as the flames danced across his skin, reveling in the feel of a full body burn, something he hadn't done in quite a while. After a moment he stood, calling back the flames and walking over to the previously abandoned cloths and pulling on his shirt. He'd just got his arms into it when he heard something and froze, his eyes scanning the area as the metallic clang of a pipe falling on cement echoed. In seconds he had the shirt on and the hat in hand before heading to the sound. Turning the corner, he found the downed pipe still rolling around, but no sign as to why it went over. He eyed the
offending thing in annoyance.

"Yo, anyone in here?" a voice called back by the door, "Ace? Man, I see you got the job done! Krieg will be pleased. Where are you, bud?"

He gave the pipe one last dirty look before heading to Gin, "How many times do I have to tell you not to be so familiar? Yeah, I got the job done. Krieg's gonna get it if the building inspector finds out he's been cutting corners and buying cheap supplies again."

"And how is he gonna find out that? You gonna snitch, Mr. Arsonist?" the man threatened.

"I don't appreciate the threat. I'm not stupid enough to draw that kind of attention to myself, you know. I'm just warning you that you guys can't keep doing shit like this. Someone's gonna catch on, before or after someone dies. Fuck if I care though, so long as you pay me."

Gin rolled his eyes before handing over an envelope, "Yeah yeah. Here's your cash. Listen, we might need you sometime next week. Give me a call then, k?"

"Take it you don't need me anymore today, then?" Ace eyed the scruffy looking foreman as he counted the cash, "Fine. I'm outta here. I'll call next week, but you better have the cash you jipped me by then. I'm not playing with you guys, you owe me big for making me work with a broken torch." He smirked at Gin as he headed to the door, the rest of the crew moving out of the way as he passed through. He hadn't heard them come in, but judging by the looks on their face they'd been there long enough to hear him call their boss on the shoddy materials.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time, "Wonder if I should see if Luffy wants to grab lunch or something after work...wait a second..." he thought back on Luffy's earlier call. "Luffy...! That little shit got fired again! Dammit! When I get my hands on him, I'm gonna beat the crap out of him..."
Following Ace turned out to be harder than Tony had expected. For one thing, the guy moved fast! By the time he'd gotten out of the building the team was staying in, the orange hat was around the block. DiNozzo had to run to keep him in sight, a workout he decidedly did not enjoy. The only plus he could see was the man was so intent on his goal he didn't look back once, and he stood out with the orange hat. Tony was amazed that most of the people on the streets moved out of Ace's way when they saw him coming, which of course gave him a greater lead over the agent.

By the time the black haired man had ducked into a warehouse, Tony was panting. Taking a minute to catch his breath, he read the construction notice outside the building. It stated that the place was being converted into an apartment complex, courtesy of the governor's re-housing plan. It still didn't explain why Ace was going past the 'Authorized Personnel Only' sign.

Tony was thankful that Ace had forgotten to lock the door behind him as he looked for where he'd disappeared to. It wasn't long before he found him in one of the areas being set up as a separate room, Tony thought it might eventually end up as a laundry room. Ace was on top of some scaffolding, welding something together. It surprised him that the Ace was doing so without even a shirt on to protect him from the hot sparks that were periodically flying off the metal. Carefully he ensconced himself where he could watch without being seen easily. Of course, it was just his luck there really wasn't anywhere for him to hide completely. He was decidedly out of place in this situation, and all he could do was hope that the guy didn't look around as he settled in for what looks like a long day in surveillance.

Periodically he sent Tim text updates using his phone. Mostly, he just complained about how amazingly boring the suspect was. There was nothing even remotely out of place with the guy, making him think this whole 'Devil-fruit' thing was just an elaborate hoax being pulled on them. Not that he ever suspect Gibbs of doing something like that. Not really, anyway. After listening to rather loud and colorful complaints over the shitty materials being used, Tony suggested to his partner that someone call in an anonymous tip about it to the inspector, something his partner readily agreed to do. Neither of them liked the idea of people living in a poorly constructed home. After the blowtorch went out for the eighth time, even DiNozzo was starting to get pissed at this 'Krieg' person. It was really making the day drag on, he actually felt sorry for Ace.

Tony actually jumped when the Macarena suddenly filled the silence left by the torch. He watched, heart still pounding in surprise, as Ace reached for his pocket muttering something about Barney and stupid friends before answering the phone.

"Ouch! GAH! Dammit, Lu, this had better be important." Tony thought he'd seen the nozzle of the torch dip and hit a leg, and winced in sympathy. He wondered, vaguely, if Lu was a woman.

"Just put a hole in my damn pants is all. What is it?" Or not, the man seemed more concerned by the new hole in his pants then in pain. Then again, he was welding shirtless, which just seemed incredibly stupid.

"Yeah...So? Luffy, I really don't have time for this right now, I'm trying to weld a frame over my head and get it to code with SUB-PAR SUPPLIES, fucking cheap-bastard!" Quickly he made sure he was fully hidden as the piece Ace had been working on went flying off the scaffolding, landing with a resounding CLANG! that put his teeth on edge.

Ace sighed, and DiNozzo could see him adjusting into a better position as he readjusted the phone, legs dangling off the edge. He wondered exactly what was going on. "Hand her the phone." There
was a pause, the man smirking into the air. Something about that smirk reminded him of something... He didn't understand a single word he said next. Words that were said in a kind manner, the grin never leaving his face even while he nervously rubbed the back of his head. Tony figured it was some Asian language, and really wished that Ziva was there, she'd know what was being said.

When he was done, he just sat there for a moment. "Still here. Told her that you saw her kid and where he was, but that you're grasp on languages was shameful, which was why you called me. Now let me get back to work." Pocketing the phone, the dark haired man easily leapt down from the scaffolding and picked up the T-section before clambering his way back up. Tony was seriously wondering how the hell he was so athletic. It made him feel really out of shape, and he swore to himself that as soon as he got back to D.C, he'd hit the gym every day. Or three times a week. Yeah, that worked better for him.

He watched as Ace lit up the torch again, thinking that it was only a matter of time before the uncooperative junker stopped working. Almost as if his thoughts triggered it, the brilliant flame went out. Ace sneered at it, before he eyed the empty building, causing Tony to slink further into the shadows. "Cheap fucking bastard. Bet he's gonna cut my pay too. Screw this, I'll use my own tools." He looked around again before tossing the offending thing out of reach and flexing his hand. Then a flame was dancing on the young man's hand.

His mouth dropped as he saw that. Pulling up his camera, something he'd neglected for most of the day, he's zoomed in. Sure enough, the white hot flame was coming directly from Ace's finger. If that wasn't bizarre enough, the man was grinning, obviously not disturbed in the slightest as flames licked against his skin, turning the metal in his hand red. Instead, the guy calmly ignored the now useless blowtorch and started to weld the joints once more using just his finger. Tony was amazed as he snapped shot after shot. This was the evidence they were looking for. This was how the suspect had gotten into the storage room, by burning out the lock with his finger. He could easily see how effective it was as Ace easily bonded the metal, turning his finger every which way to get the best angle. He had to admit, he was impressed by the speed, and doubted that it was the first time the freckled man had used the shortcut. It wasn't long before the mask had been abandoned as well, apparently having gotten in the way at some point as he stretched out on his back to reach the more difficult welds. Tony flinched every time a molten drip of metal fell onto the prone exposed body, but the other was obviously not disturbed by it.

Finally, with a grin the finger went out and Ace flexed his hands. Tony could hear his yawn all the way from where he was, followed shortly by the sound of snoring and couldn't help but chuckle.

_There he is, a wanted man with some serious charges soon to be leveled against him, and he's snoring._ He knew, logically, that the brothers arrived very late last night, and that Ace most likely would have been the one driving all the way back from Tuxedo Park. Luffy didn't have a license on file after all. So, he's not really surprised that the guy is exhausted. It just stuck him as odd he fell asleep so quickly in such a place. It didn't seem like the safest place to make a bed.

Tony was proven right a moment later when the young man rolled over with a snort balancing precariously on the ledge for a moment. As he slipped off the end Tony couldn't help but shout "Hey! Lookout!" standing as if to run to catch him.

The reaction was instantaneous. Dark gray eyes snapped open, widening instantly in surprise, "SHIT!" the next second, where Ace had been there was a fire ball floating serenely down to the ground.

It made Tony's eyes water to look at it, but that didn't stop him from quickly fingering the button
on his camera, even as his mind screamed that what he was seeing was impossible. This was so much more than a finger, a finger he could maybe rationalize. This though... No one could do that and survive. Not without a flame suit. It just wasn't couldn't be possible. Unless Gibbs was right. Of course Gibbs was always right, he was Gibbs. Still, he gulped as the flames flickered out slowly revealing a completely unhurt Ace. He seemed more relaxed with the flames dancing over his skin then Tony had seen him before, though that wasn't saying much.

As the Devil-fruit user just strolled over to his shirt, DiNozzo backed away slowly. If Ace what is getting ready to leave, Tony needed to get outside. It wouldn't do to be caught in here. Idly he wondered is maybe the flame user had taken off his shirt because it wasn't fireproof, and then he wondered if maybe the pants were. Those that didn't seem possible, since he'd apparently burned them earlier. In his confusion, he didn't see the pipe leaning against the wall until he tripped on it, sending it clattering to the floor. Gulping he abandoned any attempt at stealth as he raced out of the building and around the corner. That has been entirely too close.

He barely noticed a surly looking fellow heading into the building, but he couldn't help but notice the group of people who came strolling down the street as if they own the place. He assumed when they stopped at the warehouse that these were the workers, and was thankful for his hasty exit. It wasn't much longer before Ace was out of the building; a sour look on his face as he pocketed what Tony assumed was money before pulling out his phone.

"Wonder if I should see if Luffy wants to grab lunch or something after work...wait a second..." there was a pause, and Ace glared at his phone as if it had personally wronged him, "Luffy...! That little shit got fired again! Dammit! When I get my hands on him, I'm gonna beat the crap out of him..."

He didn't even so much as glance at Tony as he stormed past, muttering darkly about little brothers who apparently couldn't hold down a job if their life depended on it. As he walked, Ace held the phone to his ear, "LUFFY! Did you get fired again?! What do you mean it's 'cool'? HOW is this cool? Where are you? Wait, don't you dare hang up on...That little...He hung up on me!"

Tony trailed behind him, all thoughts of what he had seen temporally pushed from his mind as he watched the guy act so normal. He couldn't help but smirk as Ace tried repeatedly to call his brother, becoming increasingly annoyed as the younger teen hung up on him multiple times, and then just stopped answering. He almost got too close when he stopped, pulling out his phone and frowning as he dialed.

"Zoro? Don't you dare hang up on me, you asshole..." Ace turned, and Tony suddenly became wildly interested in a window display. "Yeah, I kinda got that he got fired again... No, not particularly... Yeah, he needs to find a job!" He pushed his hat off so it was hanging by the strap around his neck as he ran his hand through his hair, "What do you mean, 'earning money'?... Just... Fine. Try and keep him out of trouble, alright? I'm going to go see if I can scrounge up some work."

As soon as he was off the phone he pocketed it, a sour look still on his face as he looked around. He stared right at Tony for a moment, causing the man to panic slightly as he noticed this out of the corner of his eye. Had he been made? Gibbs would never let him hear the end of it if it he had. When Ace headed towards him, a grin on his face, he was sure it was all over. He just hoped that the guy wasn't about to roast him alive, but he wouldn't do that on a crowded street. Not that he really thought he would, he'd probably take him somewhere secluded first. He really should have called Tim or something about the evidence he'd found. Tony's heart was racing when Ace drew level with him...and kept going right past up to an old fashioned eatery with a colorful sign of Little Garden.
"Ah, can I get four gyros with the works on them? Got any beer to go with that?"

"Listen to this guy, Brogy! Asking for beer at noon, what a guy. Gegyagyagyagya!" The man behind the stand laughed as his coworker cut the meat for the wraps with a grin. "Now Ace, you know I can't be giving you booze. You're underage! Plus, we don't have any. What are you doing in this neighborhood anyway?"

Ace smirked as he paid for his meal, "It was worth a shot, Dorry. Just lookin' for work. Don't suppose you guys know anyone who's in need of some temporary help?"

"Sorry, kid, not in this area. Might want to try over by the docks." Brogy handed over the gyros and a soda, "Just the way you like them, my friend! Extra meat! Gebabababababa!"

"Thanks for the meal, I better get down to the docks then. Arlong's gonna hassle me, I'm sure." The dark haired man said around a mouth full of food before slugging the soda and heading off down the street.

Tony watched him go, casually letting him get ahead as he ordered a gyro for himself. Both men working the shop eyed him warily before handing over the wrap, obviously aware something was up. He ignored the look as he strolled in the direction Ace had gone, his hat just barely still visible. As he took a bite into the hot meat, he had to admit, it was really good. He just hoped he didn't have any more close calls like that before the boss called.
Dodgeball on the Streets

Gibbs was very impressed with the green haired man's observational skills. The man reminded him of a war-veteran, wary, aware of everything going on around him. He was, however, much too young to have seen that kind of action. Given the altercation Luffy interrupted earlier, he doubted he was a hard-core gang member, either, though he did look more then able to take care of himself. Military brat I bet, he mused as he once again was forced to cross the street to avoid being noticed. The only time he'd had time to check in with his team was when the three young men had been annoying the owner of a restaurant before it had opened. Gibbs himself had just snagged a coffee from a vender on the street and waited for them to come out, followed by good-natured cussing which they laughed off. Not often you heard cursing like that on land, he thought.

He was mildly surprised when the group moved on to the better side of town, still acting like fools. They stood out like sore thumbs, even though the neighborhoods were not rich per-se, it was quite a few steps up from where they lived. As Gibbs watched them move, he noticed that Luffy was definitely the leader; something that wasn't exactly surprising, but at the same time it was. The feeling he got was that these two were most likely not tied into anything to do with Luffy's brother, meaning the youngster wasn't the go-between he was expecting. Why they followed him was still a mystery. The guy with the long nose and afro seemed very easy going, obviously egging on the other. The green haired man trailed a little behind for some reason, still noticeably disturbed by Gibbs tailing them. It was clear to him that this was how they walked a lot, as Luffy walked backwards frequently to engage him.

All three ignored the looks passer-by's gave them, either used to it, or just not seeing them. Given where they grew up, it was more likely they were ignoring the looks, though Abby had said Luffy wasn't too bright. When the teen stopped in the street watching a woman holding a picture, Gibbs saw...something...cross his face for a moment. It took his friends a moment to notice he'd stopped, the guy Gibbs was seriously beginning to suspect had some kind of training had walked past him. When he realized he'd past his friend his expression darkened. The senior agent realized then that no matter what his real reason for being with Luffy, this man was also something of a bodyguard. The expression changed to exasperation when he saw what had held up the others, though.

The boys approached the woman confidently, and he was impressed that she didn't bolt given that they truly looked like a group of punks. Instead, she ran up to them and shoved a picture at them. He tensed, ready to intervene and help her if needed, but relaxed when he saw the reassuring smile Luffy gave her as she clung to his friend. Gibbs was too far away to hear what was said but gathered from the way the picture was passed around, he figured they either personally knew the person in it or had seen them. However, none of them seemed to be able to explain it to her until a cell phone was pulled out. When she'd gone almost running down the street crying "Xie xie!" and clutching a photo of a boy in her hand, he'd only hesitated for a moment before turning around and following her. Luffy had been heading straight for a while now, and he'd heard them shout something about a fountain and a statue, so he assumed they were heading to the park. If he was wrong, he knew where Luffy lived. It was more important that the woman found her son.

He followed her as she half ran eight blocks. By the fifth block, she was aware that Gibbs was following her, and shot him an alarmed look. He just calmly pointed to her picture causing her to stop.

"You've seen my son, too?" She seemed surprised.

His Chinese was very rusty, he shook his head "No, can't say I have. I want to make sure you find
"Ah, thank you. Those nice boys and the brother on phone told me exactly where to find him. I swear, when I find him, I'm going to tan his hide!" She growled out as she continued on, only slightly slower. He followed along, trying not to grin. When they reached the fence around the playground the boy was easy to spot. He was standing on the top step of the slide, waiting his turn. He spotted his mother instantly and waved before sliding down and running up to her. "YOU! Do you have any idea how worried I was! How many times have I told you not to wander off! What if you had been kidnapped? Thank the nice man! THANK HIM!"

The boy looked contrite as he thanked Gibbs, bowing low before his mother grabbed his hand and started to drag him home. He watched for a moment before heading back the way he'd come. He had some other wayward children to watch today. As he walked, he thought about the look that had crossed Luffy's face. It had been a strange mix of pain, guilt, hate and fear that was out of place on the normally dopey-ly grinning youth. Something about the woman had triggered it, and he wasn't sure what it was. Abby was still working to see if she could dig up anything about their pasts, hopefully she'd find something.

Luffy and his friends were anything but difficult to find when he arrived at the park. The green haired guy was drawing quite a crowd all on his own as he shouted up at Luffy who was dancing on the top of a statue like it was a Broadway stage. The third friend was calling people over to watch the act, trying to earn money as he placed a busking licence down. Where and how they'd obtained that was a mystery all its own, since Luffy was too young for one, and he wasn't too sure if the other two were old enough for one either.

"LUFFY! Seriously! Get down from there! You're going to get busted again!"

"Zoro, what's with you today? You worry too much. That's Nami's job. Normally you'd be right up here with me!"

"BULLSHIT! With that witch not here, someone's got to try and keep you in line. You were told to stay out of trouble and keep a low profile, remember? This isn't helping. Usopp, stop egging him on!"

The youth pouted before doing a front flip off the statue, earning claps from the small crowd that had gathered, "Aww. It's not like I was going to break it or anything."

"Actually Luffy...Your track record isn't the best, now that I think about it," Usopp pointed out, "wasn't it something like three street signs and one statue last year you broke?"

"Really? I thought it was more than that!" The dark mop of hair tilted to the side, a wide grin on his face as both of his friends sighed in defeat.

"Just get moving before I kill you for Ace, you idiot." muttered Zoro as he leaned against the now vacated statue and for all intents and purposes closed his eyes.

"It's a lot harder to earn money when you won't let me show off half my skills you know." The teen pointed out, "Oh well. Usopp! See if Brook is around today, we'll make it a party!"

The other teen nodded before jogging off deeper into the park. Before he completely lost the small crowd he'd gathered, Luffy began with some simple tumbling tricks, many that Gibbs had seen at the renaissance faire. Still, he was amused when a small child cried out for more and the boy obliged by running up a bench, vaulting onto a sign where he balanced only for a second on one hand before flinging himself up and out, and landing precariously on the top of a fountain.
Even he clapped for that one. Though he could see how he’d broken a few signs last year. With a glance at the sleeping member of the group, Gibbs went to a busy hotdog stand and got something to eat and drink before settling down on the very bench that had become a prop in the show. It wasn’t much longer before Luffy’s cavorting was interrupted by Usopp.

His friend waved to him, before pointing back the way he’d come. "Oy!, Luffy! Brook's on his way!"

"Really? Awesome! I was hoping he was playing here today!" The teen dropped off the statue he’d managed to climb back onto, grinning as his friend came jogging up.

"Even better, Franky's girls are with him today. They said the usual split works for them, but they're not paying for your food, sorry, man."

"No fair! Kiwi, Mozu! You're so stingy!" He shouted to two young women who were slowly making their way over with an immaculately dressed elderly man. The two women were sisters, even their hair was styled the same way, in a gravity defying...square. There was no other way for Gibbs to describe the hair. Idly, he pulled out the camera he’d ignored all day and took a picture of the two sisters as they helped the man who was old enough to be their many times great-grandfather set up a keyboard stand and put down a violin case as well. The only real difference was the color of their tops, and one girl's hair appeared to be curly. He had to wonder how they got it up like that.

The one with smoother hair puffed out her cheeks at him, "Stingy? We're here to make money, you idiot..."

"...If we fed you, we'd have no money left, waina!" her sister finished, wagging her finger under his nose.

"Aww, Kiwi, please?" He begged, clutching the finger.

"No way, Franky warned us about you and your brother. Bottomless pits, right, Mozu?"

"Besides, we're here to help Mr. Brook, not you." the girls teased.

The old man looked up from where he was expertly tuning his violin. His skin was paper thin, and so white it was almost translucent. Dark old fashioned sun-glasses covered his eyes, giving him an almost skeletal look that was ruined by the large coal black afro growing from his scalp. "Yohooohoho! Luffy, you are such a devil, you are! Sneaking into the park to make some money again, huh?"

"Yep."

"Your brother doesn't know that you've lost your job again, hmm?" Taking off his top hat, he placed it on the ground for tips.

Luffy scratched the back of his head, "Well, Ace is really smart. So, he'll figure it out soon. Boy he's gonna be pissed!" he laughed.

The old man sighed, as the other three younger people seemed to deflate, much to the amusement of the people watching, "You truly have no fear. Well girls! Can you do this old man a favour?"

Kiwi and Mozu shared a look "What is it, Mr. Brook?"

He grinned at them, standing to his impressive full height while holding his violin at the ready,
"May I see...your panties?" Gibbs had never seen an old man move so fast as he did to avoid being punched, a jaunty tune coming from his instrument.

Luffy didn't give the girls much time to chase after the man, instead pulling them into an impromptu dance to the lively tune. Usopp waved them off, taking over the keyboard when they attempted to lure him in, claiming he was "a musical prodigy, on top of having killer dance moves" though apparently only his friend believed him, everyone else just rolled their eyes. Still, the teen was decent enough.

In an hour, the group had settled into a bit of a routine. Brook would play a few upbeat tunes accompanied by the keyboard while the three danced. Then while they were taking a break, Usopp would regale any who would listen about his great exploits. According to him, he'd fought in a war, saved his school from zombies and turned down the Presidency. Part of Jethro thought it would be interesting to get him together with Ducky. The kid sure did know how to spin a yarn. Kiwi and Mozu, after they'd rested a bit, would help out with the story telling by striking overly dramatic and bizarre poses right behind him, acting out what he was saying. The three of them were so serious about it the results were hilarious instead of scary, and they had quite a few children gathered around.

Luffy, who apparently had the attention span of a gnat, kept wandering off during the storytelling, occasionally coming back with food. If the nervous looks on his friend's faces were anything to go by, Gibbs doubted he was paying for it. Brook looked the most troubled, but didn't hesitate to take a still-warm pretzel from the teen. If he didn't come back with food, he'd come back with beetles. Luffy seemed to take great glee in trying to show his sleeping friend every single one he'd caught before leaving it with the man to race off and find more. Finally, Zoro had enough and threatened to kill the laughing annoyance as he shook off all the bugs crawling on him. With a glare at the others who were now laughing as well, he moved over to the bench and sat right next to Gibbs. Well now, this could be interesting, the former marine thought as he took another sip of his drink, warily watching his new companion out of the corner of his eye. The man ran a hand through his hair as he yawned, watching the group start back up again.

"Zoro, you should join us, waina!" Mozu cajoled, leaning on her sister.

"Nah, Think I'll just watch. I'm not the one who needs the cash."

"Stingy!"

"What is that, your word of the day or something?" Usopp laughed as he started playing a tune of the keyboard only to be interrupted by Luffy's phone going off. He hit a sour note, "Is that..."

The teen pulled out his phone; looking at it like it was alive as 'Let It Rock' blared out at him, "Ace..." Shouting could be heard as the boy held the phone away from his ear, wincing slightly. "It's Cool, Ace. The..." he winced again, "Um...I think I have a bad connection, you're breaking up! Bye Ace!"

He hung up the phone and everyone sighed. Even Gibbs felt a little sympathy for the kid, getting reamed out like that. Just as he was about to put it back in his pocket, it started to ring again. Brown eyes widened in panic as he tossed the offending item at Brook, "You Answer it, he likes you!"

"Sorry, no! I am not getting on your brother's bad side, Luffy! He's scary when he's angry!" the old man tossed the phone back like it was a hot potato.

As Luffy caught the phone before it hit the ground, yelling could be heard, "SHIT! I answered it..."
the yelling was abruptly cut off as he hung up on his brother's rant. The song started again almost instantly, "Usopp!"

"Are you nuts? He'll kill me!" He caught the phone anyway and held his nose, "I'm sorry, but all lines are currently busy. Please try your call at a later time." He hung up.

Everyone stared at the phone as it remained ominously silent. Zoro didn't even flinch when his phone started to play the opening of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls.' He waved off all the stares as he looked at who the call was from, "Ch. Figures he'd call me."

"Don't answer it!"

"Shut up, you idiot." He put the phone to his ear, looking away from his group,"Yeah?...Nice to hear from you, too." he muttered before continuing louder, "Guess you figured out that our idiot got fired again...before you go off the deep end on me, I've got nothing to do with it. Luffy did this one all on his own. The owner left his hungry-ass alone in the store all day last week, no breaks. So are you honestly surprised he ate his way out of a job?...That's what I thought. Anyway, he figured you'd want him to have a job, so we've all been asking around...Well, he's earning some money right now...Woah, whatever you're thinking, no, he's not doing anything illegal...Honestly, we're keeping it as under the radar as we can...Well, I'll try, but this is Luffy we're talking about. He's a magnet for stupid shit. Good luck." He clicked his phone off.

"Am I dead?"

"Well, you end up in jail or come home with no money, you are." Zoro pointed out, "So, basically, no different then last week."

"Cool!" The teen cheered before turning back to the others and calling for them to start the party up again.

"That idiot completely forgot why we're here."

"Seems like he's a real handful." Gibbs chuckled.

Zoro looked at him out of the corner of his eye, barely turning his head. After a moment he snorted derisively, "You have no idea, mister."

"Oh, I think I get the idea." Noticing the suspicious look in the forest green eyes, he pointed his cup at the phone still in Zoro's hand, "That your dad checking up on you guys?"

"Huh? You think...GOD NO! We are definitely not related! He's just a really good friend." He turned to face Gibbs fully, sun catching off the three earrings in his left ear as he held up the phone, "The one on the phone was his brother."

"Sorry for the confusion. His brother must trust you a lot, though, if he's calling you."

"More like he knows I wouldn't dare lie to him." The green haired man muttered, before continuing louder, "Ace is very protective of his little brother is all. Ok, sometimes I think the kid needs some medication or the dog whisperer myself, but...he's Luffy. Not like he's got much room to talk, either. With his uncle out of town, there's not a lot for them to worry about."

Gibbs nodded, filling the information for later as he watched the mini-party that was in full swing, "I see. I know a couple of guys like that myself."

Both men sat on the bench in silence for awhile watching as the group took audience participation
to a new level. The girls were taking pictures with any interested passersby in bizarre poses while Luffy attempted to teach some young children simple Parkour moves under their parent's watchful eyes. Usopp and Brook were still merrily playing music, taking requests and attempting to trip each other up.

Both men paused when a loud booming could be heard. Gibbs raised an eyebrow as his companion sighed, grumbling something under his breath. A tall man could be seen walking towards them with a blue hair that swept forward like a cockatoo crest. The two girls ran over to him in excitement, quickly falling into step with his strutting as Brook put away his violin, grinning just as wide as Usopp and Luffy were. As the crest of hair drew closer, he almost dropped his now empty cup. The man was wearing dark shades, a very loud open Hawaiian shirt, heavy gold chain, and a pair of Speedos. Nothing else, not even shoes. Given that his legs appeared to be prosthetic from the knee down, Gibbs doubted that he really needed shoes, but the overall look was still a bit much. Even by Tony and Abby standards it would be a bit much. The crowd parted readily, closing being the strange man as he drew close to Luffy and the others, who were obviously waiting for him. With a grin, he handed Luffy the old-fashioned Boombox, which was still blaring out Super Freak as he started to flex and pose with the girls for the crowd as people took pictures.

"I'm A Super Freak! SUUPER FREAK, I'm SUUUUUPER FRANKY! OW!"

"FRANKY WE LOVE YOU!" Shouted one person as people laughed and cheered the man. Luffy put down the boom box as the song came to an end and tacked the giant man.

"Franky, it's been a while! Hey, wanna hire me?"

"You get fired again, bro?" The man laughed, "Hell no I'm not paying you to break shit. How's The Striker holding up?"

"Great! We took it up to the Faire."

"Tell Ace to bring it by if it needs a tune up. Brook, thanks for the loan of Laboon again. I don't think those punks will be coming back anytime soon."

The old man smiled warmly, "Do not mention it, Laboon had a great time, he needs the exercise, and unfortunately these bones are not as spry as they used to be."

Franky pushed up his shades onto the top of his head, "Well, you should come back to the workshop with us. We'll see if we can maybe work something out. Usopp, don't think I was ignoring you, bro! And I see you there Zoro! Been a long time!"

"Not long enough..." muttered Zoro, waving as he stood and went over to the group.

"Franky, what have you been up to?"

"Oh, this and that, you know. Avoiding certain people," Whistles could be heard, and the group as one looked up and over to see two mounted police officers, "like them."

Usopp rubbed his chin, "Isn't that Johnny and Yosaku?"

"Shishishishi! Let's go! To Franky's!" Luffy laughed, taking off with the rest in tow as Gibbs watched them leave. He didn't quite remember New York being filled with so many weirdos. Then again, he generally didn't work in these areas, so it could just be the type that lived in the seeder parts of town.

As the police officers trotted passed he saw one had some kind of Asian writing on his face. With a
frown he looked down at his empty cup, "Maybe it's something in the water?"
Normal families expected early afternoon calls about younger family members to be about them being sick in school, or maybe playing hooky. Most people would be beyond pissed if they'd gotten a call saying their baby brother was in jail and they had to come pick him up. Ace just sighed and said he'd be there in a few hours. The fact he was the one being called was a bit of a relief, really. It meant that his little brother wasn't in trouble for something that bastard had put him up to. If that were the case, Ace would have been the last person to know. Of course, he still had to pick up Luffy. From jail. Why? He wasn't sure yet, but he was sure it was for something stupid. He spent the rest of his shift torn between worried and pissed. Heck he even considered leaving him in jail over night except, knowing his luck, the little shit would break out looking for food.

When he'd arrived at the jail, the older brother had truly worked himself into a foul mood. It wasn't exactly his favourite place to be, anyway. He filled out the paperwork for Luffy's release. Apparently his little brother and his merry band of friends had gotten caught causing a ruckus in the middle of the mall. Ace had no doubt who'd caused the problem, either. He could easily ignore the fact that three out of four of them were supposed to be in school. Who the hell knew what Sanji was supposed to be doing, but it sure wasn't going along with Luffy's trouble.

He was quite surprised when officer Johnny led him to the holding cell to find his brother chatting it up with a green-haired man with a bad attitude. None of his brother's usual cohorts were anywhere to be found. Ace eyed the stranger warily as the Johnny unlocked the cell, stopping himself from rolling his eyes. In reality, he should never have been let back here, and the officer knew it. The only reason he was was for two reasons. Firstly, because Ace himself had spent enough time in these cells to know every single officer in the precinct by name. Heck, he even knew their kids' birthdays. Secondly, it was no secret that Blackbeard had his sticky fingers deep into everything in this city, including law enforcement. The young man knew of at least half a dozen cops who were on the take, and another dozen he suspected. It seemed nowadays he couldn't go anywhere without tripping over one of his men.

His younger brother was so engrossed with telling the man a story, he didn't react to the door opening. Ace ignored his brother's animated tale, though he remembered that particular fight, and glared at the man in the cell. "Nami, you'll love this, she took a broom and WHACK! smacked the guy right in the head. Hard as she could, which is really hard. Broke the thing."

"The head or the broom?" The green haired man inquired, though his eyes were on Ace, almost daring him to do something.

"...Well, both actually. Guy had to go to the hospital. He never called her sister a whore again though, so I guess he learned his lesson." Luffy laughed, ignoring the officer standing behind him as he finished the story.

Johnny rolled his eyes, well used to this kind of behaviour, "Oy! Luffy, move your ass, your brother's here for you."

"Eh? Ace is here?" The black mop of hair whipped around, eyes widening in delight at the sight of his elder brother, "Ace! Shishishishi...You missed a great fight!"

He definitely felt a headache coming on as he face-palmed. "Luffy...how many times do I have to
"tell you to try and stay out of trouble?" Which of course meant 'you can tell me about it later, now is not the time.' His brother just grinned at him. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Zoro! He's really cool! He beat down a whole bunch all on his own. AND he's got green hair! How cool is that?" He slapped the mans shoulder as he got up and headed towards the door, "Can we keep him?"

"I'm not a stray dog, you know." Zoro grumbled at Luffy's back. Ace saw the snicker that Johnny tried to hide.

He glared at the man, "No, you're a cop."

The stranger tensed, and Johnny immediately found the wall fascinating, "What makes you say that?"

"So you're saying you're not a cop then." Ace gabbed Luffy's arm, pulling the idiot over to him from where he'd been gawking at Zoro.

"Do I look like one?"

"I kind of figured that was the point. Send some unknown rookie in undercover, that's how it works, right?" He glared at both of the cops over his shoulder as he dragged his brother out of the precinct, "I'm on to you, asshole. Do whatever you want, but leave my brother out of it, got it?"

Luffy followed him home; a lot more subdued than he usually was, pissing him off even more. Luffy's view on the world was, well... slanted, to say the least. Ace wanted to blame Teach, but they'd been hiding in the gray area of the law long before that man had ever come into their lives. He was used to people trying to manipulate him, it just went with growing up on the streets. Luffy, however, had always been oblivious. Ivankov always called it one of his 'charm points' whenever he tried to lure the child into working for him. Not that the drag-queen had tried that in years. Ivan claimed even hardened criminals would have a hard time manipulating to Luffy. It would be like tricking a puppy, he just didn't understand it, so there was no point. Unfortunately, Blackbeard had no such problems, resorting to easier to understand methods, such as pain. The walk back to the apartment was the longest walk in a while as he thought about how to explain to his brother what exactly was going on. Luffy, he was sure, wasn't going to take this well. He should have decked that guy before they'd left.

"Zoro...is a cop? Really?" Luffy asked, looking a bit confused when they finally arrived home. "Then why'd he get arrested? Ace, really, he's way too cool to be a cop, he kicked ass today."

Ace sighed, turning his brother to face him, "Lu, listen to me. This is how it works, alright? He's a plant, a narc. His job is to get close to guys like us by pretending to be our friend."

Wide eyed, his brother looked back at him, "Why?"

"To find out what we're up to, and who we work for."

"Well, that's easy. I mean, everyone knows Teach, right? It's not like he isn't always bossing you around or making me do stupid shit for him either, so it's not a secret or anything."

"That's the point Luffy. Zoro's supposed to get all buddy-buddy with you so you'll tell him things about Blackbeard. Then he'll report that to his bosses, and in theory Teach would end up in jail."

Of course, in reality, Zoro or his boss would end up dead, and Luffy would be in even a worse mess for talking. Looking at the horror on his little brother's face though, he didn't need to say that, Luffy knew the man well enough to figure that one out for himself.
"Oh. But, I don't even tell Usopp and Nami about those kinds of things, you know that, Ace! Even I know better than that! I'm not stupid!" Ace raised an eyebrow, "Not that stupid."

"I'm not saying you are, Lu. Cops do this all the time, hell, other gangs, too. Honestly, I'm shocked that this is the first time they've tried it on you. Even I've been approached a couple of times."

Luffy flopped onto the couch, dejected, "What am I going to do, Ace?"

"Stay the hell away from him, that's what. Blackbeard even thinks you're sharing info, and you know what'll happen."

"Yeah, but...Zoro is really fucking cool! He totally beat the crap out of a bunch of Buggy's men, and helped Nami get away before the cops got there." His brother suddenly grinned up at him, "Plus, did you see his hair? It's green, Ace!"

"Yeah, I noticed the hair. No, you can't dye your hair." He got the feeling that his little brother wasn't going to listen to him at all about staying away from the cop, but he tried one more time, "Listen, it's for your own good, stay away from that man. I mean it, Luffy. I can't help you if Marshall thinks you're working with a cop."

"I'll be fine Ace, you worry too much!"

**BREAK**

Zoro rolled his shoulders, trying to settle the leather jacket. When he'd graduated the police academy as one of the youngest in history, he had not expected to find himself working in the undercover task force. Then again, given his age and willingness to bend the rules, he wasn't that surprised. Johnny, one of the first friends he'd made at the precinct, told him that his 'piss off' attitude was a big plus, too. Yosaku, who was Johnny's partner, said he should have an easy time fitting in down in the rougher neighborhoods Neighborhoods that Johnny and Yosaku could no longer work undercover in, despite looking like thugs themselves. Something about pissing off Arlong's crew, Zoro wasn't sure. They were very secretive about it. Both had been shocked when Ace had quickly made him, though.

His job was supposed to be relatively simple, get established as a rough, get in with a few of the gangs, and help the police keep ahead of some of the more dangerous things going on out there. Shutting down a gang, particularly for a lone cop like him, just wasn't in the cards. Still, his job was risky, and getting established was the hardest part. He'd been warned about the two Marshal boys well before he'd ever come face to face with them. Ace had been in for some questioning on an Arson, and Zoro had watched from the observation room. The young man was trouble, that was for sure. He had absolutely no respect for the badge or anyone wearing one, and he let his contempt show during the questioning. Zoro was sure he'd been responsible for the fire by the end, but there was nothing they could do to prove it, and he'd walked out, a cocky grin on his face.

Yosaku told him later that Ace wasn't that bad of a guy, so long as you didn't cross him. He and Johnny stressed that is was a very, very bad idea to cross Ace. It took a lot of prodding, but eventually they told him that Ace worked for his Uncle Teach, doing whatever the man needed done, none of it legal. Word on the street was Ace hated the fat gang-leader with a passion, but he was stuck. Stuck because Teach's pet happened to be his little brother. Luffy, he was told, was your run-of-the-mill petty criminal, other than the fact that he 'belonged' to Teach. Neither cop knew what to make of the whole situation, just saying the boy was generally a very happy kid, if a bit dumb. He also had a bit of a reputation for being a monster in a fight, so it was no surprise the boy had very few friends. It was then Zoro thought up his plan to become established.
Getting close to Luffy had been easy, really. Just had to be in the right place at the right time. So, after loitering outside the movie theatre just as *Zombie Pirates III* let out, he'd planned on tailing the group of teens that included one idiot. He hadn't expected the shout of "AMAZING! GUYS! LOOK AT THIS DUDE'S HAIR! IT'S GREEN!" followed by Luffy grinning up at him, asking him if it was natural. Really, who has naturally green hair? Though he seemed slightly disappointed that it was a dye job, it was still apparently 'cool' and he was dragged along with the group.

Thus, he was a part of the group Nami told him was called 'Straw-hat' gang, to which both Usopp and Luffy shouted back 'Pirates!' He never did figure out why it was Straw-hat that day, though he did get stuck carrying a bunch of lifted wallets and fighting for his life at one point. All and all, it seemed like the plan had been a success. Right up until Ace had walked in the holding room and his plan had come crashing down around him. He was lucky the guy seemed willing not to spread the word. Now he'd have to start all over again. Grumbling, he rolled his shoulders again, glaring at the sidewalk like it had personally arranged this disaster.

"So, Zoro," A voice said from his upper right, "is it true you're a cop?"

He stopped and looked up to see Luffy casually sitting on top of a lamp, looking down at him, "Isn't that what Ace said?"

"Well, yeah. But I wanna hear it from you." The kid looked at him, a serious expression on his face.

"Why?"

Luffy hopped down, grinning, "Because we're friends, silly!"

Green eyes met black, searching for a lie, only to be met with open honesty. *This guy is an idiot.* Zoro sighed pushing past the teen, "Yeah. You gonna tell anyone?"

"Why would I do that? That would be boring." Luffy pointed out as he started walking next to him, "Its much more exciting this way, don't you think? I've never been friends with a cop before. Johnny and them don't really count, cuz they're always yelling at me and shit."

"You...still want to be friends with me." Zoro turned his head to look at him, "You're a complete idiot, you know."

"Shishishishi...probably." Came the grinning response, and Zoro felt himself grinning back.

"Ah. But I'm not gonna tell you anything that'll get you into trouble."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Ace said you'll want info on things like what that drunk is up to and shit. I'm not gonna tell you anything. Is that alright?" The drunk, Zoro assumed, was Teach "Blackbeard" Marshall, Luffy's adopted Uncle, "What if someone says something to you, and I happen to overhear it?"

"The boy seemed to think about it for a second, "Well, I can't stop them if they do. I don't think it'll happen though. So, we cool?"

Zoro grinned, "Yeah, we're cool."
It had been three days since the sting down at the docks. Arlong, according to Nami, was walking around a bit more smug than usual since Hordy was cooling his heels in a cell. The girl told her friends in hushed tones that she'd overheard the two fighting about the shipment, and Hordy had gone through with it despite orders. Which matched up with what Zoro had heard from Johnny. Cleanup had apparently been quick, with the splinter group of the gang being taken completely by surprise, and though things were tense in the area, everyone was settling down back to normal, and the criminals were coming back out of hiding like the cockroaches they were.

The only worrying thing was, he hadn't seen Luffy. Normally, the teen sought him out right after school, or whenever he free. He seemed to have a built in Zoro-radar or something; rarely calling the other's phone, instead just dropping by, sometimes literally. When he'd asked Nami and Usopp, both had clammed up, shaking their heads suddenly nervous. He'd even asked Yosaku if he'd somehow been picked up during the sting, but the other hadn't seen the mop of messy dark hair either. The only one left to ask was the stupid curly-brow cook.

He glared at the Barrette's front door, eyeing the sign with distaste before making his way to the kitchen's back door, or as his mind supplied Pirate entrance. Damn Luffy and his obsession with pirates anyway. The big metal door was braced open, letting hot wonderful smelling air waft into the back alley. From the sound of things, the place was really busy today. He almost turned around and went back when the screen door opened and the blond cook strolled out, a cigarette between his teeth. They glared at each other in silence for a moment before Sanji lit up and took a long drag.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up, moss-head." He puffed out a perfect smoke ring, "What happened, you get lost?"

"You wanna go, pevery-cook?" He growled out, fingerling his switchblade. Taking a deep breath, he turned to leave, "Just forget it. This was a bad idea."

"So you're not here to ask about our fearless leader then? And here Nami was saying you were worried."

He looked back at the cook leaning casually against the wall, "I wouldn't say I'm worried...just concerned is all."

"I see. Well, I really should just tell you to take your concern and shove it." Sanji glared at him, another puff of smoke rising lazily, and Zoro was confused by the sudden animosity, "But Nami asked me to help out. So. Ace'll be here soon. He's picking up some soup for Luffy, if you want to know what's up, talk to him."

"Soup? What, is the idiot sick or something?"

Sanji scrubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe and headed back into the kitchen. Holding open the screen door, he handed him two take-out bags, obviously for Ace, "Something like that." He looked Zoro's confused expression and seemed to come to a decision, "Ch. Listen, you dumb moss-ball. There are some things you just don't ask about. Not on these streets, got it? Luffy vanishing for a few days, hell, anything to do with Luffy or Ace, we don't ask. As his friends, we don't talk about it, we don't guess about it, we leave it the hell alone. Because that's safer."

"Safer? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He called to Sanji's retreating back, even more confused.

"It means talking to assholes like you causes trouble." Ace snarled a second before his hand closed
painfully on Zoro's shoulder, forcing the cop to turn. He was slightly shocked at Ace's appearance, the dark circles under his eyes and the busted lip.

"What the hell happened to you?" He asked before he thought better of it, holding up the bags.

"Nothing. What are you doing here, come to get Luffy in more trouble?" The bags were snatched away, though it was obvious that Ace wanted to deck him instead.

"Hey! I just haven't seen your brother in a few days, so I was getting worried. He's been stuck to me like fucking velcro for almost a month now, so I kind of noticed when he up and vanished." Zoro grumbled, following Ace "I don't see why everyone's being so pissy at me about it. What the hell did I do?"

Grey eyes shot him a cold look over Ace's shoulder, "Other than being a narc?"

"Man, is that what this is about, Ace? I had nothing to do with that operation. Only crap I've reported was Buggy trying to knock over some vendors over by the mall. Why, Hordy a friend of yours or something?" He held the bags again as Ace leapt up and caught a fire-escape stairs. Idly he wondered where they were going, he knew for a fact Ace's place was a few blocks further away.

"No way. Guy's an elitist pig." Ace grunted, motioning for Zoro to follow as he took the bags back. "Might as well come. We're almost there anyway, and Luffy won't stop asking about you."

"Why would he be asking about me?" Zoro got no answer as they continued to climb.

Finally, when they'd reached the top floor, Ace put one of the bags down and tapped a code out on a closed window. The curtains moved and a little boy with doe-brown eyes stared at them from under a pink hat. The curtains dropped back into place and Zoro heard the window unlock, Ace pushing up to open it. Entering the room, the first thing he spotted was the boy from before trying to hide behind a chair, or at least that's what Zoro thought was going on. Either that so a sudden urge to do calisthenics since he wasn't hiding at all, just braced against the chair, arms out straight, legs shaking. His pink top-hat wobbled, an antler rubbing against the upholstery.

"Hey Chopper. How's Luffy?" The freckled man's voice was surprisingly gentle as he closed the window and locked it again.

"S-still sleeping...Ace, wh-who's that?" The boy looked ready to bolt at any moment.

"This? This is the guy my idiot brother's been asking about. Zoro Roronoa. Zoro, this is Tony T. Chopper. Luffy's doctor, he's good, too."

"You bastard, it doesn't make me happy when you compliment me..." The boy squirmed like a happy puppy, obviously lying, "Bastard...besides, I'm only an assistant."

"Well, while Hiluluk and Kureha are out, you're in charge, aren't you?" Ace pointed out. "Besides, Luffy likes you best. So, you're Luffy's doctor. I got some vegetable rice for you, and lots of beef and chicken soup for him."

"So...you're name is Zoro?" Chopper looked up at him as he stood there, feeling really out of place. The room didn't look particularly like what he'd thought an underground doctor's place would look like, being actually kind of cosy with a couple of big chairs and a TV, with a few blackened doorways off to one side. He ran a hand over his hair, again wondering what was going on as he looked down at the kid, "You really do have green hair. I like it."

"I like your hat. Cool antlers."
The boy tugged the brim down, smiling shyly, "Thanks. Hiluluk gave it to me." He turned his attention to Ace, who was walking over to one of the doorways, a bowl in hand, "I think you should wait until he wakes up on his own. Last time he got a little violent, Ace."

"It'll be fine. I just forgot about the damn coral is all." Ace continued to the door, fingering his split lip, "Besides, I'm sure Zoro will hold him down if we need it. Right?"

"Hold who down? Luffy?" He asked, following after the other man and the little boy. He couldn't imagine Luffy ever landing a blow on his brother. The kid was good, but Ace was on a whole different level.

Ace flipped the lights on when they got into the room. It was a sparse bedroom, with two cots, both covered in white sheets. One of the cots was occupied, the sheets in complete disarray as the occupant tossed and turned in his sleep. Zoro stopped and stared, not believing his eyes.

"Is he sick or something?"

"Well, I can't say for sure, but I think he was given a mild poison. When Ace brought him in last night, he was suffering from hypothermia, and he's got a couple of really deep cuts, too." Chopper gently edged around him, "It's not the worst case I've seen...but, he looks pretty bad."

"What the hell happened? Did he get hit by a truck or something?" He turned to Ace, who was busy arranging the soup just right. He caught the shoulders tensing and was able to barely avoid the wide swinging fist.

"You happened! I told him to stay away from you! But no. Even though you're a fucking cop, Luffy said you were his friend, so he didn't listen. I warned him that this was gonna happen, and I was right. This is your fault." He pointed at his brother's prone form, anger warring with pain in his eyes.

He gaped at him, shocked by the accusation, "I didn't do anything!"

"It doesn't matter, you're a cop!" The other screamed back at him.

"If you can't keep it down I'm going to ask you to leave, Ace." Chopper's voice was firm, despite the fact that the men in front of him were at least ten years older than he was. He was the doctor here, and he expected to be obeyed. "Mr. Roronoa, though you might not want to hear it...this is your fault. You are a cop, and even though your cover is good, some people are gonna know. So when something goes wrong and people get arrested..."

"Yeah, but that's all on me. I'm the narc." He pointed at Luffy, "He's got the brains of a goldfish. I could tell that after five minutes with the guy getting anything useful out of him was a lost cause."

"Tell that to Blackbeard." snarled Ace. The boy-doctor just glared at him, and he raised both hands in surrender before storming out of the room, "I'm grabbing some soda."

Chopper watched him go before turning back to his patient, "You know who Blackbeard is, right?"

"Who doesn't? Criminal with sticky fingers, setting up to be the next big thing. He's their Uncle, right?" Zoro moved closer, getting a better look at Luffy. The kid looked like shit warmed over, and was muttering incoherently in his sleep.

Chopper nodded, "Adopted, but yeah. You don't want to meet him. He's...got a bit of a temper. When Arlong told him what happened to his shipment, well. Let's just say Luffy'll be glad to see you."
"So, Blackbeard did this to him? I thought he, I don't know, liked Luffy or something."

"Hardly." Ace came back into the room, "Only time that fat pig likes my brother is when he's bringing him money, or writhing in pain."

Zoro caught the soda that was tossed at his head as Ace walked over to the bed. If what they were saying was true... this was his fault, in a roundabout way. Even if he wasn't pumping Luffy for information, Blackbeard had apparently assumed the black-should-have-been-blondie was sharing his every little secret. It was amazing that he hadn't been accosted by the man's bully-boys, making him think that Luffy had said or done something to turn the brunt of the anger on himself. He eyed the young Chopper for a moment, thinking about how the doctor in training had seen worse. It was possible, again, that Zoro had just been the excuse for the abuse. Either way, he felt guilty.

Ace stood there for a second eyeing his brother before he sighed. "Luffy, if you don't wake up right now, I'm going to eat all the soup Sanji made for you. It's full of meat, too, so I'm sure it'll be..."

"MEAT!" Luffy sat bolt right up in bed before letting out a whimper and falling back onto the pillows, "Owww... that hurt. But I still get my meat, right? Right, Ace? Chopper, come on, meat, meat, meat!"

"Only if you sit up slowly and take it easy, Luffy. And it's only soup. You're not well enough for real meat right now."

"No fair." Luffy pouted as he complied. His face lit up with a huge grin directed towards his brother as the other handed him a bowl of soup. Which he promptly inhaled.

"That's just disgusting." Zoro muttered, shaking his head, "Really, don't you have any table manners?"

"Zoro! I'm glad you're alright! You came to visit me? That's great!"

"Yeah. How you holding up? Heard you had a rough couple of days there."

"Eh, it wasn't too bad. Chopper says I'll be out of here by tomorrow..."

"A week."

"or the next day at the latest..."

"Three days, or I tie you to the bed AND you take it easy for the rest of the week!"

"so we should get the gang together and do something awesome when I get out!"

"Ace, he's not listening to me again!"

"Luffy, seriously, you need to take a few days to..."

"Like, I heard that there was this super awesome carnival coming to town. We should go!"

"That's it. Zoro, it's up to you," Ace sighed.

The green haired man was now fully confused. He was pretty sure Ace hated him, or at least wanted to beat the crap out of him right now. Not that he didn't understand, but still. "Wait, what happened to the whole 'this is all your fault, stay the hell away from Luffy' shit?"

"What's your fault?" Luffy cocked his head to the side, confused.
"Well, apparently everything. This." He waved his hand, indicating the room.

"Oh." He seemed to think about it for a second. "Shishishishi...I guess it might be, then. Alright. It's decided!"

Why did he get a bad feeling about this? Ace was holding his head like he had a migraine, and Chopper was grinning into his rice, "I know I'm going to regret asking, but what?"

"Your punishment of course!"

"Ah. I'll just keep out of your way from now on. I wasn't trying to..."

Luffy ignored his attempt at an apology though the other two seemed to appreciate it, "Your punishment is to be...my first man!"

"Eh?" His mouth dropped open. Luffy...was... he was sure his brain just broke.

"I think he means first mate." Ace coughed into his hand, hiding a grin. "Like, his right hand man."

"That's what I said. Isn't it?" Luffy gave them a wide-eyed innocent look before grinning like the nutcase he was, "I think I broke Zoro."

"Well, I'm not getting you a new one." Ace rolled his eyes, "You heard him Zoro. You'd have more luck convincing water to run uphill then changing my idiot of a brother's mind. You're stuck with him."

"And you're fine with this?"

"Hell no. You screw him over, I'll kill you."

"Come on, Ace! Zoro's a friend! He'd never do that! Hey Zoro, you think Nami will teach me that new pickpocket move if I show her how to break into an apartment?"

As Ace moved out into the living room to call everyone and give them updates, Zoro sat heavily on the end of the cot. He had this feeling that maybe his plan to get in close with Luffy hadn't been the best idea after all. It promised to definitely make his life interesting, that was for sure. Now he just had to figure out how to explain to his boss why he was paying a cop to pick-pockets and burglarize homes.
Abby was practically bouncing with excitement at being included in the case. When doctor Mallard had decided to leave for the city mere hours after Gibbs’ team had left, it had been on the reasoning that he’d be able to provide a more accurate psychological profile for the team if he were able to see where the suspect lived. Given he also had prior experience with Devil-fruit users, if it did turn out that Ace was the person they were looking for, he would be able to provide on site assistance for apprehending the man. Abby had told Director Vance that she had to go with Ducky because she’d just finished the special equipment the medical examiner had asked her to make on the spot, and she wanted to be sure Tony didn't break it. Vance had given her that look, the one that he’d learned from Gibbs. It said 'I know you're full of it, but I'm just going to go with it.', except Gibbs did it better. He'd let them go with more than a few warnings to be careful. By the time they'd arrived in New York City, the team had already split up for the day and no one was at the apartment the Director had told them had been acquired. When Tim and Ziva came up the stairs to find the two of them sitting there, they were quite surprised.

"What are you guys doing here?" Tim eyed the bags they'd brought with them warily as he opened the door to the small apartment they were using as a base of operations.

Ducky was the first one in, placing his leather satchel on an available table he explained, "Helping, Timothy. I felt I would get a better grasp on this fellow if I were here on hand after all."

"And Abby?" Ziva asked as she helped carry in their bags, "What are you doing here?"

"Well, the global search is still running back at the lab, but I really don't need to be there to tell you that it's going to take forever, and honestly, I don't think it's going to be much use. I mean, it's a bit of a long shot in the first place. When Ducky told me he was planning on coming up, I'd just finished putting together the things you'll need to take this guy in safely, assuming he's a Devil-fruit user. Of course, they're not perfect, so I thought I'd come along and just...show you guys how to use them."

"Right..." Tim rolled his eyes, "Gibbs know you're here?"

"Not as of yet. Oh, don't give me that look, McGee! He knew were were coming before we left. The man said we should have made up our minds sooner. I was just going to call him to let him know we'd arrived just before you came up the stairs."

The call itself was brief, Ducky believed the man was busy. He sounded like he was enjoying himself, though, which came as a bit of a surprise to the others. Trailing Luffy seemed like it would be tedious to them. After getting off the phone, the team got back to work. Tim and Ziva continued with their original plan, which was to observe the neighborhood, maybe gaining clues about the strange bone-cross symbol. Ducky immediately started going over all the photographs taken within the apartment, trying to glean some idea of what Ace was like from the information provided.

"Fascinating. Abigail, these boys have quite the bookshelves. Look at this, an entire shelf dedicated to learning guides. Ah, I see some of those college books mixed in as well. What an odd place to put a physics book."

"What do you mean, Ducky?" Abby peaked over his shoulder at the computer screen.

He pointed to the spine of an quantum physics book, "This one right here, sandwiched between A Wrinkle in Time and Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Both books are well known, of course. I
wonder if the placement is coincidental, or deliberate. If it was deliberate, I'd say one of the boys has a wicked sense of humor."

"You can get that out of where he put a book?" mused McGee as he watched an argument on the street.

"That is the beauty of psychological profiling, taking small innocuous things and seeing what they can tell you about a person. These shelves tell me a lot, Timothy." He opened up the thin files they already had on the boys and was soon lost in discovering every little nuance he could, his pen moving rhythmically as he jotted down his conclusions.

With a shrug, Abby got back to work as well. She had her trusty laptop out and was continuing to run searches. There had been no luck so far in finding out exactly where the two had come from before showing up under Teach's care. It was frustrating, to say the least. Right now she had her computer running through national databases of missing and exploited children from the last decade that were still open in the hopes of getting some kind of match. After discussing it with Ducky on the way over, she had carefully constructed her program. The algorithm only drew her attention to cases where multiple children had gone missing, with at least one child matching one of the boys' physical features and age range. The list she was left with was still heartbreakingly long, and a few times she found herself having to just walk away from the pictures of the young boys and girls. The only other thing she could work with, since Ducky had commandeered all the notes and photos, were the strange mystery pills McGee had collected. Pills that were obviously home-made, which she wouldn't be able to test until they returned to Quantico and she was back in her lab.

"Abby, what is the matter?" Ziva asked when she'd walked away from her computer for the third time in a half an hour.

"I feel so useless here. But if I was back at my lab, I'd be feeling just as useless! I'm just looking at all these photos of these kids, and they've been missing for years so who knows what's happened to most of them or if they're even alive. I keep thinking of how they must have felt, and what their families are going through, and I get so frustrated. And I still can't find the two kids we're looking for. Why aren't they coming up on my list, Ziva?"

"I do not know. Perhaps they will come up later. Or perhaps they were never reported missing." Both women fell silent for a moment, "Maybe you should take a break and work on something else."

"I can't."

"Oh sure you can."

Abby shook her head, waving an arm over to where Ducky was absorbed with all the papers in front of him, "No really, I can't. All I have are those unknown pills Tim brought back, and I need to lab to test them. Ducky's kinda got everything else."

"Wait a second. Tim?"

The other agent looked over at them, "Yeah?"

"Did you take notes of the pills in the bathroom?"

"Of course. Why do...oh." Tim stood, moving for the first time in what had to be a few hours. He quickly walked over to where Ducky was and looked for his notepad, which he found with little
problem. Opening it to the notes he'd taken he handed it over, "There you go. I copied down as much of the information as I could. A lot of the bottles were marked up, and I couldn't read the whole name or the doses. Anyway, it's all in my notes. Ziva, I'm going to go and get some food. You guys want anything?"

"Yes, please." The Israeli went back to the window to take over the observation over the street.

"Same here. Thanks Tim. Might want to get Ducky something, too. I don't think he heard you."

"Right. I'll be back in a bit."

Abby took the list back over to where she had been working as Tim closed the door. Just as he'd said, many of the names had gaps in them, making it impossible to tell what the names were. She gathered from his notes that the bottles that had been strongly marked seemed to be kept separate. She agreed with his conclusion that they were pills that weren't to be used for whatever reason, and had yet to be disposed of. When she saw that the doctors prescribing the medication were the same two people, she was itching to que up another search on her computer. Unfortunately, her wonderful machine was already working at it's rather impressive capacity, so it would have to wait.

That did leave the two prescriptions she could read. It paid off to keep abreast of the various narcotics, though given how many drugs were on the market, though often she did find herself looking up the many pills she'd been given to examine. In this case, she didn't need to look them up. Amphetamine-Dextroamphetamine, she recognized thanks to an old ex. There are a lot of drugs out on the market for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Most were not as troubling as this one, though almost all of them treated other things as well as ADHD. Her ex had become incredibly moody after just a short time on being Amphetamine-Dextroamphetamine. When she had finally dragged him back to the doctor to get it changed, she did her research. The drug had a slew of serious possible side effects, some being to mood like he exhibited. Not to mention it was highly habit forming, with numerous cases of patients abusing the strong amphetamine.

The other drug, Armodafinil, was a name she was quite familiar with. One of the nuns she bowled with suffered from sleep apnea. Her doctor had prescribed the drug, and Ruth had asked Abby if she'd look into the drug, since she understood those things. Armodafinil wasn't a drug people were expected to take long term, being used mostly to correct sleeping disorders. All it did was promote wakefulness, really, with minimum side effects. Most people took it for around twelve weeks, though she supposed people with conditions like narcolepsy would have a reason to have a cabinet full. She looked again at the notes, frowning in thought as she saw that Armodafinil bottles were marked with an 'A' while the Amphetamine-Dextroamphetamine were marked with either an 'A' or an 'L'.

It was then that Gibbs opened the door. "Gibbs! How do you always know when I found something?"

"Well, this time Abbs, I can't take credit. Lost my mark, so I thought I might as well come back."

"Wait. You lost someone?" Abby gaped at him, "Are you feeling ok, Gibbs?"

"How do you lose Luffy?" Ziva said at the same time.

"I'm fine. Just didn't feel like running after them when the group took off running from the mounted cops in the park. I figured he has to come back here eventually."

Ducky blinked owlishly at him, "A group?"
"Yeah. He met up with this guy with green hair about two blocks from here. Fella's name is Zoro. He's got some kind of training, knew I was tailing them. After that they went to a deli, picking up a loudmouth named Usopp. Eventually they got together with some more weird characters. Old guy with an afro and a violin, two sisters with square hair,"

"Square hair?"

"Oh yeah. It was square. Got a picture, too. The three of them were pretty weird, and the lot of them were definitely drawing a crowd. But I think the guy in the speedo is why the cops came."

"Tell me more. What was the boy, Luffy, like? How did he interact with these people?"

"Why doc? He's not our suspect."

"Something in the apartment caught my eye, but I can't say what it is exactly. For an apartment that two young men inhabit, I'd have expected more personalization, or at least self expression. Jethro, there are no pictures on the walls, no posters, no decorative elements. I need to understand this better. Because I do not like the picture I'm beginning to see. All I can say for certain is the younger brother is a focal point in many ways in Ace's life." Ducky explained, "So I need to get a better feel for Luffy beyond his love of videogames and manga, which are prevalent in youth nowadays. The apartment tells me very little about him as an individual beyond those two things. He spends very little time there, I suspect, even if it is more time than he does as his 'Uncle's'. This leads me to believe that the boy spends more time outside the apartment. I hope, or rather fear, that is the case with Ace as well."

"Alright, Ducky. I'll tell you what I saw. Maybe you can make sense of it, cause I sure couldn't."

**BREAK**

"Now remember, Abigale, we are just to observe. If at all possible, we should avoid drawing attention to ourselves. Everything I've been able to deduce says Ace is very smart, and very paranoid. A bad combination for us I'm afraid, if he suspects us in the slightest. Particularly given Tony's revelation earlier today." Ducky reminded her again as they headed towards the Rip-off bar.

He didn't need to tell her, though. Ace's paranoia was exactly why they were the ones going in, he'd already seen the rest of the team at least once. Ducky and Gibbs both agreed that the young man would recognize them if seen again, which effectively ended any attempts at following him anywhere where they would definitely be spotted. Places like a bar where he'd vanished into an hour beforehand, leaving a frustrated Tony to return to base worn out after a long day of trailing the man. The moment Gibbs had gotten off the phone with Tony; who'd assured his boss that the suspect wasn't going anywhere for a while, he'd looked at Ducky and Abby.

Next thing they knew, the two were outside the bar. It didn't look like the kind of place Abby would willingly go into. Rip-off didn't exactly look like some seedy den of thieves, but it still had an overall feel of lawlessness about it. And that was just the feeling she was getting standing outside the place, though the gothic woman supposed it could have something to do with the obvious gang-bangers casually loitering outside, smoking who knew what. Abby felt everyone watching them as they approached the door and the man casually resting in the doorframe. A bouncer...? The man was older, his gray hair combed back and falling to his shoulders, possibly an old biker. He had an interestingly shaped beard, completing the roguish look.

As he looked at the two of them, a lock of hair fell in front of his glasses, "You'll be wanting to go inside, I guess?"
"Yes. We would." Ducky replied, calmly looking the man in the eye, ignoring the snide comments the others were making about how the two of them were dressed.

The bouncer for his part calmly looked them over, appraising them. He grinned suddenly, "Knock it off, boyz, show some respect. Love the bowtie, don't see too many of those nowadays. And what a fine lovely looking lass you have with you."

"Thank you," Abby smiled back at him.

"Well, you're welcome to go in, I'm not here to stop you. I should warn you though, since you're new faces. No guns, no knives. Gang shit stays outside, cop shit, too. Shakky runs a neutral bar, and you sure as hell better respect that. If you don't...well, some of the folks in there might take an exception to it, and they'll find you." The man warned as he moved out of the way, "Besides that, anything goes, and I do mean anything. Have fun you two."

Ever the gentleman, Ducky offered her his arm. When they'd entered the bar, he commented to her, "That was a very interesting man."

"Very. But not as interesting as this place. I've never heard of a neutral bar. I kinda thought in areas like this one gang or another laid claim or something. Oh hey, there he is!"

"Abigale, not so loud," admonished her friend as they made their way to the bar. Sure enough, Ace was there, surprisingly behind the bar working. She was pretty sure he was too young to be working as a bartender, but then again, quite a few people in the bar were too young to be drinking. Ducky also noticed some of the younger drinkers and commented with a sniff, "The man at the door had said anything goes."

Ace was pouring drinks and working the bar like a pro, sliding beers to rest right in front of their owners and flipping bottles in the air before pouring shots. As he worked his way to the far end, the two sat, content to soak in the atmosphere. On the wall opposite the bar there was a bit of a stage, more of just a slightly raised area, really. If the tables lined up against the wall were any indication, Abby suspected that there was going to be music tonight, though it probably wasn't going to be live. People seemed to be avoiding the open space for the most part, almost as if it was taboo. Instead they hung around the tables. A good number were determinedly drinking, oblivious to the world around them. Quite a few, mostly younger and obviously tied to different gangs, were shouting insults and bragging. She thought some of it actually sounded good-natured, if foul. There were even a few people who'd obviously just stopped in for a quick drink on their way home, possibly to catch up with local news. Some of the people she knew were criminals, the 'big fish' as Tony would say.

Like the guy with blood red hair that Ace was pouring Bacardi for. He had three long scars going across his left eye and a general air of confidence. The man said something to Ace, who shook his head, earning a laugh from the men around him. Abby was so caught up in trying to read the man's lips, a task made difficult as he constantly had a drink up to them, she jumped when someone sat on the stool right next to her. He was a large man, tall but also wide. His dark hair was done up like a samurai's in a movie, and when he glanced over at her, she would have easily believed he was one.

"Gomen, I didn't mean to startled you." He turned his attention back to Ace, obviously waiting for the other to notice him.

When the man did, a lazy smile stretched his freckled cheeks as he strolled back up the bar. He raised an eyebrow, "So, what'll it be?"
"Besides an explanation on what you're doing here? Smirnoff."

"Oh, come on now, Shakky hired me for my mixing skills and not a single one of you drunks has asked for a mixed drink." He clunked a chilled glass and bottle down in front of him, "What have you been up to? Haven't seen you in ages, Jinbee."

"Keeping busy, doing this and that. You know better than to ask, Ace-kun."

Shrugging, Ace asked, "You hear my brother actually managed to graduate?"

"Little Luffy-kun? Are you sure he didn't forge the diploma?"

"Well, it wasn't written in crayon, if that's what you're asking," the elder brother laughed as he poured a beer for another patron. Abby noticed another bartender slip in as a DJ started to set up.

"I'm shocked. Your brother is severely lacking in the educational sense."

Ace snorted, "My brother is severely lacking in a lot of senses. It's alright. He was dropped on his head a baby. Repeatedly." Jinbee looked at him oddly, trying to gauge if he was lying or telling the truth before shrugging it off as another voice called out to him. Glancing over the large man's shoulder, Ace spotted Shanks' wave as a man with an impressive mustache made his way over to join him at the table he'd commandeered. "Ah, while the rat's away, the cat's will play?"

"Something like that, Ace-kun." The man grinned, picking up his glass as he turned to join the others.

"Fan-fucking-tastic." he spat, a sour expression on his face for the space of a heartbeat. It was gone when he looked at them, "Hello there, didn't quite see you two hiding behind my friend. Sorry about that. What can I get ya?"

"A gin and tonic, of you'd be so kind."

"Classic. Coming right up. And you, miss?" Ace called over his shoulder as he turned to pull a tumbler off a shelf.

"Don't suppose you have any Caf-Pow here, huh?" He put the drink down in front of Ducky, giving her an odd look, and she sighed, "I take that as a 'what the heck are you talking about.'"

"No, that was the 'you're definitely not from around here' look." The man grinned, holding a bottle of blue moon to the other bartender without even looking at her, "It's that over the top caffeinated juice coffee mix that comes in like five different flavors. You know that shit comes with a warning on the caffeine content? Governor tried to ban it a year ago, thought my brother was going to throw a fit. Anyway, sorry, Shakky doesn't stock it, and someone drank my last bottle of blue-raspberry, so I can't help you with that." He ducked under the counter and fiddled around, "Ah, got some cans of vamp, red bull and rockstar though. One of those work?"

"Sure!" She watched as he opened a can of red bull, poured it into a glass with ice and after eyeing her critically, added a large amount of cherry juice before handing her the glass just as the DJ started up. "Thanks."

"Enjoy. Shout if you need anything." He nodded cordially to them both before answering the call of another patron.

Ducky leaned over and almost had to shout in her ear to be heard over the music, "For a dangerous man, he seems quite pleasant. It's a shame really. I wonder, though, how much of it is an act?"
She could only shrug in response as she turned slightly to watch the crowd finally fill the open space and start dancing. The three men that had seemed to annoy Ace earlier were still sitting at the same table discussing something while the other bartender brought them copious amounts of alcohol. All three were watching the crowd, she saw, and she had to stop herself from flinching when the man with the mustache caught her staring. His eyes crinkled in merriment and he winked before he looked away. The music was loud, but it really wasn't the kind of music she was in to. Most of it was a mixture of current dance music and some older classics as well. As Abby's eyes roved over the crowded building, she caught a mild disturbance at the door. Just before Ducky tapped her shoulder, pulling her attention away, she thought she saw a flash of green hair.

"It looks like you were right, Abby. Our friend has a sleeping disorder." Ducky pointed behind the counter to where Ace had been standing. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear the people around them chuckling as one of them shouted for the other bartender. She leaned over the bar to see a mop of dark hair resting against the ice bin.

"ACCCEE!!" Someone shouted, jumping between her and Ducky, causing them both the jump. "Where are you? Hey, old guy, have you seen Ace?"

Ducky pointed behind the counter, "He's right there. I do hope he is alright. Perhaps I should go check."

"Huh? Oh, there you are, Ace! Ace? Shishishihiihi!" Dark eyes lit up as the stranger shouted loudly, "Oy! Sanji!"

"Not so loud, I'm right here, you know." A blond man with his hair swept over one eye in a full suit whacked the other in the head, "What's the problem this time, Luffy?"

"Ace fell asleep again. I'm gonna get some drinks while he's out, wanna help?" He grinned, leaping over the counter and narrowly avoiding stepping on his brother. The other patrons started calling out for drinks but he just waved them off, laughing as he picked out different bottles.

Sanji sighed, muttering a polite excuse as he slid himself over the bar, "If he catches you, you're dead."

"He's got to catch me first. They're not for me, anyway. Nami, Usopp and Zoro like this crap, right? Hey, rockstar! Cool!"

"Ah, Nami! You get out of here, I'll make sure the rest of these assholes stay back before your brother wakes up." Sanji sighed, sticking a lit cigarette firmly between his teeth as he moved the unconscious Ace over so he'd be in a more out of the way spot.

"M'k! Later, Sanji!" Luffy flipped himself over the bar, grinning as he ducked through the crowd towards the person she'd spotted earlier with green hair.

"Alright, listen up you bums! Till sleeping beauty here wakes up, I'll be your bartender. That means you assholes get beer on tap. The ladies, however, get whatever they want. Got it?" He puffed around his cigarette, glaring at the booing men.

The other bartender, a woman with frosty blue hair had finally made her way back to the bar, "Sanji, what on earth are you doing back there? Where's Ace?"

"Nojiko, my love!"

"I thought you were interested in my sister? Answer."
"A true man has enough love for all the ladies. Ace is conked out right now. Place is a bit packed, so I thought I'd offer a hand."

"Of course, you're offering to help has nothing to do with helping Luffy out."

"Wouldn't dream of helping that dummy out."

The woman sighed, looking over the counter, "Idiot. Well, he should be up soon-ish. I'll let Shakky know. Behave."

"Um, Sanji was it?" Ducky got the blonde's attention, giving Ace's still snoring form a worried look.

"Yeah. You want a beer or something, pops?"

"No, no, that's quite alright. I was wondering if that young man was alright."

"Who?" The blond looked over his shoulder down at his snoring companion, "Ace?"

"Yes. You see, I'm a doctor. Well, a medical examiner, really...the point is, he went down awfully hard. Maybe someone should check on him?"

The man blinked, his expression softening and Abby noticed that his eyebrow had a strange curl to it. He smiled, taking a drag out of his cigarette, "Nah, Ace'll be fine. He's got narcolepsy or some shit, falls asleep like this sometimes. Guy's made out of kevlar, tough as nails. So a little fall like that won't bug him. If he's snoring, he's fine. Thanks for being worried, though. That's a gin and tonic, right? Let me get ya another one."

"So, you guys are friends then, right?" Abby pipped in, earning a charming smile, the man really was a flirt.

"I'd like to say I've got nothing to do with them, really, but then Luffy would whine and Ace would probably punch me for being a dick." He sighed dramatically, playing the part of the wounded hero as he got her another drink before waving it off, "The two of them are something of a legend around here, so everyone knows them. I just have the misfortune of being one of Luffy's friends. Plus, my old man owns a restaurant the two love, so I see way too much of these loosers."

A hand closed on Sanji's shoulder and the blonde paled comically, "I'm a loser now, huh?"

"Ace, my man! Nice to see you up! I didn't mean you, of course. I meant the idiots."

Ace leaned casually on the slightly smaller male, grinning dangerously while looking out at the crowd now wide awake, "What are you doing here?"

"Ch. What do you think I'm doing here? Luffy decided he wanted to hear this DJ and got the whole group together. The others are around here somewhere. He took some booze over to them while you were Ko'd, left the cash." Sanji stubbed out what was left of his cig and tapped out another, but didn't light it, "Bastard's lucky I don't have to be in till five tomorrow."

"And Rayleigh just let you guys in. Again. Gah. Son-of-a...WHAT?" He snarled at a drunk who had been shouting his name. The man cowered for a second before raising an empty glass in a shaking hand. "Fine. You. You're on Luffy Duty."

Sanji glared at him, "Fuck that, I'm staying here. Zoro's out there, let him keep an eye on your brother. He doesn't listen to me worth a damn, anyway. I'll give you all my tips, too."
"...Fine." He growled, moving away to fill more drinks, obviously in a foul mood. Abby was surprised to note that the very people who had been joking with him earlier now regarded him warily, as if waiting for him to explode.

"He seems less then happy that his brother is here." Ducky commented, eyes raised in surprise as the two working the bar left. She had to agree, what the team had seen at the renfaire and during the day suggested that the two were close, but this suggested differently.

Time seemed to fly by, and Ace's mood improved quickly. The overall atmosphere in the bar became festive, as women hopped up on tables and started to dance much to the crowds delight. Drinks flowed, and it soon became difficult to hear the music over the raucous cheering and revelry. She and Ducky shared quite a few looks over it. It was nothing like the two of them were expecting, more like a combination of New Years and Mardi Gras then a rundown bar in the ghetto, but both found themselves enjoying it.

The party took a sharp turn when someone, a woman on top of a table screamed, "KNIFE!"

"Die, Whitebeard!" A man shoved his way through the crowd, launching himself at the man with the amazing mustache. The masses parted easily, ducking and covering as the attacker barely made it to the table before being sent flying backwards, slamming into some fools who didn't get out of the way fast enough as a mug collided with his face.

"Hey, Asshole, watch where you're going!" A drunk bellowed as things quickly dissolved into a free for all. Abby's mouth dropped open as one young man lept over the bar and started using a rubber band to slingshot peanuts into the crowd, inciting more small fights to break out before the blond behind the bar kicked him out.

Ducky pointed out what seemed to be one of the few pockets of calm. Three people sat on a covered pool table, one of them was the dark haired kid from earlier. He was laughing, obviously having a great time as he waved to the scary looking redhead across the room. The girl with orange hair sitting next to him was shaking her head, but a smile was one her face nonetheless as she used a pool stick to whack the head of someone who got to close. The third member of the group had vibrant green hair. He yawned before saying something to the other two, all three laughing. Raising his glass to his mouth he didn't see the person behind him get shoved, so he didn't have time to move. Instead he dropped his drink, the glass shattering as he glared at the man before snatching up two pool sticks and leaping off the table. With another laugh, Luffy flung himself into the crowd as well, though the girl just grumbled and stretched out, preventing anyone else from joining her. At least until the peanut shooter reached the table with more booze.

"H-hey, pretty lady...Why don' you n' me find us somewhere nice n' quiet, eh?" A drunk cozied up next to Abby in all the commotion, casually punching someone who got too close to him. She shuddered slightly, leaning back into her friend. She'd hoped to avoid this, but of course it would happen in the middle of a huge bar fight, "Ew, no. You smell like old socks."

"Aww, come on, baby, don' be like that...I'm a..." The man's head collided with the bar as Luffy slammed into him from behind, apparently avoiding someone using a broken bottle as a weapon before his friend took him out with the pool stick. "What the fuck man?!"

"Eh? Oh, sorry!" Luffy laughed, dodging the man's attempt at punching him. He grinned brightly, "Ace! This is so much fun! You should join in!"

"Can't, bro, unlike some people, I'm working." The man who'd been attempting to pick up Abby took one look at Ace and flinched under the harsh glare he was receiving before ducking back into
the crowd. "You've had your fun now, you should go home."

"Stingy!"

"Lu...seriously, go home. I mean it. I'll see you when I get there."

The younger brother pouted for a moment, before deciding that it wasn't working and clambering onto the bar, "Fine... HEY! EVERYONE! IT'S BEEN FUN, LET'S DO IT AGAIN SOMETIME!" he shouted before hopping down with a cheeky grin at the cheers and heading to the door, his friends hot on his heals.

"If I were you two...I'd suggest ducking out now. Cops are probably gonna show up soon and make a token attempt to restore order. It might be better if your not here when that happens, in case they wanna try making some arrests."

"Thank you for the advice, young man. I think we shall take it. I must say, it has been quite an...enlightening evening." Ducky nodded to Ace, leaving a more than generous tip on the counter as he grabbed Abby's hand and lead her out of the bar.
"Luffy, man, you up still?" Ace stretched until he felt his spine pop as he opened the door of the apartment. Luffy was snoring on the couch, a game controller in his hands. The avatar was currently repeatedly running off a cliff, screaming as he fell to his synthetic death. He watched for a moment before shuddering and walking over to the TV and shutting the system off.

Getting the controller out of the rubbery grip turned out to be a bit more difficult. The more he tugged, the more Luffy held on, muttering under his breath about meat. That little brother of his sure had a one track mind, even in his sleep. With a laugh, he gave one final sharp tug, freeing the X-box remote with a snapping sound. The laugh turned into a yelp though when Luffy came tumbling off the couch on top of him knocking them both into the tables and sending them skittering apart.

"Ow. Crap. What the hell, man!" He punched his brother's head earning a sleepy snuggle, "...and now I'm stuck. Ch. You're such a child sometimes, Lu. I am not being your mattress all night." He puffed in exasperation as the hundreds of photos spilled out on top of them, wondering why Yassop and Belemire couldn't have just given him a memory card instead. This was going to be a real pain in the ass to clean in the morning. After a bit of a struggle, he managed to get them both on the couch, glad he hadn't bothered to turn on the lights with the glare of the TV to see by. It was a little crowded, but his brother still had a death-grip going on, so it would have to do for the night. Besides, after seeing not only Shanks and Jinbee at Rip-off, but the man who could only be Whitebeard being had there as well, Ace felt more than a little inclined to let Luffy be clingy.

The brothers knew Shanks pretty well. That man was Luffy's hero, having done the kid a good turn before they'd gotten mixed up with Teach. Ace wasn't exactly sure what the man did, besides drink and flirt with the ladies; but he pissed Blackbeard off no end, which made him pretty awesome in Ace's book. Not that he'd be telling Shanks that anytime soon, the guy had a big enough ego. He'd known Jinbee personally for a while now. The guy was a bit of a legend in the area, though. Right up there with Shanks and the guy called 'Whitebeard' on controlling factors in the city. There were rumors of Jinbee being a former Yakuza elite. The guy could be scary as hell when he wanted to be, so Ace was inclined to believe the rumors. Then again, Luffy claimed the man looked like that guy from Super Sumo, with his samurai style hair and large frame, so Jinbee could just be screwing with everyone. The guy smiled in a knowing way when Luffy had asked, and he did have a weird sense of humor after all. All he could say for sure was Arlong both respected and despised Jinbee, for whatever reason. Ace, for one, was staying the hell out of that one. Sure, he liked Jinbee, and Arlong was a lying asshat, but Arlong had ties with Blackbeard, and was more than happy to rat out Ace. So, the only time he saw Jinbee was usually when he was working. Times when he couldn't be accused of betraying Blackbeard.

When he'd seen the guy with the mustache, he knew he was boned. Not that he'd ever seen Whitebeard in person before, but he knew what the man was supposed to look like. Hell, everyone in the area knew exactly who to look out for. Ace had to admit, Edward Newgate sure was impressive to look at. Part of him had wanted to go and meet the man, maybe drop off a beer, though he spent the whole evening terrified that his idiot of a brother was going to do something particularly stupid and draw attention to the fact that they were both there. If Marshall found out...Ace working was a flimsy excuse at best, and he was sure to catch hell for being anywhere near the three powerhouses. Luffy, though, had absolutely no reason to be there. And Luffy had the self preservation instincts of a rock. He was sure the lovable dope was going to ask if the mustache was real or something. All and all, a very stressful night.
Morning came all too quickly for Ace's taste. Sure, he'd left the bar around one, and sure, he decided to sleep in a bit, but eight was too early. Luffy was up, though. He could hear his brother in the kitchen.

"Ace, we're out of food again."

"Not my problem." He moaned into the couch.

He heard a cabinet almost slam, "Yes it is, you ate the last of it!"

"Did not. I think there's something in the back of the fridge."

There was a pause, "Yuck. Fruit cake."

"Eat that then. And bring some over here with coffee."

"I don't think we want to eat it, Ace. It's green and fuzzy."

"...Is that even possible?" He sat up and caught the cake Luffy tossed him. Sure enough, the offending item was definitely growing hair under it's cellophane wrapping. Thinking it might possibly be last months meatloaf, though how meat would be left to go bad was a mystery, he sniffed it cautiously. It was definitely fruitcake. He didn't even remember when they were given a fruit cake. His brother made a inquisitive noise as he brought over a hot cup of coffee and plopped down on the couch. "I...Don't even wanna know how old this is. Luffy, you earned some cash yesterday, right?"

"Yeah. I put it in the usual spot. Well, most of it." The teen grinned, drinking his own coffee. By the usual spot he meant the decrepit cookie jar under the sink. He'd been gripped at a few times about paying his rent in cash and keeping it just laying around the house, but the way Ace saw it, if anyone was brave enough to stick their hands in that jar, they deserved a tip. Of course, the landlord didn't appreciate the wet money, or Luffy's 'Laundered cash' jokes every month, but the jerk could deal with it.

"Good. You get to go and buy groceries this morning then. Try and get something other than just meat this time, alright? Like, oh, maybe some bread and vegetables."

"Vegetables stuck. If you want them, you should go get them."

"Fine, I go grocery shopping, and you go see the docs. How's that?"

"Yosh, vegetables! Peas and carrots!" Luffy cheered, never one for a trip to the doctors, "Say hey to Chopper for me though, K?"

Ace rolled his eyes at his brother as the younger downed his cup of coffee and ducked into the bedroom. "Of course. Wait, you're actually going to go now? Without me pestering you until noon? I'm shocked."

"I'm hungry now, Ace. I'll be dead if I wait till noon." exaggerated Luffy as he emerged, his favorite straw hat firmly on his head as he stuffed some money in his pockets and practically skipped out the door chanting 'meat'.

"And there goes our rent money for the month. Maybe letting him go grocery shopping wasn't such a great idea after all." The elder sighed, a bemused smirk on his face as he filled his carry-bag with the medications he wanted to check over with the doctor, "I guess I better get going too, then. Doctorine should be in today...wonder if Luffy needs a check-up as well. Eh, I'm sure she'll bitch
Ace made sure to lock the door behind himself as he left the apartment. Often he'd come home to find the door unlocked and wide open, a victim of Luffy's carefree attitude. Not that anyone ever dared to go in the apartment, except Blackbeard. But then the man just trashed the place. There was the one time he'd caught Marco and Thatch re-arranging his furniture, though. Apparently they thought it would be funny. At first, he was going to beat the shit out of the two of them, but instead, the three of them finished, planning on messing with Luffy. Of course, the plan backfired when Luffy acted like nothing had happened. When they'd asked if he noticed anything different, he said it was a 'mystery' with that dopey grin, leaving them all convinced he was a complete idiot. The kid might enjoy swapping Marco's furniture while he was still out of town. *Thatch'll have his address, and me and Lu can get in and out no problem. He'll never know we were even there...So long as we stay out of the fridge, that is. I'll just tell Thatch I'm ordering him some hair cream or some stupid gag gift.* He chuckled evilly as the plan began to take shape.

Ace was so distracted by his plotting, he failed to notice the two people who fell into step behind him right away. He did notice the man who stepped right in front of him, effectively blocking his path. He was an older man, gray hair, military short, with a no-nonsense look in his eyes. He was also familiar, and the freckled young man scowled at him as he tried to place where he'd seen this clown before, "You're in my way. Move."

"I don't think so," the old guy had the audacity to look down at him with a half-smirk

He saw red for just a second, and took a deep breath and pushed up his hat so he he glare up at the man, "Old man, you obviously don't know who you're messing with. Get. Out. Of. My. Way."

"I know exactly who I'm 'messing with', Ace Marshall, also known as *Fire-Fist Ace*." He noticed the two people right behind him, and felt the tension in the air. Casually his dark eyes slid over to the side, were one of them had his hand on his gun like that'll help... "Congratulations. You want a prize or something?"

"What I want is for you to come quietly." The man said, "You think you can do that?"

"First off, I don't see any badge." Ace crossed his arms, glaring at the man belligerently, "I'm not going anywhere until I see a badge, *officer.*"

The man flipped open his wallet, "Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, NCIS."

The young man face-palmed, "Awww...FUCK! I *knew* you looked familiar! You bastards were at the damn renfaire. Fuck." He knew in an instant what this had to be about, but still, they were probably just fishing. He hoped. "Look, I haven't *done* anything. This is harassment, profiling, and hell, I'd even say entrapment, 'cause your flunkies are just dieing for me to try something."

The man, Gibbs, just stared at him for a moment, "You done yet? Because it's a long drive to Quantico, and I'd like to get going."

"*Quantico*?! What the hell, man? I swear, I've got nothing against the navy! And I only punched Belimere in self defense that one time! Whatever it is, can't you question me, like, here? In New York?" Ace sputtered. He barely resisted as the woman agent frisked him, still staring at Gibbs in shock.

"Nope. Sorry, Kid. Blowing up part of a base is classified as an act of Terrorism."
Ace's mouth dropped open as all color drained from his face. *Act of...? I'm screwed. Screwed. I totally messed up big-time. No...it's ok, they'll cuff me, and I'll just wait until their backs are turned and just run. They can't actually STOP me. I'll just lay low for a while...* In hindsight, he probably should have just punched the woman in the face and taken his chances running when he felt the handcuff go around his wrist. It was a horrible feeling, as if all his energy was just leaving his body, and his knees buckled slightly. He hadn't felt like that since the last time Blackbeard had decided to punish him, but it was a feeling you didn't forget. He glared at Gibbs while part of his mind wondered where the heck they'd gotten the cuffs.

"Yeah, we know about your little tricks." The man nodded.

"Can't prove shit." Ace growled out.

"Oh, I bet we can," Said one of the other agents, Ace's mind supplied the name Tim, "Photo-documented evidence, for one. We caught you on camera."

Ace blinked at him, thinking fast. *I'm not screwed, I'm royally FUCKED! Marshall's is definitely going to kill me when he finds out, which will be in about three hours I bet. He's not going to be able to reach me right a...SHIT, LUFFY! He's gonna go after Lu!*

He threw himself backwards against the agent holding him, almost sending them both to the ground, "NO!"

"No? We caught you on camera," she growled out as the other agent grabbed his other arm. Even though he was weakened by the stupid handcuffs, he fought hard. He couldn't let them take him, not without making sure his brother was going to be safe.

"NO! You can't take me! Not yet! LUFFY! SHIT! LUFFY!" A crowd had gathered, but he really couldn't care less. In fact, let them gather, it made it more likely Luffy would investigate.

"If you do not stop struggling, I will be forced to shoot you." The woman grunted out.

"Try it!" He growled in response, "I'm not going anywhere till I see Lu-LUFFY! Thank God!"

There was his lovable brother, Zoro just a few steps behind him. Both were holding grocery bags mostly full of meat. He didn't have time to wonder where he’d picked up the cop, or lament the loss of rent money, however. "Ace? What did you do this time?"

"Luffy, Lu, Listen...You listening? I...have to go far away for a while." He yanked his arm out of the woman's grasp, looking intently into his brother's dark brown eyes, willing him to pay attention for once.

"For work?"

"Well..." you see, Luffy, I kind of messed up a body dump and accidentally blew up part of a marine navy base. It was totally an accident. Stop laughing, it wasn't funny! Ok, so it was a little funny, but it ruined my hat. YES I like my new hat, thank you very much. But now these guys figured out it was me and think I'm some kind of terrorist. Yeah. So... Because he could totally say that... "Kinda work related."

Luffy looked at the disheveled officers and the glaring Gibbs before looking back at Ace, "Ah. I see. I get your share of meat then."

Ace chewed his lower lip, torn for a second. Generally they tried to keep these things private. But he had no choice. Being vague meant Luffy wouldn't get it. "Luffy. Forget that. Just listen to me for a second. You need to find Shanks. You hear me? Find him right now. Tell him to get you out of the city. NOW. I mean it, Lu."
"Eh?" Brown eyes went wide in shock as his younger brother just stared at him.

"Um," Zoro raised his hand, giving Gibbs a nasty look before eyeing the crowd warily, "Are you sure that's such a good idea, Ace? You're telling your brother to...

The agents were pulling him away again, he glared at them, "Fucking RUN! Luffy, get the hell out of the city!"

He just saw Zoro put his hand on Luffy's shoulder and drag him away as to woman gave him another shove and the crowd swallowed his brother. Still, his heart pounded in his chest. It was a gamble. By telling him to run like that, out in front of so many people, it would get to Blackbeard much faster. But, Shanks was smart, and Zoro would make sure the kid got there in one piece. For a cop, he was an ok guy...He might even go into hiding with Luffy. Might have to, not that Ace felt bad about that. Shanks should be able to get him/them out of the city fast. He'd be safe. He had to be safe. Ace'd die if something happened to his brother because he messed up...

"AAAAACCCCCCEEEEE!"

Or he could just kill Luffy himself and save everyone the trouble.
Want Fries with That

The decision to arrest Ace had been quickly reached the night before when Abby and Ducky had returned from the bar. It was obvious from the photos Tim had taken that the scowling young man was a Devil-fruit user as well as their primary suspect. They still had not found anything to tie him to Moria, or discovered why he was on the base, but that would come later. First, they had to bring him in, and the faster the better. If his work at Rip-off was anything to go by, he was very well connected with the underbelly of the city. Vance had recognized the descriptions of a few of the men, including the bouncer. The man had suggested grabbing Ace as soon as possible in the morning, though that had been the plan before they called. The young man was cocky when they'd approached. It was obvious when he recognized them he knew exactly why they were there, but he was playing dumb. Hadn't stopped him from throwing a complete fit when he realized his little secret wasn't so secret anymore. Gibbs had not been surprised by the dirty looks Luffy and his friend Zoro had given him. Given the situation, it was kind of expected. In fact, he would have been more than a bit worried if the two had not given him the stink eye. He was surprised by Ace's encouragement of his brother to run. Surely he didn't think that they were after his brother as well. Unless there was something they were missing...but no, Luffy was supposed to be graduating at the time of the arson. There was no way he was involved, so telling him to run made no sense.

Given what he knew of Luffy, the fact the generally happy kid had completely ignored the order didn't come as a surprise, though. What did come as a shock was the way he barreled through the crowd that was still loitering and decked Tony as hard as he could, knocking the agent to the ground in an impressive display of strength. The boy leapt back with a grin on his face as Ziva rushed to her friend's defense. She was an expert at multiple forms of hand to hand, but still, she seemed to have difficulty landing even one blow on the surprisingly flexible teen who ducked and wove out of the way laughing like it was a game. He didn't throw another blow of his own until Ziva managed to hook his right leg out from under him, sending him stumbling for a second and allowing her to land a solid his to his solar plexus. Instead of gasping and falling to the ground like the agents all expected him to do, the boy grunted instead and responded with a wide swinging left hook that seemed to curve when she went to block it, glancing off her cheek.

She snarled at the boy, no longer playing around. Not that the Israeli ever played around when it came to fighting, but Gibbs could tell that she was stepping it up a notch. Luffy seemed to notice as well, and reacted with a flurry of blows and a few kicks, most of which missed. His fighting style was erratic to say the least, relying mostly on the element of surprise. Ziva had years of experience however, and her body moved instinctively to block; though more than a few got through to graze her obviously annoying her. Gibbs gave the fight to the count of twenty, and when she hadn't laid the kid out he pulled his gun, getting a bead on the constantly moving target for a grazing shot. If the spastic kid was normal, the bullet would do little more than sting like a bitch, breaking up on impact as it wasn't made to combat criminals in the first place. Still, it would buy them enough time to wrestle him to the ground at least.

He caught their suspect staring at the gun out of the corner of his eyes. At first, Ace looked shocked, then incredulous. Smug superiority followed, which worried him slightly. His gut said he was missing something. Then gray eyes darted over to his brother, a frown forming. He eyed the gun again as Gibbs waited for a clear shot, chewing his lower lip, obviously worried now. There. Ziva had managed to throw the boy off balance, and now Luffy was crouched low a few feet away from her, ready to rush her, grinning like a nutcase.

"Freeze, or I'll shoot." He knew from where the boy was, it looked like he was aiming at his head as he gazed impassively down the barrel of his gun.
Luffy barely glanced at him, "Shihshishihii, wouldn't be the first time..."

"Getting shot is nothing to laugh off, you idiot." Tony grumbled rubbing his jaw with a glare.

The boy just shook his head, flicking his bangs out of his eyes before tensing. His eyes narrowed, Gibbs took the safety off, "Last warning, kid." He knew it wasn't going to stop him, though. Kid was insane.

The shout, "Luffy *STOP!*" did work. Ace was straining against Tim and Tony, eyes darting between Gibbs and his brother. "Don't move. You. Gibbs, don't shoot him, alright? He's done."

"But Ace..."

"I said you're done, Luffy!"

"It was just getting good." The teen rolled his eyes, rocking back on his heels as he pouted, "Guns just make it more exciting."

Tony gaped at the kid, "...Man, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but your brother is retarded."

"So, you gonna arrest me now?" Luffy grinned as he sat down on the sidewalk, looking around for his hat.

Gibbs lowered his weapon but didn't put it away. He blinked at Luffy for a moment, "So all this was so we'd arrest you?" The boy nodded, "Why?"

"Well, cauz Ace said to get out of the city. And I figured you were taking him out of the city...so I should just go with you guys. Smart, huh, Ace?" He smiled as he found his hat and snagged it, twirling it about his finger as Zoro came up behind him, looking disgruntled with his arms full of bags. "Hey Zoro!"

The green haired man dropped the bag and punched the teen in the back of the head. "Don't you 'hey Zoro' me! Of all the stupid ideas you've ever had...! That woman thought she'd killed you with her car, you idiot! Plus, now the eggs are all smashed! Do you realize the crap you just put me through? HUH? And for what!"

"To get arrested, apparently..." Ziva interrupted, pulling out a pair of handcuffs and approaching the still grinning teen.

"That...isn't the dumbest thing I've heard. Alright. I'll drop the food of with Nami's family then on my way to Rip-off."

Luffy grinned, offering Ziva his wrists as he looked over his shoulder, "Thanks man! Tell everyone not to worry."

Ziva was just about to close the fist cuff when Gibbs stopped her, deciding to trust his gut as he holstered his weapon. "Wait. Use the other ones."

"Are you sure? We might need them if he starts to act up." She nodded to Ace, who looked like he wanted to throttle his brother. Noticing that they were both looking at him, he glared at them instead, without saying a word.

"Oh yeah. Abby knows what she's going, we won't need them for him."

She shrugged and pocketed the first set of cuffs before bringing out a slightly bulkier looking set
from her coat pocket, "This is one of those Gut things again."

"Those are weird looking. Why do they look so funny, lady?" Luffy's head was cocked to the side as he eyed the new cuffs curiously. When the first cuff closed on his wrist his eyes went wide, and he looked over to Ace, "Oh."

"Luffy, you are such an idiot." Ace grumbled back in reply.

Gibbs had watched the exchange impassively, standing right next to Luffy. He was ready when the boy's legs buckled the moment both hands were cuffed behind him, his skin blanching. His arm shot out, stopping the boy from falling flat on his face. Luffy shuddered against his arm as he took a deep breath. It looked like his gut was right, despite what he knew to be impossible. He and Ducky had discussed how young Ace was to be a Devil-fruit user of some obvious skill. Devil-fruits were not only rare and expensive but so incredibly risky that very few actually ever used the ones that were found. There was no possible way for someone as young as Ace to just get one, let alone his younger brother. The chances, Ducky had said, of Luffy being a Devil-fruit user before they knew the elder brother was one were a million to one. Once they knew Ace was one, the odds had actually dropped. Devil-fruits killed. So why'd he let Luffy take one? What's the kids ability, I wonder?

"Please, just take the handcuffs off him! I swear to you, if you hurt him I'll fucking kill you, you asshole!" Ace snarled, throwing himself against Tony and Tim's grips. Judging by the look on his face, he was dead serious, too.

Gibbs looked down at the limp form draped across his arm. He wondered if perhaps the boy had passed out. "Hey, kid. Luffy. You alright there?"

"M'fine..." The boy muttered taking another shaky breath before standing back up. He still looked pale, but he grinned anyway, "I'm fine, Ace. Just surprised me, is all. Doesn't hurt."

Gibbs held on to Luffy's arm as he still seemed unsteady on his feet. He was sure that it looked like he was manhandling the thin youth to the others, and he did nothing to correct the misconception as he led the way to the cars. Luffy continued to grin the whole way, not fighting or saying a word. His brother was surprisingly silent as well. The block and a half was the longest distance he'd ever walked, all the same. When he spotted the two black SUVs, both his teams, and the one Ducky had taken up, Gibbs almost sighed in relief. He knew better than to transport the two brothers in the same vehicle even if there was enough room for everyone in one. He knew the moment Abby and Ducky spotted them, both of them waved, before looking very confused when they realized he was not holding Ace.

"Jethro, is that..." Ducky began.

"Yeah. Give me the keys Ducky."

Abby pointed at the grinning Luffy, "Why is he here, Gibbs? I thought we were here to arrest Ace?"

"Hey, you guy's were at Shankky's last night! How cool is that, Ace?" The teen called over his shoulder to his older brother.

"That's decidedly not cool, Luffy. We got played." Growled out the older of the two as he leveled a glare that could peel paint at Ducky.

The doctor was not phased, instead looking away and commenting in a hushed voice as he handed
over the keys, "The warrant was just for Ace, Jethro. What are you doing?"

"Got no choice. He decked Tony."

"Shihihihi...you forgot resisting arrest." Luffy chuckled, "Wanted to be sure you took me to where Ace was going, old man."

"I didn't forget." There was no way he was going to forget a kid fighting on par with Ziva even if it had only been for a short time. Rolling his eyes he opened the back door to the SUV and shoved the teen's shoulder, "Get in. Abby, Ducky, you're with Tony. Watch him, you got it? Don't let him jump out of the car on the expressway or something. Ziva, Tim, you guys are with me watching the other one. Think you can handle it?" He looked at his team.

"OTHER ONE? Jerk! Luffy! Lu! Don't say anything! Dammit, You better listen to me this time, or I'll beat your ass!" Ace shouted as he was shoved into the other car.

"Don't worry Boss, we've got it." Tim nodded as he forcefully strapped Ace in, ignoring the man's shouts to his brother, who was hanging out the other vehicle's window making faces.

**TONY**

Tony just rolled his eyes as he shoved Luffy back into the car before holding the door open for Abby, who for some reason unknown to him, decided to sit in the back with the boy despite Ducky offering to. The teen just grinned at her as he slid back over on the seat, completely unconcerned as the car started up.

"Tony!" Gibbs barked at him.

"Yeah, Boss! I got it, don't worry, I can handle this idiot."

"Then buckle him in." Gibbs whacked his head trough the open window before walking over to his own SUV, calling over his shoulder, "Lock the doors and roll up the windows, too."

"Don't worry, Tony, I'll buckle him in." Abby chirped from the back seat as she reached over the gap between the two to do so before the car pulled out.

The first ten or so minutes of the ride passed in relative silence, save for the occasional giggle from Luffy. He seemed content enough to just look out the windows at the slow moving city traffic, reminding DiNozzo to lock the doors. Ducky kept shooting the teen fugitive glances over his shoulder and his seat mate just gave up all pretense of subtly and started openly at him. Still, he wasn't bothered by this in the slightest, apparently oblivious to it all. Tony sighed, wondering just what he had done to deserve this kind of punishment. The guy was obviously defective or something, and that giggling was starting to creep him the hell out.

Abby finally broke the silence. "Did you really punch Tony?"

"Who's Tony?" Luffy asked, turning to look at her. If he was shocked to find her face less than a foot away, he didn't show it.

"I'm Tony. Anthony DiNozzo, Senior Field Agent, NCIS. And yes, Abby, he did."

He could see Luffy's wide grin in the rear-view mirror, "Yep! Fought that other lady, too."

"Good lord, you fought with Ziva?" Ducky spun in his seat, "What on Earth possessed you to do such a thing, my boy?"
Luffy just shrugged, chewing his lip. "What, did you forget or something? You seemed chatty enough about it before." Tony pointed out, causing the boy to pout. *Huh. His brother told him not to say anything...* he tabled the thought and explained to his companions, "His brother told him to get out of the city when we arrested him. Seems like the idiot thought getting us to arrest him too would be the fastest way."

"Well, it worked." Ducky pointed out.

"Yeah, but fighting Ziva? She's like Xena!" Abby gushed, "kid, you should be a pancake by now. Do you realize how lucky you are?"

Luffy snorted, "She's not so tough. Ace is much stronger!"

Ducky shook his head, "Your faith in your brother is commendable, but Ziva is a former Mossad officer. She's trained in several forms of fighting styles."

"Yeah? That's so cool! But Ace is still stronger. His Krav Maga might not be as good but he doesn't pull his punches."

"Krav Maga?" Tony asked, confused.

"Yeah, Israeli form of self defense. Marco 'n Ace took classes for a while till the teacher tossed them out. Donno why though. Anyway, Ziva was using it."

"Wait. Your brother knows how to juggle, mix drinks, blow shit up, and he knows an obscure form of martial arts?" Tony's eyes left the road completely for a second to take in the widening grin before Ducky reminded him he was driving.

"Actually, he knows a couple of different martial arts. He keeps getting tossed out of dojos though. So we practice at home, or sometimes he goes at it with Marco and Tatch. It's so cool to watch! Really! Ace knows so many awesome things!"

"And what about you, my dear boy? You say you practice with Ace. Do you know 'awesome things' as well?" Ducky asked.

Luffy shrugged, "I never win against Ace, but he's boss. He says I have 'the skills of a drunk bumble bee' shishihihiihi. He's still thrilled I graduated, mister...?"

"Doctor Mallard. Donald Mallard, but you can call me Ducky. Everyone does." The elderly doctor smiled.

"That's a cool name. Really really cool." A rumble interrupted the teen.

"What was that?" Abby asked, looking at Luffy oddly while shifting away.

"I'm hungry. I haven't had anything to eat in hours." Luffy sighed.

"Well, it's going to be a couple more hours till you get food. We've got a long drive ahead of us." Tony pointed out, ignoring the pointed pout behind him. Luffy continued to pout for a while until they passed a sign for a McDonalds on the next exit. He didn't realize at first that the hand tapping his shoulder belonged to the black haired teen. Then again, that wasn't too surprising since those hands had been cuffed behind the teen when he'd been put into the car. So, he didn't think it was girly at all when he yelped in shock when he turned his head expecting to see Abby's Gothic nail polish and saw clunky handcuffs instead."Fuck! How did you do that?"
"I'm reeeaaaaallly flexible." Dark eyes danced in amusement as the three of them stared at him in shock. Apparently no one had been paying attention to the boy.

"Uh-huh. Alright, Gumby. What do you want?"

"I'm gonna starve to death if you guys don't stop at McDonalds." Luffy's expression was dead serious, "I need meat!"

Tony shared a look with Ducky and Abby, both of who shrugged. Sighing, Tony nodded to Ducky to call the other car, "I suppose a quick bite to eat wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Hello there Timothy! Things are fine here. No no, he hasn't given us any trouble. Oh, I am sorry to hear that. Listen, Luffy is asking..."

"DEMANDING! I DEMAND MEAT!"

"...demanding we stop at McDonalds and feed him. Apparently the poor boy has not eaten today and is quite hungry. Yes yes, I realize we are on a time frame. Alright. Very good, the drive-thru it is." Ducky hung up, "They will be stopping at the drive-thru as well. Apparently Ace's stomach has been quite vocal, even if he himself has not been."

Two twenty piece chicken nugget boxes and four burgers with fries later, Tony was seriously hoping that Director Vance would accept this as a work expense. Where does he put it all? he wondered, torn between amazement and disgust. Holy crap, does his brother eat like this? Those groceries I saw him with would barely last a week! "Do you smoke pot or something?"

"No. Drugs are bad for you, Tony. Why?" came the answer around a mouthful of fries.

"No reason."

"Ah! That was good! Thanks for the food! But don't tell Sanji I said that, or he'll be really mad."

Abby took a sip of her soda, "Who's Sanji? Was that that blond guy at the bar last night?"

"Yeah, he's a friend! Sanji's gonna be the world's best chef someday. He's the sous-chef at the Baratie right now, and he makes really amazing food. He and Zoro are always fighting, it's so funny."

"Zoro is...?" Tony waved a hand, holding some fries.

"He was the guy with green hair. He's a cop." The teen's eyes got wide and he slapped his hands over his mouth looking sheepish, "I probably shouldn't have told you that."

"So he's a dirty cop?" Ducky raised his eyebrows, "I can see why you wouldn't want to share that."

"No. He's not dirty. I know plenty of dirty cops. Zoro's a narc." Luffy grinned, apparently proud for some reason.

"Wait, you're friends with an undercover cop?" Abby asked, eyebrows raised, "I didn't think he was old enough! Wasn't he beating people up at the bar?"

The teen started to laugh, "Yeah, he was! Zoro's cool like that, always so much fun to hang out with. Me n' Zoro get lost a lot though. Like, this one time, we were looking for the Statue of Liberty and we ended up in New Jersey. Actually, we end up in Jersey a lot."

"A chef and a cop. Those are some interesting friends." Ducky pressed, obviously angling for
"They do seem to be older then you, however. Don't you have friends your own age?"

"Older? I guess...but Franky is older than both of them. Shihihihiihi, Brook is way older than everyone combined! Nami and Usopp I guess would be my age. They graduated with me, at least. Nami loves money and mandarin oranges, but she won't share the ones her family grows. They have a bunch of small trees in their apartment. Usopp's a great storyteller, and he's really, really good with his hands. Anyway, it's usually the four of us."

Tony had to admit that it seemed like an odd mix, "What do you guys do for fun? Go to the movies or something?"

"Sometimes. I donno. Whatever seems like an adventure. Like, this one time we rescued Brook's dog Laboon from the dog pound in the middle of the night. He was innocent! It had to be some other big black scarred dog that attacked the taxi, so I wanted to get him out before they hurt him."

"How big are we talking?"

"Um...I can ride him. So big."

"Uh-huh. There's something wrong with you. You know that, right?"

Luffy grinned, "People tell me that a lot."

"Tony! That's not very nice!" Abby sputtered, "Ignore him, Luffy. He's an idiot."

They lapsed into silence for a bit. It wasn't long before the black haired teen began to fidget. He would eye the clock, then go back to looking out the window before sighing gustily. Tony caught him staring intently at all three of them before pouting and looking at the clock again. Naturally, he looked. They'd only been on the road for around an hour and a half. They had at least another two and a half hours to go if they drove like Gibbs. Well, Boss said the kid had trouble holding still for more than five seconds. This is going to be a really, really long ride, though. Tony's sighed was echoed by the teen's. Next thing he knew, the boy was leaning far forward, groaning as his fingers brushed the controls of the radio. Quickly he slapped the hands away.

"What the hell are you doing?" He shot the teen a look.

"What's it look like? Turning on the music! It's too quiet in here." The boy pouted.

"Allow me." Ducky reached over and turned the knob, filling the silence with hard rock.

Apparently on the way up, Abby had been in control over the radio. Still, the teen brightened instantly, tapping his hands on the back of the seat to the beat. Ducky looked at Luffy's hands, a kindly smile on his face, "Luffy, might I ask why you are wearing those particular handcuffs?"

"I donno. The old guy..."

His seatmate provided the name, "Gibbs"

"Gibbs told Ziva to put these on. They're really heavy though. You think you could take them off? I promise I'll be good!"

"I'm sure Gibbs had a good reason," Abby hedged as she tried really hard not to give into the puppy-dog-eyes.

"I don't know about that, but Luffy here dropped like a rock when Ziva put them on him. I thought
Ace was going to break my arm trying to get to him." Tony glanced at him in the rear view mirror, "He still looks a little pale. What's the deal with that, kid?"

Luffy made a strange face. His lips puckered out and he looked over to the side, "I've got no clue what you're talking about." He started to whistle. Badly.

"You, my boy, should never play poker with that face." Ducky attempted a smile, though it was obvious he was very disturbed by what DiNozzo had said. The agent just shrugged and figured his friend would explain later.

"I'm not very good at it," the teen admitted, grinning again.

"Hey, Luffy?" Tony turned down the radio, deciding to test his earlier theory. He'll talk to us about his friends, and about himself, but Ace told him to say nothing. Kid can't lie for shit, either. "You know why we're arresting your brother?"

Luffy laughed, "Nope!"

"He blew up a building." Abby cut threw his laughter, "On a navy base. It's not something to laugh about."

"I don't know anything about that." He shrugged. Tony didn't think he was lying.

"So anyway. It's a big deal. Gotta say, though. A guy who can light himself on fire is definitely a new one." Green eyes focused for a second on Luffy's reflection. There it was. He looked away, making a fish face again. DiNozzo almost smirked, knowing what the other would say.

"That's impossible. Ace can't do that."

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Doctor Mallard turned around as far as he could in his seat and grabbed Luffy's hands, worry etched on his face, "It's obvious you are lying. My dear boy, if your brother has in anyway coerced you into covering for him..."

"No! I'm not lying! I...I wanna talk to Ace."

"You can when we get to Quantico." Abby patted the boy's shoulder. She gave Ducky a look that clearly told him to back off, one that Tony caught, but he was sure the teen missed.

"I wanna talk to him now. He's in the other car, right? Can't we just call them? Just for a few minutes?" Luffy pleaded with them. He actually sounded physically distressed over not being able to talk to his brother. Tony cursed himself as five kinds a fool as he handed the cellphone back to Abby, letting her make the call.

"It's Abby. Luffy want's to talk to Ace. Just do it, alright? Well, put us on speaker then, McGee! Geesh." She glared at the phone before clicking the speaker on her end.

"...Sure this is a good idea?" Tim's voice creaked over the phone as Ducky turned off the radio.

"Ace?" Abby held the phone out more so the teen didn't have to nearly strangle himself on the seat-belt, "Can you hear me?"

"Of course I can hear you Lu. What do you want?"

"...I..." Luffy chewed his lip for a second, obviously thinking, "Er. I forgot to tell you that Brook and Laboon moved in to Franky's."
"You called to tell me that?" The other sounded torn between pissed and amused, "Well, that's typical. I'm glad, though. They treating you alright?"

"Yeah. Kinda bored, though. Oh! The guy with the bow-tie? His name is Ducky! How awesome is that?" The teen smiled at the phone, like his brother could see him.

"Very." Ace's tone said it really wasn't though, "Did you eat enough?"

"Well, I could have eaten more, but I guess. You?"

"Hey, it wasn't half a fuzzy fruit cake so I..." The other voice cut off.

Tim sounded worried, though apparently Luffy wasn't as he laughed into his hands, "Hey? Are you ok? Boss, I think he fell asleep..." Snoring could be heard, "Yeah. He's asleep."

"I can hear that, Tim. How is everything Tony?"

"Just fine, Boss. Luffy's behaving, for the most part. You guys?"

"Oh, Ace is definitely a handful. He tried to kick out the window twice, once on the highway. Thought Tim was going to have heart failure. Told the guy at McDonalds we 'kidnapped him and were going to do unspeakable things' to him. Had to flash my badge at the guy taking our order. When that didn't work, he started cursing in Latin. Other than that, he's been glaring holes into the back of my head, probably trying to find a way around the handcuffs." Gibbs sounded almost amused by the whole thing. "So, let's try to speed this up a bit before he figures out how to make my head explode. Alright?"

"Right, Boss." Tony replied, even though Gibbs had already hung up. "Ok then. No trying to kick out the window, Luffy. The Director would make me pay for it."

"Shishishishi, I won't. I could have told Ace that it was harder than it looks in the movies. Sanji's good at it though. This one time, this dude was being a real jerk to Nami, and BAM! Sanji put his foot right into the guy's windshield." Luffy waved his hands as Ducky turned the radio back on low.

Abby shook his arm, "Oh my gosh! Did he hurt himself?"

"Nah. Chopper insisted on checking him out though. Chopper's kinda like a doctor. Anyway. Sanji's got really strong legs. Like, Zoro'll fight with him, right? And Sanji won't use a weapon. He says," Luffy pulled some hair over one eye and squinted the other, pretending to pull a drag off a cigarette, "'A chef's hands are his pride, idiot. I would never risk them in a fight.' so he'll try to kick the crap out of Zoro. But Zoro's an expert swordsman."

"On top of being a cop?"

"Yeah. Something about a promise. He uses three swords...but you can't carry swords on the street, so it kinda sucks."

"Three swords!" Abby gasped, "I think I've heard of him! Oh my gosh, he's like, famous in the fencing world. How did you meet?"

The rest of the trip past quickly, surprisingly so. Luffy shared stories about his friends with very little prompting from the others, though he'd clam up when asked about his brother or himself. The teen's pride in his 'crew' was obvious, a happy grin on his face as he spoke of their quirks. Tony soon found himself reevaluating his opinion of Luffy. Looking at Ducky, he could tell that the
medical examiner felt the same way about the teen, though he wasn't sure how good of a thing that was. The man seemed increasingly worried, though he hid it well enough that Luffy didn't seem to notice. Abby looked just about ready to adopt him as she attempted to convince him the bowling was the best sport ever.
Ace hadn't fought them much when they'd brought him into the interrogation room beyond looking around for his brother. He'd seemed only mildly annoyed when he hadn't been able to spot the straw hat. Gibbs had tossed him into the small room, told Ziva to watch him from Observation, and left him to stew as he went to check in with Vance. He just knew the man was not going to be amused. He'd sent the team to get one guy and they'd come back with two after all.

The Director didn't disappoint, "What the hell were you thinking, Gibbs?"

"I was thinking I'd bring in the guy who punched one of your agents." He replied as he lowered himself into a chair.

"This complicates matters. I've already gotten phone calls about my agents running roughshod over some 'poor defenseless child', so I'll ask you again. Why didn't you just turn him over to the police there?"

"Well," Gibbs began, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at his boss which was never a smart, "didn't think it would be such a good idea."

"Your gut tell you that?"

"Yeah," His tone said it was obvious. He let the word hang for a moment before relenting and explaining, "He's a Devil-fruit user."

Vance's eyes widened as he leaned forward, "Are you sure?"

Gibbs nodded, "Pretty sure. Luffy didn't react too well to those special handcuffs, either. His brother seemed pretty worried, actually. Didn't think you'd want me to just leave him behind considering."

"No. No, you're right. Dammit. Whatever happened to the days where hearing about one of these people in a carer was considered rare? Now we have three tied into a case. I don't like it, Gibbs." Vance rubbed a hand across his face, sighing. "Any evidence that the kid has anything to do with the actual murder?"

"So far, nope. He was graduating when all hell broke loose, but we know that Moria was killed days before that, so it's not off the table yet."

The Director nodded, "I want you to question him then. Hell he might just know something, his brother is our prime suspect."

"Might have to wait a bit. Got Ace stewing in interrogation right now."

"You think he's going to crack?"

Gibbs just smirked as he stood back up, "Won't know until I try."

On his way back to the interrogation room he swung by the bullpen, catching Tony as he lead a reluctant Luffy away from another agent's desk. The other agent looked vaguely terrified, and he thought Luffy was drooling slightly. Tony looked sheepishly at him, obviously feeling guilty at getting caught as Luffy just laughed. He knew he was going to regret asking.
"What happened?"

"Well Luffy here got a little hungry..."

"HE ATE MY LUNCH! He didn't even take it out of the wrapper!"

"What? The wrapper adds extra flavor." The teen grinned, "I'm still hungry. Got anything else?"

Gibbs just sighed, tossing DiNozzo a five, "Grab him some stuff from the vending machines and get him settled in interrogation three. I'll be there later."

"Right, Boss."

"And Tony."

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Don't let him eat anyone else's lunch, ok?" He called over his shoulder as he continued on. Really, the younger brother was a complete glutton. He should have expected as much from watching him in the park, though.

Still, overall he was much more approachable than the elder brother. Ace had definitely mastered the 'fuck you' look. Hostility just rolled off him in waves. Jethro knocked on the door before walking into the observation room where Ziva still stood, silently watching the black haired young man. He joined her silently. For a while, neither said nothing, instead watching an apparently bored guy as he lounged in his chair. Gibbs was mildly impressed. Those metal chairs were really uncomfortable, meant to keep a suspect off guard, but the way Ace sat with his legs stretched out in front of him, the chair tipped back slightly on two legs as he stared vacantly at the ceiling, it could have been a sofa.

"He is good," Ziva commented, "He has not moved one inch since right after you left. Well, except once."

"Oh?"

"Yes. He looked over this way and said, 'Don't fucking break my phone. I know you assholes are watching. I'm warning you.' He then gave us the finger and zoned out."

Gibbs nodded. Impressive, for sure. Lots of experience with interrogation tactics. To be expected, he mused. The question was if he should go in heavy handed, or take a gentler approach. Either way, he doubted he'd get the guy to admit to anything solid, but anything he said would help at this point. Both tactics had their pros and cons, but he really couldn't tell from here which would be most effective against Ace until he actually went into the room. A few more moments passed till Ducky entered the room.

"Am I late? I'm terribly sorry! I was waylaid by Abby on the way to the lab. She wanted assistance in cracking Ace's password on his phone. She was worried he might have booby trapped it. We had no such luck, however." The doctor rambled slightly as he eyed the youth on the other side of the glass. "So I take it that you are about to begin?"

Gibbs patted his friend's shoulder before he left and went next door. He knew Ducky was increasingly uneasy about both brothers, which was why he'd waited for the other to arrive. Both were hoping that he might learn something by watching both interviews firsthand, instead of watching the recordings later. Ace's gave didn't even flicker as the door opened, he just continued to gaze dully at the ceiling. Did he fall asleep with his eyes open? The agent wondered as he closed

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the door behind him with a soft click. Still, no response. He stood there for a second, waiting for a reaction. He thought for a second that he should say something.

"I'm awake, Agent Gibbs. If that's what you're wondering." The gaze didn't leave the ceiling, and the tone was bored. "I'm narcoleptic, but I don't sleep with my eyes open."

Gibbs strode forward now, taking the other chair, "Mind telling me what you're doing, then?"

Ace's feet slid back, the chair clanking back to the ground jarringly as Ace eyed him dispassionately with a shrug, "Killing time. Counting those little dots in the tiles. Waiting for you to get here."

"You do this a lot, huh?"

"Ah. Going with the nice guy? I pegged you more for the bad cop type." Ace rolled his eyes, snorting.

Gibbs didn't bother to hide his answering smirk. He had suspected that any actual tactic would be useless on this guy, and he was right. So, "Wrong on both counts. I'm not playing that old game. Just doing my job." as himself.

"Like I haven't heard that before." Still, there was a glimmer of interest in those dark eyes.

"Oh, I'm sure you have, Ace." He flipped open a file, "Says here you've been arrested multiple times. Assault, theft, drug running, arson. Mostly small time stuff. So I'm sure you know the drill by now."

There was a toothy grin. "Miranda rights. Never got them. This arrest is null-and-void."

"You're here under suspect of terroristic activities. Different rules." Gibbs replied calmly as he combed through the files. Silence answered him. Glancing up, he saw Ace was thinking hard, his expression saying 'Well fuck!' He looked back at the file, "Ace D. Marshall, age twenty. One sibling, Luffy, seventeen. Both were adopted by Teach Marshall. Says here you've been suspected in quite a few unsolved cases as well."

Ace glared at him, riled up for some reason, "Nothing anyone could prove."

"Like the time you burned down your entire apartment building?"

Ace's glare lost its intensity, then he blinked, realizing what he was talking about. He grinned widely, "Ah. I really liked that apartment, it was cheap, and it wasn't too crappy. What happened wasn't my fault, actually. Some jackass on the sixth floor was growing pot and the grow lamp fell over. Sucked too, cauz the place went up like a match. Then again, with all the other...things going on in the building, I'm not surprised. It was all Luffy and I could do to get everyone out."

"Really? You had nothing to do with it? Because, witnesses say you were fleeing the scene. Not something you'd expect out of a hero who'd just saved lives."

The young man shrugged, "Of course! Everyone blames the arsonist, so I had to make myself scarce. It's not exactly a secret among certain circles where my talents lay, after all."

Gibbs gave him his patented stare. The story of rescuing people, that rang true to what the other people had said, but, he knew that Ace was lying about the fire. His gut told him so. His first thought was that Luffy had somehow started the fire, he was obviously someone Ace would go to great lengths to protect. Problem was, that didn't quite fit. If that was the case, the
fire...wielder?...man?...arsonist would have taken the blame instead of blaming a third party. He was definitely hiding something. Gibbs' stare was returned with a cocky grin. Make that a lot of something.

"I think you're a bit more than just an arsonist. When my team searched your apartment, they found no accelerants, no fuels, and not even a single lighter. I think you and I both know you use something else to get your blazes going."

Ace pointed out with an air of not caring, "Well, you could always take these cuffs off me, and we could test your little theory."

"Or we could leave them on, and you could just admit to being a Devil-fruit user."

"Again, you've got no proof." Ace scoffed.

"We've got the photos." Gibbs pointed out, flipping open a file and spreading out just a few of the tapped a finger on a particularly nice shot of the man half aflame as he landed. "Proof enough."

Shifting in his seat, Ace picked up the photo, eyeing it critically before snorting and tossing it back on the table and slouching once more. "Photoshopped. Is that the best you got? Any idiot with a computer can do that."

"Any idiot like your brother, Luffy?"

"Well, maybe not Luffy." He laughed, "One time, Luffy got fooled by some stupid photoshop job of a zombie warthog in a wedding dress. He's kind of gullible. Most people don't fall for crap like this though."

Gibbs picked up the photos and neatly stacked them inside the folder again, letting the silence reign for a moment as he contemplated the young man. It was obvious by the calculating look he'd already planned ahead, the team having tipped him off about the photos earlier. He was smart, that was for sure. Stubborn as hell, too. His gut said the kid knew he'd been caught, but he wasn't going to give up the ghost just yet. With a sigh, he flipped closed the file.

"So you gonna let me go, or what?" Ace smirked.

He chose to ignore the request, instead plowing into the next question, "Why'd you kill him?" the cocky look vanished, replaced by a furrowed brow, so he elaborated, "Moria Gekkō. The guy you almost blew up on base. Why'd you kill him? He insult you? Someone ask you to?" He watched Ace's eyes carefully, "Threaten Luffy?" just for a second, the man's eyes went cold, hard. Ah, makes sense, he thought to himself. Moria was known for being vicious, and a kidnapper. Even with Ducky's...concerns...Ace didn't seem the type to take that kind of threat to his brother kindly. If nothing else, Ace didn't strike him as the type to share.

Ace's cuffed hands slapping the table interrupted his line of thought, "I didn't kill the bastard. Didn't even know the guy was dead until after the fact. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. That Gekkō was a slimeball."

"So you don't deny you knew him?"

"Knew of him, yeah." Ace looked away dismissively, "I keep an eye on the most wanted lists. In my circles, never know when a friend will pop up."

He found that little admission interesting, "Can you tell me anything about him?"
"You mean other than the fact that he was a scary S-O-B? Not much. Guy was a wraith, modern day pirate that left a bad stink in the air. Don't know many who'd deal with him, plenty who'd've killed him off if they had a chance. That was the word on the docks, at least."

"Uh-huh." Gibbs stared at him long and hard for a moment, getting the feeling the relationship was a lot more personal than that. Moria had done or said something that had threatened Luffy in some way, he was sure of it. Still, he could tell Ace wasn't going to budge on his story, "Anyone ever mention if he could manipulate shadows?"

"What the fuck? 'manipulate' shadows? What the hell does that even mean? Are you kidding me?" The surprise wasn't feigned this time. Gibbs didn't bother to answer as he watched the myriad of emotions going across the others face. First was the surprise and shock, then wariness, suspicion. Grudging respect, and a little worry mixed in. He was sure then that Ace had known that Gekkō was a Devil-fruit user and what his abilities were, possibly first hand. He obviously didn't expect them to know, though. He gave the youth credit, he thought fast on his feet. "What do you think this is, some kind of damn comic book? Where's Superman?"

"You'll have to ask McGee, that's more his thing."

"Riiiight." Ace rolled his eyes, "Nah, no one ever talked about if Moria could hijack your shadow."

He almost smiled, he could feel it. Instead, he looked down at his folder before looking back up, "Is there a reason you dumped him on a navy base? Or lit him up?"

"I keep telling you; it wasn't me. I didn't do it." He flicked at the file contemptuously, "Your so called 'evidence' proves nothing."

"Right." Gibbs stood up and headed towards the door.

"Giving up already?"

"No. Thought I'd go ask your brother some questions. See if he's got the answers I'm looking for."

"Shit! Luffy has nothing to do with this! Leave him out of it!" Ace shouted at his back as he shut the door behind him, not bothering to turn and look at him.
Luffy munched happily on the candy bar that DiNozzo gave him. He knew the man had a whole pocket full of candy bars, and though he was tempted to snatch the others he figured he could wait a bit. That burger he'd found on a desk had been really tasty, after all. The wrapper had been a bit waxy, but Luffy wasn't one to quibble about little things like that when someone was trying to take food away from him. He guessed that Gibbs guy wasn't all that bad, since he paid for some snacks.

Tony sat him at a plain metal table in a small room with a big one-way window taking up one side of the room before handing him the rest of the candy. "Sit here and stay, alright? Boss will be by in a bit. He's got some questions for you."

"I can do that! Thanks for the candy!" Luffy grinned, snagging the bars and wolfing them down. He could tell by the look on the other's face that the man wasn't sure if he was even tasting anything. *Shows what he knows,* the teen thought, enjoying the flavors as Tony left. Of course, with the candy gone, and no-one in the room with him, he got bored. There was nothing to do in the room, nothing at all. And they'd taken away his phone and wallet, so he couldn't even bug Zoro.

"Booookrrred..." He moaned, wishing again for his phone. Even if he couldn't call his friends, he could have at least watched some anime with it. Ace had said seven dollars a month to shut Luffy up was worth the money just that weekend when he'd signed them up for Crunchyroll. Of course, he'd then had to take Luffy's phone away before he missed every single one of their shows because he was too busy watching *Naruto* but that was another matter. Ninjas were Cool! Not as cool as Pirates, though. "NINJA PIRATES WOULD BE AWESOME!" He laughed out loud, wondering if there was an anime about that.

Next he stared at the window. Luffy been in enough rooms like this to know that people were on the other side. Probably. Either that, or it really was just a big-ass mirror, like at the dance studio. Hell, even if there were people watching, he could *still* use it like a mirror, right? He grinned, pushing his hat back so it rested on his back before hopping onto the table. The ceiling was high, so he had plenty of clearance. Experimentally he bounced on his heels, his grin widening as the table didn't even so much as shift. It was a good table. He edged his sandals right to the end of the table and moon walked across the slick surface before flipping off. That made him a bit dizzy. *Stupid handcuffs.* Still, it had looked cool in the mirror, so he rolled onto the table and moon walked going the other way. The handcuffs kept getting in his way, though. Lots of the dance moves he knew moved the whole body, and he couldn't really pull them off the way he wanted to. He couldn't even do *Oppa Gangnam* properly! Finally, he sat on the table and glared at the mirrored glass.

"You suck!" He told it, and anyone who may or may not be on the other side. "How can I do anything cool if you won't let me? What's with this stupid cuffs, anyway? They're way too big, and they're heavy! If I didn't have them on, I could do the *Macarena,* too. Or *YMCA.* Yeah! This totally stinks. Ah! what if I get attacked by a monster or something and my hands are cuffed together? Crap. Where's Zoro when I need him? Or Usopp. Can you even use a slingshot handcuffed? I should ask him...crap. I don't have my phone. GAH!" He scratched his head in frustration. "Hey! Mirror-wall-guys! Can you shoot a slingshot handcuffed? Hellooo?" He waited a full minute for an answer, since there was nothing better to do. It was boring. So very boring in that room. At least when the cops arrested him back home, they didn't make him wait this long. Sighing, Luffy put his hat against his chest and lay on the table, staring at the ceiling. This was officially worse than school had been.
When the door finally opened up, he sprang up, grin plastered on his face. The old guy, Gibbs, barely looked at him though. "Get your butt off the table and into the chair."

"But the chair's uncomfortable," Luffy whined as he complied. It was true, the thing was really annoying to sit on. If he hadn't been cuffed, it wouldn't have been a problem, but it was so annoying right now. And cold, he hated being cold with a passion. Still, Ace would be mad if he made trouble over something like this. So he sat in it anyway with a huff.

"You know who I am?" the agent asked, looking at the teen for the first time. He spoke gently, though his eyes were still tough. His hair was a really cool silver-gray color, and cut short.

Luffy liked the look of him, so he grinned back widely. "Tony called you 'Boss'. You're Gibbs or something, right?"

"That's right. Special Agent Jethro Gibbs." The man said, placing a bag on the table.

"Jethro? That's a funny name!" Luffy eyed the bag before shrugging.

"You think my name's funny, huh? What about yours? Luffy, that's an unusual name."

"Shishishishi...it is isn't it? So cool!" The teen laughed, dark eyes dancing, "Ace says he thinks someone was lazy."

Gibbs looked at him curiously, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, there are aces in cards and there are luffa sponges, right? So he thinks someone couldn't be bothered to think up real names. I think they're cool, though. Right?"

"In sailing, there's something called a luffing, too."

"Really?" He thought about that for a second. "That's cool, too...but I like being a sponge!"

Gibbs appeared to be trying not to smile as he opened the bag, pulling out two sandwiches and a can of coke. "Here. Thought you might still be hungry."

"Thanks!" He wasted no time unwrapping the first sandwich. In seconds half of it was gone.

The agent's eyes widened slightly in surprise, "You must eat your Uncle out of house and home."

"Mph morph mh mumphl." Luffy frowned around his mouthful.

"Come again?"

Taking a swig of his soda he replied, "He's not my Uncle. Besides, I live with Ace. He eats as much as I do, so it's not a problem."

"You really like your brother, don't you, Luffy?"

"Well, yeah! Ace is the best! Everyone knows that, silly." Luffy grinned widely at him, "He's so cool."

"What makes him cool? Tony told me he studies martial arts. Is that it?"

He finished the second sandwich, "No. But he's awesome in a fight! I can't beat him at all. I keep telling him when I'm his age I'll win, but he just laughs at me. It's alright, though, because it's Ace. He's got like, mad skills and shit. Plus, he's really, really super smart! But he does get angry
sometimes, and even Marco and Thatch'll keep away when he's like that, and they're not afraid of anything! I just usually do something funny to him and he cheers up. Well, after he threatens to kill me or he beats me up or something," Luffy laughed, "Like, this one time, he was in such a bad mood, he threw me off a bridge."

Gibbs stared at him for a second, "Sounds like your brother is a dangerous guy."

"That's what makes him so much fun." He grinned, thinking of all the scuffles he and his brother got into.

"Fun, huh?" The man opened a file in front of him apparently changing the topic, "Sounds like you're pretty 'fun' yourself. It says here you have an extensive juvi record."

"Shihsh...that. Yeah, I get in trouble a lot. It's an adventure, though! Oh yeah, you guys forgot my rights." Luffy smiled at him, "You know, the ones that go, 'You have the right to shut the fuck up will you? You have the right to someone bringing you meat. If you can't find someone, we're stuck feeding you. God, we don't want to feed you. You get a phone call. We know who to call, so we've done that. Now, sit down, stop laughing, and try not to mentally scar anyone.' no one said that to me. Won't that get you in trouble?"

"I don't think that's how it goes." the agent looked like he had a headache. "I know that's not how it goes. For now, we're not going to get in trouble. I've just got a few questions for you. You think you can handle that?"

"Sure! I like mystery questions!" He leaned forward, eyes dancing.

"Do you know why we arrested Ace?"

"Tony said something about him blowing up a building or something, but I don't know anything about that." He answered quickly, smiling.

"Uh-huh." Gibbs pulled out a photo and looked at it for a second, "Well, when he blew up a building..."

Luffy waved his hands, trying to get the agent's attention, "Wait, you really think he blew up a building? Ace doesn't blow stuff up! Well, unless you touch the fireflies, they go BOOM! sometimes. Ah, and Zeff says his temper is explosive. Does that count?"

Gray blue eyes stared at the teen in confusion for a moment before he continued, "...we suspect it was to cover up the murder of someone. Do you know anything about Moria Gekkō?"

Luffy took the photo. It wasn't a new picture, but it was definitely Moria. He frowned at the image, wondering what Gekkō had to do with his brother 'blowing something up'. Unless Ace had gotten into a fight with the man. That could possibly lead to an explosion or something equally epic. His brother had sworn to beat the shit out of him if their paths ever crossed for the stunt the man had pulled. Luffy didn't remember too much of it, really. He just remembered that once, while Ace was away Blackbeard had had someone over. That someone had been Gekkō. Luffy spent a week hiding in the apartment after meeting the man, his whole body a giant walking sunburn. Though, the whole no-shadow thing was cool for a while. Like a vampire or something. Except he had a reflection. Ace had said something later about Gekkō using him to steal plutonium, but that made no sense, because Luffy hadn't gone anywhere.

He handed the photo back, nodding his head, "Sure, everyone knows about him. He is a pirate! But not like Jack Sparrow, cauz he's romantic or something. But like a real pirate. You know, like that
"Your brother know the guy or something?" Gibbs continued, apparently looking for another picture.

"Nah. Ace's never met him. Moria's a total creep, though, so I think he wants to beat him up or something."

Gibbs' expression turned colder as he placed another photo on the table between them. Luffy had seen photos like this before, his smile faded completely. Once again, it was Moria, but he was definitely dead on a table. He looked more than a little charred, and the teen couldn't really deny that was his brother's doing. The man's nose looked a bit squashed, too. Most likely thanks to Ace's boot. One thing proved to him that his older brother hadn't done this though.

Calmly he looked up at Gibbs, "Ace didn't do this."

"What makes you say that?" The man tapped the photo, "You're saying he wouldn't kill this guy? Because, frankly, he sounded pissed enough about him to try."

Luffy shrugged one shoulder, "He was shot. Ace doesn't like guns. He says something about when you pull 'heat' the other guy does, and that's cheating."

"So let me get this straight. You're saying your brother didn't kill this guy because he doesn't like guns?"

"Yep! Ace almost never uses a gun. He knows how to shoot though. He tried to teach me, but I'm no good. My aim's terrible," He grinned. "So I know Ace didn't do this. He would have stabbed him or something else, maybe." Though he had a good idea on who had shot him for Ace to clean up afterwards.

The two stared at each other in silence. The teen wondered if maybe he had something stuck in his hair, but remembered his hat was on his head. Maybe that was the problem. Luffy wondered if Gibbs was hungry. It was too bad he'd eaten both sandwiches already, though. Come to think of it, he was feeling a bit hungry again. His stomach rumbled, and he grinned at the look of surprise the older agent shot him.

"Ever heard of 'Devil-fruits'?" The man asked.

Luffy blinked at him for a second, regretting his inability to lie well. Still, Ace had told him to say nothing, so he'd give it a shot. "Nope. Is that some kind of food? It sounds nasty."

"Powers?" Luffy grinned his trademark grin, "You mean like the X-men or something? That would be so amazing! I'd want the power to eat all the time! OOO! No! The power...to control what my farts smelled like. That would be so cool! Hey, do you think zombies poop?"

"Excuse me?" It took a second for Gibbs to process that.

"Zombies. Do they poop?"

The other looked around the small room for a second before asking in a raised voice, "Where the hell did that come from?"
"Well, I was just thinking, Wolverine's power is pretty awesome too, so he'd be good to have around during the zombie apocalypse. Unless he gets bit. But his powers might take care of that. Then I thought, 'Zombies eat an awful lot, so, do they poop?' So. Do they? What do you think? They're dead, right? Can the dead even poop? I wonder about vampires too. Hmm...Ace might know. Yeah. I'll ask him next time I see him."

"I think I'm beginning to see why your brother would toss you off a bridge." Gibbs looked like he had a headache. Luffy just laughed at him. "Are you doing this on purpose?"

"Doing what on purpose?" He stared at him blankly.

"Never mind. Alright. You stay here." Gibbs got up to leave, "If you behave, we'll let you see your brother in a bit. That means stay off the table this time!"

"You saw me? So cool!" Luffy called as the door clicked closed, grin plastered on his face.
Ducky had to hide a smile as Gibbs came back into the observation room. He was sure that his friend wouldn't appreciate him laughing, though Gibbs was sure to see the humor in Luffy's actions. The boy was amusing, to say the least. Always moving, even now he was doing handstands, apparently completely unbothered by circumstances. The two older men stood in silence for a while watching the teen until the handcuffs tripped him up and he went tumbling right into a wall, where he lay slightly out of breath, laughing.

"That'll leave a mark." Gibbs calmly pointed out.

"Oh, I do think he'll be fine. I doubt there will even be a bruise to show for it."

His friend pointed his styrofoam cup at the scene, "I was talking about the wall."

Looking closer, Ducky thought he might actually see a crack in the paster. He smiled wanly and shrugged, "Well, you told him to keep off the table."

"Uh-huh. So. What can you tell me about these two, Duck?"

"I'll start with Luffy, as he is right in front of us, shall I?" The doctor turned and looked at his friend, "Most obvious should be the boy's inability to lie well. He seems completely aware of this fact, however, and shows no remorse at being caught in a lie. I'd go so far as to say he finds it funny. He also is suffering from what seems to be Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, though to what extent it is hard to tell."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm afraid, Jethro, he could have been playing you, however I think this is unlikely. He reminds me a bit of an over-eager puppy in some ways. As Abby would say, he's not the brightest crayon in the box." He caught Gibbs' smile and continued, "Personality wise, given from what I observed on the ride over, Luffy is loyal to a fault. He's also obsessed with keeping entertained and seems to have a fixation with food."

"Yeah, I noticed that one. Kid's eaten about a hundred dollars in food already. Had Tony drop food off for his brother, too. You think there's a good reason behind this? Because I'd love to know where they're putting it all. This one especially."

Doctor Mallard nodded, "I believe that the cause stems from their early years. You see this behavior sometimes in people who are unsure when they are going to eat next. When food is provided they'll eat in excess, often making themselves sick...but I digress slightly. I can not say for certain until we learn more about their pasts," something I'm sure both boys won't share willingly "but I suspect they spent quite a bit of time hungry. Either in an abusive situation, or possibly on the streets. Maybe both."

The two mean lapsed into silence for a moment, and Ducky found himself looking over towards where Luffy still lay against the wall, humming to himself. The black haired youth looked exhausted, but seemed either unable or unwilling to really rest. He wondered idly if it was because the teen knew they were there, or if it was the special handcuffs. Seeing the slight shiver go through the boy, he suspected it was the latter of the two. Again, he found himself wondering what kind of power Luffy had.

"He doesn't look like someone who could give Ziva a hard time." Gibbs interrupted his musings,
"He looks almost harmless. Kid's dangerous, Ducky. Don't need you to tell me that one. He just hides it behind that goofy smile of his, unlike his brother. I wanna know how dangerous, and if he had anything to do with this."

"I...don't know, Jethro. He did have personal experience with Moria, most likely unpleasant. His brother obviously was aware of the fact, given his reaction. Luffy wasn't unhappy the man was dead, either. I believe both boys were telling the truth about Ace not killing the man. What Luffy said was very insightful, Gibbs."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we suspect Ace to be some sort of fire user, correct?" His friend nodded ever so slightly, "The comment about 'pulling heat' is quite possibly a reference to that. Luffy is well aware of his brother's abilities, I assure you. As we saw from the video footage, and Private Coby informed us, the debris also passed right through Ace. This suggests the man is, in fact, bullet proof. As Ace lives in a high crime area where many people are armed, if he were to use a gun in a fight, it is much more likely the other person would as well. While it would give him the advantage in the fight, it would also blow his cover as a Devil-fruit user, something neither will do even when caught. They are afraid of being caught, actually, and with good reason."

"Yeah. Sengoku said something about how people tended to react badly after they got over their shock." Gibbs nodded, "I don't think he was talking about civilians, either."

Ducky frowned as he watched Luffy balance the chairs on top of each other and sit on them, "I doubt he was. Devil-fruit users are seen as both a threat by governments and as weapons no matter how inconsequential the power may be. These two..."

Gibbs nodded towards the door, signaling his intent to go watch the other brother, "They'd see Ace is a threat, that's for sure."

Ducky followed him down the hall a little ways, "Ironic, considering the lad does not seem to have any sort of problem with the government, really. Oh, don't give me that look, the law is a different matter entirely! I am merely suggesting that this 'act of terror' may have been perpetrated by Ace, but it was planned by another."

Ace was stacking ice cubes when they entered the observation room. He seemed completely absorbed in the task of seeing how high he could get his frozen tower. Ziva and Tony, both standing in the observation, seemed to have a bet going on how high he could make it. Ziva apparently was winning. Unlike his younger brother, he completely ignored the fact that he was handcuffed, despite the pallor that had started to creep onto his cheeks. Ducky wondered how much longer they could safely keep them handcuffed, or if there was a better way to restrain them. Petrified coral might not be hard to come by, per-se, but this particular type was a bit more difficult to obtain in large quantities, so making a room coated in the stuff was out of the question. The handcuffs had seemed like a good idea before, but both brothers seemed to be feeling ill. Director Vance had firmly stated that they would not be asking for assistance from any other government branch, however, so Ducky could not contact the few people he knew to be experts in Devil-fruit users. Gibbs' friend had also been unreachable, making things even more difficult. The problem was, Ace was dangerous. Very scarily dangerous, and Luffy was an unknown. They couldn't risk them going about unsecured.

"Ace is an interesting fellow, Jethro. In many ways, he reminds me of Ari. He's quite intelligent, charismatic, and driven."

"That's not helping his case, any, Ducky. Makes me want to lock him up right now. Or put a bullet
in him while I can." Gibbs grumbled while the other two agents in the room nodded.

The doctor shrugged, "I understand the feeling. I can tell you that like Ari, he takes issue with his father figure, Teach Marshall. Luffy does as well, though I'm not sure if it is because Ace does."

"The brothers that close?"

"It's complicated." Ducky turned away from the window, "Ace needs Luffy to rely on him. I fear that to him, his younger brother is a possession, one that he is reluctant to share with anyone who might be a threat."

Gibbs' brows furrowed, "What about Luffy's friends, then?"

"As you stated earlier, all were reluctant to talk to Ace on the phone. At the bar even, I noticed the blond friend, Sanji I believe his name was, blanch in fear of him. They are not seen as threats to his claim, he expects them to obey him as well when it comes to his sibling. His dislike for Teach could very well be that the man vies for Luffy's affection, something he can't tolerate." Ducky sighed, "I suspect he is not above punishing his brother for any perceived disobedience."

"Luffy seems pretty attached, though. You think the kid's got stockholm or something?"

"Most likely. I doubt the poor boy can even imagine going through a week without his brother. Luffy is reluctant to do anything that he thinks his brother wouldn't like. He is convinced that he needs the other. I fear that Ace used a Devil-fruit on Luffy despite the risks to increase that dependency."

"Well, that sucks." Tony interrupted for the first time, glaring at the man on the other side of the glass.

"Yes, I'm afraid it does. However, despite this, I truly believe Ace does care for his brother in his own way. I do not think he would have been aware exactly how dangerous the Devil-fruits are, or he would never have used one on his brother. The last thing he wants is for Luffy to be seriously injured or dead, after all."

"Why don't you two go get Luffy and bring him here." Gibbs suggested.

Ziva turned to face him, "You sure that's a good idea, Gibbs?"

"I promised the kid if he behaved I'd let him see his brother. Don't want to be a liar. Besides, if we leave him alone, he'll trash the place."

"Good point, Boss." Tony nodded, tapping his partner on the shoulder and heading out the door, "Try not to get into a fist fight with him this time, alright, Ziva?"

"TONY!" The door clicked closed.

Gibbs waited a second before continuing, "What else can you tell me about Ace?"

"He is proud of what he can do. He's good at it, and he knows it, so he isn't looking for approval. You, Jethro, have earned his respect, albeit grudgingly. I'm not fully sure how you did that, though. Most of it was undoubtedly your lack of underhanded play while questioning him, and your knowledge of Moria. Though I feel there might have been more to it. Ah. Speaking of, he recognizes Tony." Ducky waved off the look he was getting, "Or at least, someone he knew once looked a lot like our Anthony."
The door to the room on the other side of the window opened, revealing Ziva. Ace gave her a dark look. "What?"

"I brought someone to see you, is all." She replied calmly, stepping aside.

Luffy barely waited for her to get out of the way before pulling out of Tony's grip, "Ace!"

"Luffy!" In seconds the elder brother was standing and braced, which turned out to be a good thing. The huge happy grin didn't leave his face when his brother slammed into him, gripping the front of his shirt and tearing a few buttons off in the process. "UPH! Hey, I need those buttons you know." The look he shot the two agents wasn't exactly grateful, but it was much less hostile than it had been just moments ago.

"Ace! Ace..." Luffy muttered into his shirt, the words indistinct.

Ace apparently had no problems understanding his brother though, "Huh? What kind of question is...? First off, no. No, they don't. Secondly, eww. Seriously, Luffy. Just, ewww. Stop asking questions like that, will you? Can't take you anywhere."

The shorter of the two looked up, and grinned, "What about vampires?"

"LUFFY!" the taller swiftly raised his handcuffed hands together and whacked Luffy's head. "Stop asking me stuff like that!" He growled out before sighing and dropping his arms around his little brother, "Idiot."

"Well, if you two are done being all crazy, we'll just leave you alone then..." Tony warily eyed both brothers, and Ducky caught Ace's slightly curled lip as the door clicked closed.

The two stood like that for a while before Ace lifted his arms and stepped back, getting a good look at his brother's face, "You're really pale, Lu. You need to rest."

"I'm ok..."The other attempted a grin, but it faltered slightly under the intense stare, "Well...you're pale too!"

"Which is why I'm going to sit here and rest." Ace pointed out as he plopped into one of the chairs and put his feet up on the table. "See? Now sit down, Luffy."

"Nu-uh. Not on that." The teen promptly sat on the floor. "Chair's uncomfortable."

"What?" Tony muttered as he and Ziva came into the room, "He thinks the floor is going to be any better?"

Ducky thought for a second that Ace was going to start yelling at the boy. He was slightly surprised when he nodded, and slapped his lap instead. Luffy didn't need to be told twice, and quickly climbed into the other's lap, shifting around so he rested the back of his head against his brother's broader shoulders. The elder chuckled lightly rubbing the hat down onto his brothers skull before dropping his arms around him in an almost-hug. It was probably the most comfortable, given the handcuffs, however.

"You're shivering." Ace pointed out, "You sure you ok?" Luffy's answer was to snuggle down further and take off his hat, which he hugged to his chest. "Fine. Be that way. Brat. Get some sleep before I beat the crap out of you."

"That is almost sweet," Ziva pointed out as they watched the man put his own head back and close his eyes with a sigh.
Everyone was silent for a bit. Ducky debated suggesting calling child services for Luffy. It was obvious that his 'Uncle' wasn't exactly a fine citizen judging by what little information Abby had gleaned, and really, he was reluctant to send such a damaged person back to a possible criminal where the boy would most likely substitute the man for Ace. He needed a clean break, and years of therapy. He couldn't help but wonder what had twisted the elder brother's love so. Watching the two interact, he worried that it had always been this way between the two. It was a sad thought.

"Well," Gibbs began, draining the last of his 'coffee', "Let's go see the Director. Tell him what we've found so far. You two, come on." He nodded to Ziva and Tony.

Ziva blinked at him owlishly, "Us? Wouldn't it be better if we stayed and watched them?"

"You two need a break from them." Ducky almost smiled at the look his friend gave his subordinates, it was so fatherly, "And I'm sure Vance'll wanna hear your take on Ace at least. Find out what the ride down was like. Besides, they're not going anywhere, the doors locked. We've got cameras and mics in the room, they say anything interesting, we'll know about it."

"Whatever you say, Boss." Tony nodded, more than ready to get away from the two for at least a little while. He was the first one out the door, in fact. Gibbs patiently held the door as Ducky spared one last look at the two sleeping brothers. He truly hoped that Tim and Abby were having a bit more luck with the cellphones then they'd had interviewing them.
Ace smirked ever so slightly when he heard the muffled sound of footsteps walking past the door. It sounded like three, no, wait, four people. He waited a bit longer, straining his ears, listening to see if there was anyone else around. Opening his eyes he looked over at the one way window into the room. There could still be people in there...what to do, what to do... "Luffy..." he whispered into his brother's ear. The teen's eyes snapped open instantly, rolling to the side as he raised an eyebrow, "I'm gonna Eat. You. Up."

Ace quickly tightened his grip around his brother's chest as he blew a raspberry into the soft skin at the nape of his neck. Skin that was worryingly clammy. The result was spectacular, however. Luffy squealed loudly thrashing in his arms. Ace smirked and did it again, narrowly avoiding a black eye as his brother's head snapped back as he yelp-giggled. His legs beat an erratic rhythm against the table. He knew that it looked very, very wrong from experience. In fact, Marco had told him to never do this to his little brother again ever where he could see him. Really, though, is it my fault Luffy's ticklish? Not my fault if people have dirty minds, he mused as he held on for dear life. Greased pigs were easier to keep still then a hysterically giggling Luffy. Still though. If no one came running at THAT little show, I guess we really are alone for now. Well, except for the mics and cameras, I'm sure.

It took a bit longer for Luffy to calm down. As he sat there panting in Ace's still tight grip he shot his brother a glare, "What the hell was that for?"

"What? Can't a guy tease his little brother once and awhile?" Ace smiled back.

"Bastard, that isn't funny! Tickling isn't funny at all!" Luffy growled back, checking his hat for damage.

"Sorry, then. I think we're alone, Lu." the elder brother pointed out, losing his grip. He did feel kind of bad for putting his brother's precious hat at risk. "You sure you're alright?"

Dark hair swept forward, hiding Luffy's eyes from him as the boy carefully fingered the band of red fabric that went around his hat. He got no answer to his question, and started to worry a little.

"Luffy?"

"Ah-HA!" The teen crowed, holding up five thin pieces of metal before returning all but two to the band of his hat.

Ace stared at his brother, then back to the two paperclip-thin pieces in his hand, barely noticing as Luffy roughly adjusted his arms around himself before turning and facing his hands. "...Are those lockpicks?" A nod, "Why do you have them, and more importantly, can you use them?"

"Mmm, well, Usopp thought it'd be a smart place to keep them after Nami gave them to me." Luffy muttered, shifting so he could see the lock a bit better, "And of course I can use them!"

"Do I want to know what happened to make you learn that skill? Or should I just be thankful?"

He swore he could feel the other's grin, "Shishishi. Zoro was sleeping," Stories that started like that never ended well, "and so Usopp and I might have borrowed his handcuffs to play with. But then he woke up, so we had to run."

"Let me guess. You handcuffed yourselves together." His brother nodded, "Lost the key?"
"Yep! We thought we were gonna be stuck like that forever! Then I figured Nami might be able to fix it, because she's good at stuff like that, and you were out of town."

Luffy had managed to spring the lock on one of the cuffs, and he sighed in relief, already feeling better as he flexed his hand. His little brother was already at work on the second lock, "I take it she got you out of the handcuffs?"

"After she stopped laughing. Then she showed me what she did. It was amazing! Zoro found us trying to pick the lock to Baratie's later. He was impressed...right until Sanji kicked him." The second lock snapped open and the teen caught the handcuffs and put them on the table before grinning at his brother, "Why didn't you tell me picking locks was so fun?"

"Didn't think you'd be interested, Lu." Ace smiled fondly at his brother, feeling the warm rush of his power tingle from the tips of his toes to the root of his hair. It felt like he could breathe again after being smothered in a wet rag all day.

Worriedly he gently took the two picks from Luffy's flaccid grip and turned him so he was leaning against his chest. He could feel his brother shudder ever so slightly. Raising his temperature, Ace was actually thankful that the cuffs were on properly, with the keyhole facing the elbow it meant Luffy couldn't complain that he was babying him. These stupid cuffs are better than the crap Teach uses. Lu's never had this quick of a reaction. He raised a knee and had Luffy rest his wrists on it so he had a better angle at the keyholes.

"So...Why'd ya do it?" His brother asked as he watched him spring the first lock.

"Now isn't the time for this Lu. And I didn't. Ok?"

"Ace." The tone was surprisingly serious, "Not the killing part. I mean the other thing. What happened? You don't normally me..."

Ace interrupted, wary of any listening electronics, "Luffy! We'll talk about this later, alright?" his brother pouted. The moment the second cuff fell away the teen crossed his arms over his chest with a huff. Ace sighed, dropping the offending item on the table next to his own. His brother, of course, was right. He didn't usually mess up. It had been a long time since he'd botched up using his powers, and that was trying out Cross-Fire. Thank goodness for empty warehouses. It had been even longer since he'd messed up a simple arson. That was as easy as breathing when you were literally made out of fire. He'd personally checked over that storeroom, too. Just to see how intense he had to make his flames. It had been filled with a surplus of cloths and paper supplies, nothing that should have caused an explosion. I'd really have had to work at it to get those results, in fact. Meaning... "Shit!" he sighed again, resting his chin on Luffy's shoulder, "I didn't mess up."

"Oh. Ok." Luffy nodded, accepting what he said. He hummed for a moment, no longer shivering, "So, what are we going to do about it?"

He rubbed a hand through his black hair. "We are going to do nothing. I will deal with this. You are getting out of here. Don't argue with me on this, little bro, it's not safe for you."

"But Ace...if it's not safe for me, then it's not safe for you, right?"

"They've already got me pegged." Ace frowned, putting Luffy on his feet and standing himself. His brother was looking much better, though he was still a bit pale. He didn't like that at all. It could be awhile before they both fully recovered. "At least, they're close enough. I was...a bit careless. Hey, wipe the smirk off your face, idiot. Unless you've done anything epicly stupid like tell them what you can do..." Luffy shook his head emphatically as he slipped the two picks back into his hat.
Dark eyes met. Luffy was the first to look away, nodding reluctantly. He looked like he wanted to argue still, but apparently he'd recognized the look he was being given. Ace wasn't about to take 'no' for an answer this time. The longer he was here, the longer he was in danger of being discovered. Or worse. Sent back to Teach. If he was right about it being a setup...if he was right, Luffy was in a lot of trouble, and Ace had no clue what to do about it. It scared the shit out of him. He was sure he could take care of himself, and it wasn't like he was really doubting Luffy's abilities...but...It's my job to protect him. Wish I knew how.

"Um, Ace?" Luffy's voice pulled him out of his musing, and he looked over to where his brother was jiggling the door handle, "The door's locked."

He rolled his eyes, "Of course. It can't ever be easy, can it? Let me see." It was definitely locked. From the outside, no less. No keyhole was evident, so picking the lock was out, too. Ace gave it the finger, earning a laugh from Luffy when he used his now flaming digit to burn out the offending lock. "And that is how I feel about being locked in. Right, Luffy?"

"Shihishishi. Right! Now what?" His brother grinned so widely the scar under his eye stretched.

He eased the door open, stepping over the puddle of molten metal smoking on the floor. Ace couldn't stop the answering cocky grin from spreading across his face, though, "Now, we leave. Do exactly as I say, alright?"

Silently the slipped into the hall, shutting the now useless door behind them. He felt a moment of disorientation at the row of identical doors. Shrugging it off he tapped Luffy's shoulder to prevent him from wandering off and strode off towards where he remembered the bullpen being. The first rule about being somewhere you weren't supposed to be, act like you belonged. True, he wished he had time to go and find his hat and their phones, but getting his brother out of there was his priority. The only way he knew out of the building happened to be down the elevators on the other side of the large room. As such, he ignored the two elevators in the hall. From his many trips through the courts, he was reasonably sure they lead to more offices or possibly labs, and not out. It took Ace a moment to notice that Luffy wasn't following him. Turning, he saw his brother was at the elevators, both the buttons pressed.

"What are you doing?!” He hissed. Luffy just grinned at him before falling back in step leading Ace to conclude that the answer was very simple. He'd seen the buttons, so he pressed them. "Stay behind me, and don't touch anything else!" he growled, grabbing his wrist and turning back down the hall.

Just in time to see Special Agent Gibbs and his Merry Band of Annoyances round the corner. Ace was seriously tempted to punch a wall. There were four of them with him, Ziva, Tony, that guy called Ducky, and a new man. All five of them froze for a second and stared at Ace with blank expressions, obviously in shock. The taboo was broken when Luffy popped his head around his shoulder and waved. The youngest agents reached for their guns instantly, while Gibbs looked annoyed.

"Aw FUCK! This is why I told you to stay with me!"

"Hey! This isn't my fault!” Luffy whined back at him, "Oh! Look! There's Ducky! Isn't his bowtie awesome?"

"Luffy! Focus!” he rapped his brother on the top of the head as the rambunctious boy squeezed
past him, causing the boy to pout. He turned his attention back to the agents, glaring at them.

"How'd you get out of the handcuffs?"

He smirked at Gibbs, "They were a bit loose."

The man actually smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes, "And the door?"

He shook his head, looking down at his brother, "Funny thing. It broke."

"Well," The stranger spoke, "You seem to be quite the comedian, Ace Marshall."

"I try. You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Who are you?"

"Leon Vance. Director of NCIS." He held himself like a military man, that was for sure.

"Great! My day just keeps getting better and better." Ace scratched the back of his head, eyeing the man.

"So...he's Tony's boss's boss?" Luffy pipped up, smiling brightly, "Hi Lance!"

"Vance. It's Vance, Luffy."


"I take it you're the younger brother, Luffy Marshall?"

"Yep! Me n' Ace were just leaving now, ok?" He looked over his shoulder at Ace, giving him a big smile, "Right?"

Ace grinned back at his brother before turning a cold look towards the agents, "You heard my little brother. We're leaving. Now."

Gibbs shook his head, "You know why we can't let you do that."

"Do you really want to argue with me on this?" Ace rumbled, lifting a hand and making a fist. "Given what you think you know?"

"Which is exactly the reason we can't let you leave. Your brother, however, is cleared of all charges." Vance cut in.

Relief flooded through him, and he felt dizzy for a second. They had no reason to keep Luffy here. He was safe, he could leave. He'd demand a phone call, get in touch with Shanks maybe and see if the man would be willing to put the boy up...

The man was still talking, "We've already contacted child services..."

Ace's head snapped up, "What? NO! Luffy's old enough to leave them out of it!"

"Be reasonable, Ace." Ducky finally spoke up, worry etched in his face, "Think of what is best for your brother!"

"I am!" his hands tightened on his brother's shoulders, causing Luffy to look at him worriedly. Luffy was too easily manipulated. All Ace could think of was his brother, trapped in a lab somewhere. No way he was letting 'child services' get involved.
"It's not like we can just call a cab for him! He's still a minor, you moron." Tony pointed out, much to his annoyance. In retaliation, he leveled his best glare at the man.

"We thought about contacting your Uncle, but Ducky convinced me that this would be the better course of action for your brother."

Ace dropped an arm in front of Luffy's chest, "Call our Uncle? Heh." The arm circled up till the hand rested on Luffy's thin shoulder, his chin resting in the crook of his elbow. He moved slowly, moving the other arm up so his elbow rested on the same shoulder as he ran a hand through his brother's hair. He felt his brother tense slightly then relax, trusting him completely.

"What are you doing?" Ziva sounded vaguely alarmed, "Let go of your brother right now."

"If you send him back to that man..." he ignored her, standing tall and forcing Luffy to stand on his tip-toes, "You'll regret it. Now get out of my way, or I'll break his neck."

"Let your brother go right now, or we'll shoot."

"You're not moving. I'll tell you what. I'll give you to the count of three." Luffy lightly pounded against his arm, acting like he was really afraid. They'd used this trick once before on Chopper and had scared the little doctor half to death.

"Don't do it, Ace!"

"One. You're the ones doing it." He started the count. He just hoped he was able to distract the agents long enough for Luffy to run.

"I thought you loved your brother, Ace."

"Better death by my hands then life as an experiment. Two." He took a step forward and was gratified to see them step back in response. The safeties clicked off the guns, though.

"A-ace...?" Luffy coughed out, managing to sound confused, if not frightened. Still, the agent's didn't get out of the way. In fact, Gibbs pushed past his two subordinates, obviously intending to stop what was about to happen.

Ace glared at him. He wrenched his brother's neck as fast as he could, crying out his name as he did so. Luffy twitched, his arms fell limply to his sides and was still. "Three," he dropped Luffy, letting his precious little brother fall to the ground like a discarded toy and refused to look down.
Rubber Necking

Ziva's eyes were locked on Ace. She had been just a hair faster drawing her gun then Tony, having spent over four hours trapped in a car with the young man. She didn't trust him, not in the slightest. Particularly after the whole...incident at McDonalds. That had been embarrassing in many ways even if she was strangely impressed. Really, she needed to try that tactic sometime.

The part of her that was still Mossad knew that look in his eyes the moment they'd spotted him. He was determined to do anything to get away from them. Then, she'd seen Luffy. In truth, she did not know what to make of the boy. He was, as Tony put it, "a scrapper." Of course, he had to explain what he'd meant, but Tony was right. He is also not bright, she thought, getting between us and his brother like that. Does he not see the guns? Ace's eyes spoke of violence despite his jovial tone. She knew that things were about to get worse the moment the Director brought up child services.

When Ace's arm dropped across his brother's chest, Ziva remembered what Ducky had said about him being possessive with Luffy. When his other arm ran through the messy hair, she knew what he was going to do, but she was helpless to stop him. Still, she hoped it was an empty threat, that he'd see reason. He acted like he had no choice, that they had given him no choice, and that scared Ziva.

"A-ace...?" Luffy coughed out, struggling in his big brother's grasp. His toes barely reached the ground as his hands scrambled against the arm cutting off his air. The look of confusion in his eyes was heartbreaking.

Gibbs pushed past her, and she gave ground easily, still keeping her sights on Ace. The man startled, apparently surprised by the bold move and for a moment she thought Gibbs was going to reach him in time.

"LUFFY!" His voice broke in pain as he wrenched his brother's head to the side hard and fast. She could hear Ducky's gasp as his hand suddenly gripped her shoulder. She couldn't look away, though. We...we did this, her gaze didn't waver as she watched the teen, he's just a boy...twitch sporadically once, twice, and then still. His arms dropped, ability to grip lost as his eyes became glassy. The look of confusion/shock on his face seared itself into her brain as Ace snarled out "Three."

It was as if any feeling Ace had held for his brother faded with that act. He let go of Luffy, letting him fall like a ragdoll to the floor in a boneless heap. Looking into his cold gray eyes was like staring down the devil as he stepped over him. Ace flexed his hand, his knuckles popping, not even bothering to look down. It was like Luffy didn't even exist to him anymore. He is a sociopath! Ziva noticed her hands were shaking as his gaze swept over her before returning to Gibbs.

"Now see what you made me do?" Ace sounded calm.

"I didn't make you do anything." Gibbs returned, "You always blame others for your mistakes, kid?"

Ace growled, "If you had just gotten out of my way..."

"Ducky. Think you can get to Luffy?" Gibbs cut him off. She couldn't see her bosses face, but his tone promised trouble.
"Ha. And do what?" Dark eyes bore into Gibbs, "He's dead. And you're not touching his body!"

Ace threw himself at the older man, fists flying. He didn't seem to be using his powers, didn't need to. The suddenness of the attack drove Gibbs back, causing him to bump into her. She dropped her gun and left it where it fell, instead leaping upon the youth. His skin was uncomfortably warm to the touch. Before she knew it, she was thrown into a wall, not even sure exactly how it had happened.

Tony was still latched onto one of his arms, "What the hell are you? Superman or something?" he grunted as his feet left the ground for a second.

If other Devil-fruit users were strong as he was, Ziva could see why people would think they were monsters, even without the use of their powers. Ace had forced them back down the hall, opening the distance between them and Luffy's body. For a moment, she considered going to the boy while he was distracted. Looking again at the still and crumpled form, she decided against it; it was too late. Her body almost groaned in protest as she threw herself back into the fray instead.

"W-what's going on?" Palmer's voice sounded behind her.

"Never mind that! Check Luffy!" came Ducky's distraught response somewhere in front of her, blocked by Ace.

Abby must have been with Palmer, she heard the goth woman gasp, "Wh...Oh...What happened?"

"SHIT! Don't you dare touch him!" Ace snarled, flames flickering to life on his shoulders and causing Gibbs to break contact. None of them dared take their eyes off him.

If I had still been holding onto him, I would have been burned badly, Ziva realized as a faint crackling sound could be heard. She felt a moment of panic at thought, it finally hitting her what they were dealing with. Still, her voice gave nothing away as she shifted ever-so-slightly back in front of Ace, "They tried to escape. When we got in the way, he broke Luffy's neck."

"He's your brother!" Abby's voice cracked.

The flaming man winced, looking pained for a split second at her words. "What the hell do you people know, anyway?" He snarled before slamming his fist into Tony's stomach.

Ziva hesitated for just a second, debating going to Abby and Palmer when she heard the shout of "He's still alive!" or attempting to stop the determined suspect from escaping. Tony collapsing against the wall coughing decided it for her. There was no way she was going to let Ace get away with this. She moved in fast, latching onto his arm and twisting it up and back behind him. The man just grinned, and suddenly he was too hot to handle. Before she let go, Ace hooked a leg behind her foot and shoved, sending her careening into Ducky. Her hand smarted, but a quick glance down told her she wasn't burned. How are we supposed to stop him if we can't even touch him? She offered Ducky a hand back up, watching for her next opening as Tony foolishly went for Ace's legs in an attempt to bring him down the hard way. The plan backfired when a foot grazed past his cheek, causing him to fall backwards to avoid the blow.

Gibbs was reloading his gun, reminding Ziva that they did have something left that would affect the man. The problem was if they really wanted to use it, since even Abby had been unsure if the special coral would hold up or break on impact at close quarters. Ducky had told them that any penetration of the skin could be potentially fatal. On the one hand, Ace was still a suspect in an ongoing case, and possibly their only way to find out what really happened. On the other... her gaze slid over to where Luffy lay, stretched out now. Palmer was holding his head steady as Abby bent
his prone form. ...he is a murderer, and obviously dangerous. Ziva rushed him again, trying one more time, if for no other reason than to help Gibbs by distracting him.

"Persistent," he smirked at her as he caught her fist and turned it painfully, "normally I like that."

"Just not right now?" She grunted, bringing up a knee towards his groin, catching his hip instead when he turned slightly. "I suggest you give up, Ace. You are not going to win this fight."

Ace just grinned in a slightly crazed manner, "I'm not trying to win."

"What then?" Ziva barked out as a swift yank pulled her wrist free. She shook it out, "What was the point of all this, then?"

"YE-EEAAK!" Abby's screech stopped them all dead in their tracks for a second.

"AAAACCCEEE! Hide me!" A lithe body swung itself around the man, coming between the two of them where it came to an abrupt stop crouching. The mop of unruly dark hair pecked out, using Ace's stomach as a shield as he checked behind him.

Ziva blinked, not believing what she was seeing, "L-Luffy?" The black hair bobbed once, but he didn't turn and face her. "but how? I saw him... we all saw him! You should be dead."

"Eh? Why? Did something happen?" Luffy turned and looked at them now, confused.

"YOU IDIOT!" Ace rapped him hard on the top of the skull, obviously pissed off, "You were supposed to run, Luffy! How can you screw that up?"

Luffy pouted, holding his head, "She was gonna kiss me! Nuh-uh, I wasn't holding still for that! I'm not Sanji!"

"I was doing mouth to mouth! He wasn't breathing, Gibbs!"

"I was holding my breath, duh!" the teen rolled his eyes, grinning widely, "You should have seen the looks on your faces! We got you good!"

Ace actually looked pained as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Hysterical laughter bubbled up inside, but she quickly squelched the urge. Tony, however, had no such qualms. He earned himself a dark glare and a Gibbs' slap. The teen was still laughing, though. He seemed to find the whole situation amusing, guns and all. The Director stepped forward, drawing Luffy's attention. He stopped the moment Ace tensed, resting a hand on his brother's shoulder as the teen silently watched the man.

"So that's your ability? You can't die?" He asked, looking the boy over.

Luffy shrugged, "No, I'm just really flexible. I'm pretty sure I can die. I haven't tried it though. Doesn't sound very fun."

"No, it doesn't." Vance nodded before looking at Ace, "I suppose we could come to a compromise?"

"What kind of a compromise?" he sighed, obviously wary.

"You stay here, help us get to the bottom of this, and..."

"You'll let Luffy leave. Right now, no child services, no calls to our Uncle."
Gibbs answered for the Director, "No can do." He held up a hand to forestall the threats before they began, "Think about it, kid. Do you really want him out there alone? On the streets of Washington? Do you realize how much trouble he could get into?"

"Ohhoboy, I bet you a hundred dollars he gets arrested in an hour." Tony laughed, "I've heard the stories, you're brother is trouble, with a capital T."

"You're not calling anyone. You *can't* call Teach." There was a look of panic in his eyes now, "Please. *Please* don't..."

"I'm not going anywhere." Luffy cut his brother off, glaring at the Director, "You can't make me. I'll...I'll punch you Lion-pants!"

Ducky raised a few fingers, "I do think perhaps, given Luffy's little...trick..." he frowned when the teen grinned widely at him, "that I may have been a bit premature suggesting child services. I don't think they are equipped to handle someone of his...ah...unique talents."

"Hear that, Ace? I'm talented." Luffy grinned widely, "Does that mean I can stay? Can I? Huh?"

"If Mrs. Sciuto doesn't mind the company in the lab for a bit...at least until we work something out." Director Vance raised an eyebrow at Ace, waiting to see if he'd agree to the terms for now.

"He stays here?" Vance nodded, "You won't try to sneak him out to some lab while my back is turned?"

"Well, technically I work in a lab..." Abby quickly clarified, "It's a forensic lab, though."

He ran a hand through his hair, looking at his brother who was watching him expectantly. Ziva knew in that moment that if Ace were to ask it of him, Luffy would gladly fight. That level of devotion was scary to see in any boy. Particularly one who'd just been, for all intents and purposes, killed. It reminded her of the extremist groups back home, and that worried her. She didn't know if she was relieved or not when Ace nodded, agreeing to cooperate for now.

"Fine. No more handcuffs, though." The man's expression brooked no argument on that part.

Gibbs frowned when the Director nodded, not agreeing with the decision fully, but said nothing. He gestured to Ziva instead, "Take him to the conference room. Keep an eye on him."

"And where will you be?" Ziva couldn't help but ask as she firmly gripped the still-slightly-warm arm. Gibbs was already halfway down the hall, and she had a feeling she knew where he was going.

"To see how the *hell* they got out of that room, of course." He replied, the Director following him.
One year ago

"Thank you, sir." The teen smiled brightly, brushing back her dark chestnut hair as the cabby pulled to the side of the street and let her in.

"No prob, no prob. You visiting, ya? Family?"

Vivi replied easily, "I'm with my father on a business trip. I thought I'd take in the sights while he was in a meeting."

"Ah, Good! Good City! Lots of sites! Where to first?: She recognized the accent now as the driver pulled into traffic.

"If you could, I'd like to go down to Time Square?" She replied in Turkish, earning a surprised look.

"You're Turkish?"

"No, Israeli. I've been to Turkey, though. It is a lovely country." Her mocha eyes warmed at the memories.

He pulled back over to the side, "Yes, yes it is. Well, here we are, Miss. Enjoy your trip, but please. Be careful."

"I will be. Thank you." The girl looked at the fare and added another ten to the amount before handing it over before climbing out of the car, "Have a great day, sir."

He pulled away with a wave, and then she was alone. A grin broke out across her face, nothing like the polite smiles before that were so mature for her age. This one was much more appropriate for a teenaged girl on an adventure.

New York City was amazing, just like Vivi had heard. Her cousin who lived and worked in the United States of America had been the one to convince her father to let her come with him on his trip. Her father Cobra was a well respected diplomat who had been in talks with the mayor of New York recently on behalf of the Israeli Embassy. He'd been making great strides, though he'd made enemies as well. So Vivi could understand why he was hesitant to let her explore the city she'd heard so much about.

Really, she could.

She just hoped he understood why she just had to see it for herself, this beautiful city. Something she couldn't do with Igaram curtailing her every move. So, she'd done what every teenager did in that situation. She'd cut out while her father was at a meeting. Igaram thought she was back at the hotel, an upset stomach ruining her plans. The somewhat odd man had been willing to nurse her, but she had oh so kindly insisted he enjoy a day off and see the city for himself. Leaving her free to slip out, of course.

Time Square was loud, bright and full of energy, even this early in the day, and Vivi took her time
enjoying the atmosphere. She followed the general flow of the crowd and soon found herself winding her way down one street full of shops with the most adorable clothing. No, no, I shouldn't. Papa will notice if I buy something, I'm sure. Maybe tomorrow I shall get to go shopping, though. From there, she wandered with no real destination in mind. They'd been in the city a few days already and her father had already taken her to see the Statue of Liberty. After his meeting tomorrow morning, the plan was for them to go sightseeing together and finish the day at a fancy restaurant something she was really looking forward to. Vivi didn't want to spoil it by visiting the places first without him. Her thoughts drifted for a while as she watched an elderly woman feed the pigeons, a whole crowd of birds surrounding her.

Hunger called her to a food cart where she picked up two kebabs and a water. Looking around, the area was a lot different than the neighborhoods by time square. From where Vivi stood, she could see graffiti coloring the walls of a nearby building. A truck drove past covered as well. She hid a smile.

"New York is such a colorful place," she said to herself as she continued to walk.

There were men were coming in her direction. Idly, shifted slightly so as not to be too close to them on the sidewalk, "Excuse me."

As she passed, she once again was amazed at the freedom of fashion in America, where people could go around dressed so outrageously. On of the men reminded her a lot of that peanut mascot from the canister in their hotel room...with an eggy twist. The other was just as odd with a variable mane of hair and fangs. Vivi thought it was called body modification... but she wasn't sure. Either way, it was something she was sure she'd never see back home, and she resisted the urge to turn and stare. It would be rude, after all. Which is why she didn't realize until half a block later that they following her.

She looked for a cab to hail, but of course there were none around. A glance over the shoulder showed the ugly expressions on their faces, reminding her that she was alone, and while she wasn't exactly helpless, she was at a disadvantage. Vivi didn't know what they wanted, or if they were armed. That was her biggest fear, that they had guns. Knives she could deal with, Pell had seen to that. She waited until she'd rounded another corner and was momentarily out of their line of sight before taking off at a dead run. It didn't matter where she was going, only that she lost them. Unfortunately the man with the monocle was faster. She'd barely made it half a block before a hand closed on her wrist, jerking her to a painful stop.

"OW! Let go!" She yelped, tugging her arm free. Vivi backed up against the wall, trying to remember what her cousins and her bodyguard had taught her about defending herself even as she stood tall. "Why are you bothering me? I have done nothing to you."

"Oh yeah? You're here, ain't ya-gah?" one of the two men sneered down at her his fangs giving him a weird lisp.

His partner made a rude gesture,"Oui. We wouldn't want any sand-rats to settle here!"

"This...this bigotry! How can there be people so...so... to her shame, tears were threatening to fall. These men were some of the oddest people she'd come across, and yet they were so mean. This was not a side of the city she had wanted to see, and she wished more than anything Igaram was here. Particularly when the one man, the one with the shades, took a threatening step forward.

"We'll teach you to stay in your own country-gah." He cracked his knuckles.
"There you are!" Black messy hair, a beat up hat resting on the back as a hand grabbed hers and started to lead her away from the wall "You didn't have to come looking for me you know!"

"Hey, you! Excuse-moi, we were busy here!" the monocled man snarled.

The one holding her hand glanced at her over the shoulder, a pout on his face. Vivi noticed a scar under on eye, "Eh? Oh, sorry. Hurry up, or we're gonna be late, k?"

"You're that Luffy brat, aren't gah?." the boy with the hat nodded, "You know this chick?"

Vivi attempted to hide her nervousness. She'd never seen this boy before in her life, though she appreciated what he was trying to do.

"Yeah! Of course! This is Bluebell. She's a friend." Luffy chirped happily.

The others apparently didn't believe him, "Bluebell? You expect me to buy that shit? Why you covering for a Sand-rat, gah?"

"Sand rat?" His head cocked to the side, "OH! That would be a rat made of sand, right? Bluebell isn't made of sand...do you have a naked tail?" he looked very serious about the question when he looked at her.

"N-no...?"

"Are you done with your friends, Bluebell? Cause, we're gonna be late for that thing if we don't go now."

"What 'thing', s'il vous plaît," the other man asked, still blocking the boy's way.

The boy pouted and pulled out his phone. He gave her an apologetic look before returning his attention to the screen as he looked through his contact list, "Let's see...ah, here he is..."

"We're still waiting for an answer."

"I know, I just gotta call Zoro and let him know we're gonna be...," the phone was at his ear, "Zoro! Shishishi! Didya get lost?..." they boy's grin grew wider, "yeah, I know. Bluebell wasn't where I told her to meet me! We're gonna be late because...what's that beeping?...you can't hear it?...ah, I forgot to charge my phone, shihishi. Well. We're on our way... huh? Ok..." He hit the speaker on his phone.

"...so you guys know. Shut up, speakers on. Listen up, Luffy, Bluebell, you guys better hurry it up. Ace is out looking for you, 'cuz you're LATE. And charge your phone, you moron!" the line went dead.

"..it died. We gotta go, bye!" Luffy grabbed her wrist again and dragged her between the two men, pushing past them. She noticed that both of them looked vaguely nervous now and wondered why that was.

Vivi was forced to jog after the other who still held onto her wrist for two whole blocks. Finally, when she was about to stumble, the boy slowed down and let go of her. He turned to face her, the biggest grin on his face as he watched her catch her breath. His brown eyes danced in merriment, and a funny chuckle escaped him. It soon became a full blown laugh, and Vivi found herself laughing right along with him as it dawned on her what had just happened.

"That was...just like in the movies..!" She panted between laughter. "Amazing!"
His grin just got wider, if that was possible, "I know! Luffy."

Vivi blinked at the hand thrust in front of her, it taking a moment to process that he was introducing himself. She'd never had someone do so in such an informal, actually rude manner, but it suited him. She took the hand, "Vivi."

"Nice to meet ya, Vivi!" He put his hat on. "So, you lost? Zoro gets lost all the time."

"No! No...I'm...visiting the city with my family. I thought I'd do some exploring on my own, and, well..." She looked around and realized that she really didn't have a clue where she was at the moment. The area around them did look a little seedy, but actually better than it had when she'd been cornered.

"You're lost." Luffy laughed, which she huffed in reply. "Why not call them?"

Vivi blushed. She'd left her phone back at the hotel. It was a new model, and it had a gps tracker built in. A tracker that her father frequently used to check up on her with, even though she'd asked him not to. "I, uh, forgot it."

"Hmmmm. Too bad. I'd offer you mine, but, it died." He held it up and wagged it around before pocketing it again.

"Well, I can just hail a cab, then. Thanks again for the help." Vivi smiled brightly. Hailing a cab was really her first choice anyway, even if she did kind of want to cry now that the shock was wearing off.

Luffy gave her a surprisingly serious look before shaking his head. "No taxies around here. Nearest place to catch one is the docks or over by Sanji's. I guess you could come to my place to use the phone, but I'm already late..."

"No no, I couldn't..." She felt a twinge of panic. Luffy seemed harmless enough, but her cousin had told her many dangerous people looked that way to lure victims to them. The boy apparently didn't notice her apprehension, however as he once again grabbed her hand. "Where are you taking me?!"

"To the party, of course!"

She gaped, "P-party?"

"Yeah! I've kinda planned this party, you should stay! You'll love it! There'll be lots of food, Sanji's a great cook. Everyone's gonna be there. Maybe."

"What's it a party for?" She trotted after him, not really being given much of a choice. She had to smile when he acted like she should know who everyone was.

"Um...I forgot. Shishishi." He waved his other hand, "Who cares? It's a party! Sanji's pops, well, he's not really his pops, but kinda...he's fixing up the place for some big-wig tomorrow, so we've got the whole place to ourselves! Isn't that awesome?"

"Luffy, I don't understand, what place?" The neighborhood around them was much nicer as the two slowed to a walk.

"He'll let you use the phone to call your family, too. But you should stay for the party!" He pointed to the doors of a fancy restaurant, a sign in the window stating 'private party'. Vivi's eyes traveled up, taking in the fancy script of Baratie, the very same restaurant her father had made reservations at for the next day.
She gaped at Luffy, "You, you've got to be joking."

"No, you really should stay! We're friends, right?" Luffy looked at her confused as he pushed open the door.

She was tempted to drag the foolish boy out when the rather large group inside looked up. Everyone seemed to be just waiting around, and a good number of them seemed to be dangerous people. A man with vibrant green hair looked away from an argument with a blond fellow to see who'd opened the door, a sour look on his face. Vivi quickly put a hand on Luffy's arm to drag him out, diplomatic apologies already on her tongue.

"Hey!" Luffy shouted, grinning.

"You're late." The green haired man grumbled, "Ace'll be by in a few. He was looking all over for you."

"Gesh, you idiot, what the hell happened? You forget your own party?" A girl with red-orange hair gripped, a smile on her face.

"I got hungry." He shrugged, leading Vivi into the room. The blond man pulled out a chair for her and had poured her a drink before she could say no, "Then I saw Bluebell being bullied, so I stopped it."

One man who was sitting backwards on his chair chuckled. He was also blond, but only had a tuft of hair on the crown of his head, and the most laid back expression Vivi had ever seen. She was instantly wary of him, and to her shame, he could apparently tell, for he winked at her before smiling at Luffy. "Rescuing damsels, now, Luffy?" He turned his smile to her, "I take it you're 'Bluebell'?"

Vivi nodded, causing both the sleepy looking man and the man sitting next to him with a pompadour hairstyle to laugh. The other man slapped his friend and said, "Luffy strikes again. Told you it was gonna be a person, Zoro. Pay up."

"Ch. Luffy, where the hell did you get Bluebell from? And you? What the fuck is your name, anyway?" The green haired man snapped at the two of them while he crumpled a twenty and tossed it at the two laughing men.

"HEY! Moss-head, don't talk to a lady like that!" The other blond kicked his chair.

"Shut up, shitty-cook! You thought it was a cat." He snapped back.

"Now, now..." a teen with a very long nose interrupted, pointing to her, "you're scaring blu...eh...sorry. I don't know your name."

"It's Bluebell!"

"Shut up, Luffy!" Everyone chorused, and Vivi laughed. The tension she had been aware of melted the moment she did.

These people weren't scary at all, she realized. They were just different, very different then she was used to. "I'm Vivi. Vivi Nafriti. If it wouldn't be too much trouble...I'd like to join your party, and if I could, use your phone?"

"No problem, Princess." The one blond replied, walking over to the counter and picking up a cordless phone.
"Ignore Sanji. He calls all women 'Princess' or 'Goddess'. He's basically a nice guy, though." The red haired girl smiled, "I'm Nami, by the way. The scowling guy with green hair is Zoro, the dude with the nose"

"Hey!"

"is Usopp, and those two are Marco and Thatch...sorry, I'm still not sure which one is which."

"Marco's the pineapple and Thatch is the banana!" Luffy grinned. Everyone stared at him for a moment before Usopp cracked up laughing.

"That's...just so you...Oh God..." He stifled it under the harsh glares he was getting, "eh-hum, so, Luffy...why 'Bluebell'?"

"Because I think..."

"Oy, Luffy! You little shit, I spent an hour looking for you you know!" A voice interrupted from the doorway.

"Ace! Don't you think her hair would be awesome if it was dyed?"

The guy came forward. He had black hair and dark eyes, with lots of freckles across his face. The look he gave Vivi as she held the phone was definitely one she recognized. It felt like he was judging her soul, but unlike the looks she'd received from politicians, she didn't sense any expectations from him. In a way, it was even more frightening than Marco's sleepy gaze. Then Ace grinned sardonically at her and the moment passed. I've been judged, "Yeah, a bluebell color, right?"

"That's got to be a brother kind of thing..." muttered Usopp.

"Bullshit, I've got siblings. That right there? That's an Ace and Luffy kind of thing. Scary shit, right there." Thatch returned.

Ace ignored them as he sat next to Luffy and rested his arms on his brother's head to get a better look at her, "So you're 'Bluebell' huh?"

"Yes. My name is..."

"Vivi Nafratiti, daughter of Cobra, diplomat extraordinaire here on business for the week. Right?" She nodded, impressed and a little frightened at the same time. Ace smirked, "Saw you on the Israeli news I think it was day before yesterday. Cute dress you had on, by the way. So, who'd you save her from, Lu?"

"Ace, you know everything!" Luffy grinned into the table, ignoring the weight of his brother's arms as Sanji put food in front of him, "It was those weird guys from Big Mam's crew."

Zoro shook his head, "They're getting out of hand. Last week the broke into a mosque, and I've heard rumors of them attacking anyone with a middle-Eastern accent."

"No kidding! A few deli's have actually shut down because of them. Shali's family moved; they threatened to kill him." Usopp put in.

"Well, Vivi. Anyone outside this room asks, you're Bluebell. You've been Luffy's penpal for the last couple of years and when he found out you were coming to New York, he threw you a party. Got it?" Ace asked her, getting a nervous nod, "Cool. Listen, it's just for around here and in the, uh,
bad parts of town. You paying attention Luffy?"

"She's not my penpal, though..."

"Idiot..." Nami thrust a piece of paper under Vivi's face and handed her a pen, "Write something. Anything."

"Ok." She thought she understood what the other meant to do, *Thank you again for saving me - Bluebell "There. Here you go, Luffy."

The boy read the note, then grinned, taking the pen he scribbled something on the back before handing it over. Looking at it, it read, *You're welcome! Let's be friends! - Luffy*

"Now that that's all out of the way, let's party!" Usopp cheered, raising his cup, "To old friends, new friends, and friends you didn't even know you had, *kampai!*"

Vivi took a drink with everyone else before remembering she still hadn't called Igaram like she'd wanted to. Excusing herself from the table she walked over to a quieter place and made the call, leaving a message on his phone asking if he'd pick her up. She'd barely put the phone down before Nami had snuck up behind her and swung her around into a spinning dance while the guys clapped along. Afterwards while she sampled some delicious food prepared by Sanji, who was apparently a sous-chef, Usopp told tall tales of adventure on the high seas. Marco laughed and then started spinning a tale about being a soldier during a war, only for the whole thing to dissolve into an argument over Halo's *Red vs Blue* instigated by Luffy and Thatch.

She knew she should be scandalized, after all they ate with their hands more often than not and spoke with food in their mouths. The comments and language used were also much harsher than anything she was used to hearing, save for the occasional movie. The thing was, Vivi was having a blast. She'd always admired her cousins for their freer lifestyle while she'd diligently trained to be the ideal diplomats daughter. She realized right away that these were the 'uncouth masses' her father referred to with pity, but she saw nothing to pity them for. In fact, she wondered if her father couldn't learn a thing or two about what good his talks were really doing from her new friends.

It was in the middle of Luffy trying to teach her a drinking song, *they were only drinking Fanta!*, that Igaram rolled in like a storm cloud. The man who'd been part bodyguard and part confidant took one look at her with Luffy's arm casually draped across her shoulders and his expression turned black. Luffy, of course, didn't notice.

"I'll have one whiskey, one porter, one rye, And bring me some cider I'll give that a try, Bring me two rums, one buttered one cold, And bring me a scotch at least seven years old...Hey, Vivi, you stopped singing! We just got to the best part, too. Who's that?" He pointed his bottle at the now furious man.

"Unhand the lady, you, you *lowlife*." Igaram hissed.

Everyone went silent. Sanji picked up her plate with a nod, "Looks like your ride is here. I'd ask if he wants to stay, but I don't think he does. Want a pirate-bag?"

She shook her head before turning to her guardian, "Igaram, it's not what it looks like."

"Vivi get in the car. *Now*. We will discuss this later." He continued to glare at the party goers who just watched him with what seemed to be amusement for some strange reason.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I had a wonderful time." Vivi politely curtsied before exiting the building and entering the car. She knew she was in for a long lecture.
Igaram didn't let her down, "Out with a bunch of hoodlums! I thought you were sick, Vivi. Honestly, I'm so disappointed in you. And that boy! He was being way too forward with you, I should tell your father. How dare he put his arm around you like that! Though I shouldn't be surprised. What is this country coming to, where they let their *minors* get drunk and molest people like that?"

"He wasn't drunk," she began, only to be interrupted.

"I beg to differ. He was singing a drinking song!"

"Igaram, he was drinking Fanta, first off. Secondly, you don't know Luffy. He doesn't like alcohol."

"Hrmp. I'm sure you two got really *cozy* then." He admonished, "Vivi, honestly, the scandal!"

"Nothing happened, Igaram. If you must know, Luffy saved me from some thugs while I was out exploring, and yes I know I wasn't supposed to be out on my own. My new friends already read me the riot act on that one."

The silvery blond glanced in the rear view mirror at her, a look of appraisal in his eyes as he took that in, "Good, then I don't have to."

"I was cornered by two antisemitic, and Luffy just dragged me out of the situation. You should have seen him, Igaram! It was just like in all those movies you and I watch, where the man pretends to know the woman? He didn't even throw a punch, just lead me away. I think though that Papa needs to know about some of the things I heard."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Israeli shop owners being run out of town in the lower income areas. Usopp said it was anyone who looked even remotely 'middle eastern' who were being persecuted. The others said it was worse towards the docks."

Igaram was silent for a moment, "Let me deal with that, Vivi. You will keep your mouth shut about this little escapade, young lady. Your father would have my head if he found out."

Vivi spent the next day more than a little afraid that her father would bring up her little adventure while the two of them explored the city together. Their bodyguards trailed behind at a discreet distance as the two admired the displays on fifth avenue, and she pointed out the fancy little shops she'd seen the day before. When Cobra finally led his daughter to the well lit doors of the *Baratie* Vivi shot Igaram a grateful look over her shoulder. The man had apparently kept quiet, sparing her the inevitable fatherly lecture.

She smiled to see Sanji as their waiter, and rolled her eyes slightly as the blond winked at her when he pulled out her chair, "Welcome back, 'Bluebell'." He continued louder, "My name is Sanji, I'll be your waiter for this evening. Please, if there is anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask. Tonight our special is a braised lamb shanks en croûte served with a selection of fresh vegetables steamed to perfection."

"That sounds delectable," Her father interrupted, "Tell me, what have you in the way of appetizers and soups?"

"Sir, this is the *Baratie*. Just ask for it, and we will provide it. Though if I may recommend our onion soup for your consideration. It's very good." Sanji passed over five sleek looking menus.
Opening the portfolio, she wasn't surprised to see many of the items in the appetizers had been served yesterday. What did surprise her was the prices on the menu, everything from ten dollars to over the entrees. This was truly a place that catered to everyone, just as her father had said. As Sanji took his leave, Vivi politely suggested a few of the more interesting things she had sampled that her father would enjoy. The moment they were ready, Sanji was there taking the order before whisking away, the polite unobtrusive waiter. Nothing like how he had been the day before. She hid a giggle.

"Vivi my dear, why are you smiling?" Her father raised a cultured eyebrow at her.

"That family in the corner, it's sweet," She covered, pointing to a pair of grandparents with their grandson. Both of the grandparents were anything but sweet-looking, however. The woman was dressed like someone at least fifty years younger, and the man resembled a goat with a top-hat to her. Not to mention they were arguing over the boy's head.

Cobra looked over at the family then back at her, casually picking up his wine glass, a smile on his lips that said he didn't believe her at all, "Sure it is, sweetheart."

Luckily she was saved from answering when Sanji brought out their soups. As suggested, they had all gone with the French onion. She had not tried it the day before, but Nami had mentioned that it was one of the most popular things on the menu with all the customers. It was really amazing soup, and she could easily see why it was so popular.

Once again Sanji was there at just the right moment ready to take their bowls, but not obtrusive. Just as he was reaching for Pell's a shrill siren cut through the soft background music. Various patrons looked up and out to the windows, watching in silence as two fire trucks went racing down the road followed shortly by cop cars.

Sanji's hand rested on her's briefly, "Relax, it nothing to worry about. Enjoy your meal."

"Thank you," She nodded, looking at her appetizer sampler. She missed the look her father gave her as a result.

They were barely halfway into the appetizers when her attention was caught once again. This time by a tall waiter hastily walking over to the family she'd been watching earlier. She couldn't make out what he said, but he seemed agitated. It was only when he turned to go, leading the young child with him that she recognized the waiter as Ace with a start. His expression was strained, and she wondered what was going on as she worriedly watched the two of them leave.

"Miss Vivi, you were right, these crab stuffed mushrooms are simply amazing!" Igaram's voice broke through her thoughts. The look he gave her clearly said he'd look into it later for her.

"Yes, they are, aren't they? Thank you. She looked at her father, "How are the scallops wrapped in beef? I haven't had a chance to try that one yet."

"Fantastic. Simply fantastic. Really you must tell me..." He paused as two police officers entered the building. They were stopped by the door by the a formidable figure in a chefs hat. He had a mustache that was braided and tied off with bows, something that stuck her as funny considering what an intimidating figure he cut otherwise. Her father explained who it was, "That's Zeff. Good man, if a bit odd."

"I see. I wonder what they want?"

Chaka's attention seemed to be on his food, but she knew it wasn't, "They seem to be looking for
someone." He paused, looking up, "They've found whoever it is."

"Zeff's not happy. They're going to make a scene if this keeps up. Looks like it's that kid." Pell nodded to a young looking teen with dark hair who was exiting the bathroom with the little boy who'd disappeared before.

Vivi did a doubletake, "L-Luffy?" she gasped.

The boy looked like he had a bad cold. he was coughing so hard. She noticed that his hands were also bandaged, and one arm had a warp that vanished under his long sleeve. The teen grinned at her when he spotted her, the effect lost as he almost doubled over coughing in the middle of it. The boy walking beside him practically dragged him over to the table and sat him down. She noticed that at some point another place had been laid, and it didn't look fresh, either. Vivi was confused by this, even when the police approached the table.

"Luffy Marshall?" One officer asked. The teen just nodded, drinking some water to quell his cough. "May I ask your whereabouts earlier this evening?"

"What is the meaning of this? Isn't it obvious he's been here with us?" the older man puffed, "Honestly."

"Yeah, and I call you a quack! Gesh. Some detectives, huh, Tony?" The woman's tone was scathing, "Luffy happens to be our friend, and we were treating him to a nice meal for a change. I'm a doctor, and I don't like the sound of that cough. Thought some rich food would do the trick."

"And the bandages?" The officer rested a hand on his belt, attempting to be intimidating, though it was apparent that public opinion was not on his side for some reason.

"Luffy was my patient today!" The little boy piped up, "I'm gonna be a doctor!"

Vivi smiled at that, the boy was absolutely adorable when he said that. Not that she doubted for a moment that he would make a great doctor some day. She barely noticed when Sanji placed her Entree in front of her, she was so entranced by the drama a table away. She did notice Ace carrying over the main course the that very same table, however.

"What are you doing here, Ace Marshall?" The officer seemed surprised to see him.

"Working. Excuse me, you're in my way, actually."

The old woman rolled her eyes, brushing back her silver hair, "Before you even go on about what a big coincidence this is, if course we knew he was working, you idiot! He's Luffy's precious big brother, after all. Might as well feed the boy up right under his nose so he knows I'm doing it right. Best pace in this city to boot. Now, if that'll be all, my pasta is getting cold."

"I'd like for the two of you to come down to the station with us later..." The officer began.

"Oh for the love of..." Her father muttered, before continuing in a louder voice, "Officer, I'd be quite put out if you disturbed my evening by taking those two young men in for questioning. You see, the boy happens to be my daughter's penpal and I was under the impression that the group of us were going to be catching an American movie after his big brother got off of work today. It was a shame that he couldn't go shopping with us earlier because of his cold, but I must admit, he does sound quite a bit better already. Isn't that right, Vivi?"

She stared at her father in shock for a second before smiling, "Yes, he does sound much better, father. How did you find out about the movie, though? That was supposed to be a surprise."
"Oh, I have my sources." He smiled benignly at her.

The officer hesitated for another moment before returning to his partner's side. They both gave Luffy and Ace a hard look, only to have the older brother ignore it and the younger grin back at them. The moment the officers left, there was an awful lot of hushed whispering going on, and wait staff were bustling from table to table, most likely answering questions.

"What just happened, Papa?"

Cobra chuckled heartily, "That, Vivi, was a very well played alibi. Chaka, remember Paris? Oh, those were the nights!"

"You were quite the cad back then, sir." Chaka grinned back. Vivi decided she didn't want to know.

"You know what, I'm not even going to ask." Ace seconded her thought from his seat at the table. All four of them stared at him in mild shock as he munched on some appetizers. "What? Sanji made me a plate when I got here."

"Ace, I presume?" Her father's tone meant it wasn't a question, more of a challenge.

He waved off the challenge, "Me'n'Lu...I mean Luffy and I, sorry, rough night...want to thank you. You know, for sticking your neck out like that. It...doesn't happen alot around here, you know?"

"What about your friends over there? Or Zeff?" He returned.

"Different." Ace shrugged, "They know us, you don't. No reason for you to cover, even if we didn't do noth...anything wrong."

"Fair enough. Well then. Might I ask what exactly happened to, how do you American's say it, lite a fire under their asses?"

Ace gave out a bark of a laugh, causing Luffy's head to swivel around. As if he could feel his brother's eyes on him he waved a hand and the younger went back to eating with a shrug. He continued to chuckle for a moment however until Igaram finally asked him what was so funny.

"Sorry. It was a fire. Our building kinda burned down tonight. Burned pretty fast, too. Luffy and I were home, luckily, so we were able to get everyone else out before the place totally went up in smoke. Was a close call though, towards the end there. Of course, cops showed up right as we got old man Bennie out and overheard the old coot talking, so now they think I started the fire."

Vivi put her hands down from in front of her mouth, where they'd been hovering, "That's horrible! You should have told them you are innocent! You are a hero!"

"I'm no hero, and just because I didn't do this, doesn't mean I haven't done other things, you know? So I can see where they're coming from. It was better to just leave."

"This fire..." Pell began, "It wouldn't have anything to do with your little brother rescuing a young middle eastern girl from some thugs yesterday, would it?"

Ace froze, true fear racing across his face before melting into a mask of cockiness, "Nah. I doubt it." But Pell had his answer.

More importantly, Vivi had seen the truth, "Oh, Ace, I'm so sorry!"

"For what? Not getting the crap beat out of you, or worse? Even if Luffy had known what would
have happened, he'd have become your friend anyway. That's the kind of guy my brother is, you know? Except now he's grumbling about how he should have beat them up... So seriously, don't worry about it. Next time you know better than to go exploring areas like that alone. Now, what movie do you want to go see? You're treating." He grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Two additional notes. One, in my mind, the Baratie is definitely a high class place. But that's not to say that they don't have a wide menu available I think of it like a fancy restaurant with an attached bar, where you can order food from either menu if you feel like it. Does that make sense? Remember Baratie was originally started in One Piece because Zeff and Sanji's near starvation. So, I doubt he'd turn anyone away. Second little fun note. The song Luffy is trying to get Vivi to sing? It's a real song. It's called "One for the road" by the Jolly Rogers. (Yes, note the irony there.) It's a fun song, and I'll randomly start singing it. Basically just lists booze. Great way to get odd looks from people.
"I'm fine," the teen whined as Ducky gently ran a practiced hand along the side of his neck, feeling for any lumps that would signal a slipped vertebrae. "Ace won't ever hurt me."

"Yes, well, you'll forgive me if I beg to differ." The doctor gently slapped the antsy hands away as the child huffed, "I did see him give your neck a bit of rough treatment."

Brown eyes blinked up at him, doe-eyed and confused, "That? Ace'n'me've done that before. Everyone always screams lots, and I donno why. It doesn't hurt."

"I think because it looks really scary," Palmer explained to the boy, "I really thought you were dead when I saw you laying there."

"Shishishihsi! Really? Cool!" Luffy pulled away, looking at him with bright eyes and Ducky let him. He hadn't felt anything abnormal at all. The skin didn't even look bruised.

"No, not cool! Where would you even get the idea that that was cool?" Abby snapped, smacking him on the back of the head and sending the hat fluttering.

Luffy quickly caught the wayward hat rubbing where she had hit, the smile never leaving his face, "Horror movies. You know, like Jason and Freddy flicks? MMMM, except I guess it's more of a Michael Myers movie. Snapping someone's neck..."

"Horror movies?"

"Yeah! Ace loves them! I like the monster ones more, but he's a fan of the...um...you know, ones where it's a dude in a mask. Or the guy next door."

"I see." Ducky hid his uneasy feeling, instead smiling brightly at the boy, "Well, you seem to be fine."

"Told you!"

"So why don't you go to Abby's lab? I'm sure she can find something there to entertain you." He couldn't help the small chuckle as the boy practically dragged Abby behind him, though he had no clue where he was going. "Palmer?"

"Yes, Doctor Mallard?"

"Those strange bruises you discovered on Moria Gekkō, have you sent the images to Abby?"

Palmer adjusted his glasses, "Yes, Doctor, I have. Was there anything else you needed me to do?"

"No, Palmer. That will be all. Why don't you head on home for the night? It's getting a tad late, and I'm afraid we are going to be here for some time longer. No sense in us all staying."

"If you're sure?" Ducky nodded, and his assistant sighed heavily. He felt bad, thinking about how he'd left the young man in charge of the morgue while he'd been away, even though he knew Palmer was more than capable. Still, he had been quite impressed when he'd returned to find the lad had discovered what appeared to be hand-prints on Moria's ankles. "Well, if you need me for anything, call. I'm just a short drive away."

"Have a good evening, Mr. Palmer." He nodded to his protégé as the young man headed down the
hall before walking towards where he knew the Director and Gibbs would be waiting for him.

As he suspected, both men were standing in front of the monitor in the observation room. Gibbs raised a brow at him, "How's the boy?"

"Perfectly fine, as far as I can tell. Not even shaken up, if you can believe it." The old doctor shrugged, "To him, it was just normal behavior."

"Uh-huh. Find out what his ability is?" Gibbs' attention was back to the screen as he fiddled with it.

"Not in so much. I'm hoping Miss Sciuto has more luck. Ah, now here we go." Ducky wasn't surprised when the video showed Ace's eyes open after what could only be a few moments after they left. Still, the man had not moved for quite a bit, looking at the window with a contemplative air. He caught a half grin, the audio kicked in.

"Luffy..." The word was barely a whisper, but the sleeping boy's eyes were open instantly, eyebrow raised as he rolled his eyes without moving his head. Something in the tone had Vance frowning at the screen before the next words were even uttered, and the doctor thought he recognized it as well but he couldn't place it. "I'm gonna Eat. You. Up." Those words were not nearly half as terrifying as when combined with the ungodly squeal the boy let out as his whole body convulsed forward, as far away from his brother as he could get even as Ace's strong arms pulled him back and the man...

"Did he just bite him?" Gibbs took the words right out of his mouth.

"I believe so." Ducky stared in shock as the scene was rewound and played again.

Yes, it definitely looked like Ace bit Luffy, narrowly avoiding having his nose smashed as Luffy's head whipped backwards with a loud yelp. The black haired boy had a death grip on his hat as he squirmed in vain in his captor's vice-like hold. Hysterical giggling gasped out as Luffy beat on the table with his feet, but Ace apparently ignored his panic. When they could see his face, he wore a cocky grin, enjoying it.

As Luffy continued to thrash, Vance growled out, "My God, what does he do to that boy, Ducky? That's practically..."

"What the hell was that for?" Luffy's voice cut him off. He didn't sound like a passive, frightened victim now, he sounded pissed.

Ace's tone was in contrast, light and airy. Like Luffy's anger didn't matter at all, "What? Can't a guy tease his little brother once and awhile?"

The younger looked away first, shifting his glare to his hat as he fiddled with it, "Bastard, that isn't funny! Tickling isn't funny at all!"

Vance snorted, "That didn't look like tickling to me. How about you guys?"

"Nope."

"Hardly." Though his voice was bitter, Ducky's attention wasn't on the Director. He was watching Luffy's hands play with the ribbon of his hat. He barely noticed Ace's statement that they were alone, beyond considering the possibility that he had deliberately bit his brother in order to ascertain that. A fact he found most unforgivable, despite the fellow's apparent remorse.

He wasn't the only one judging by Gibbs' "Good boy" at Luffy's determined attempt to ignore his brother. Or at least that was what they thought he was doing until he shouted out, holding up
something in his hand, a wide grin plastered on his face. Ace seemed completely dumbfounded, questioning his brother on what he had. Unfortunately the camera didn't pick up what the items were, not with Luffy roughly shifting Ace's arms around. It wasn't until he started his story, which was actually quite humorous, that Ducky suspected what the boy was doing. It was confirmed when the first cuff opened with an audible click. The second cuff followed not long after, Luffy looking quite pleased with himself.

The effect on Ace was instant. The young man took a deep breath, a flush of color returning to his cheeks. He hadn't noticed until then how much the freckles had been standing out. His whole posture became more relaxed as well, despite the obviously worried look he turned to a now almost completely limp Luffy.

"Something's wrong with the kid." Gibbs pointed out as the man gently shifted his brother around and got to work picking the locks. "That right there? I think that's why he said no more cuffs. Looks like Luffy is affected a lot more by this stuff then Ace."

"So...Why'd ya do it?" Luffy asked in a bored tone while he watched his brother work. All three men shifted forward.

"Now isn't the time for this Lu. And I didn't. Ok?"

"Ace." The tone was very demanding, "Not the killing part. I mean the other thing. What happened? You don't normally me..."

Ace snapped back, "Luffy! We'll talk about this later, alright?"

The teen pouted, and the moment the handcuffs were completely off Luffy he crossed his arms over his chest with a huff. As Ace sighed gustily with a pensive look on his face, Luffy's color rapidly improved, though the boy still looked exhausted as he leaned against Ace. Ducky found the mixed signals of being 'angry' with the man and sitting on his lap very interesting, yet the boy made no move to get off. In fact, he seemed to be waiting for something.

Finally Ace let out curse, "Shit! I didn't mess up." his expression was clearly sour.

"Sounds to me like he thinks he was set up." Vance muttered over Luffy's reply.

"Yes, well, if this was one of Tony's movies I suspect this would be the part where he would go on a long soliloquy on who had set him up. Too bad for us that does not seem to be the case." Ducky really wished he'd at the very least explain on what Luffy's abilities actually were. Normally he enjoyed a good mystery, but after the scare he'd had just a short while ago, he was sorely tempted to shake the answers out of one of them. Not that he thought for a minute it would work. 

"The door's locked." Luffy huffed, jingling the handle for effect.

Gibbs leaned in, obviously this was the real reason he'd come to the room, "Now let's see how the hell he keeps melting locks."

Ace's tone was snarky as he tried the lock as well, "Of course. It can't ever be easy, can it? Let me see." The man ran a hand through his disheveled hair before flipping off the lock. His finger still proudly telling the world what he thought of the door, he grinned over his shoulder at Luffy, who was laughing. The digit lit up red then white hot. All three men stared in amazement as he poked out the lock, melting it like butter. "And that is how I feel about being locked in. Right, Luffy?"

The grin he received was so wide, it looked fake. Given his years of medical experience, Doctor
Mallard was sure it was physically impossible to grin that wide. "Shihihishi. Right! Now what?"

As the video ended, the three of them walked over to the door, looking at the still slightly warm blob of metal that was stuck to the floor. The lock itself was completely smooth on the inside, the wood of the door was barely even scorched. It was an impressive level of control, no matter how you looked at it, and it made Ducky very glad that Ace had not apparently taken the little fight out in the hall seriously. If he had, he could have easily burned them all to death. It was a sobering thought when it came once more on the heels of how young Ace was to have such control. How often, he wondered, did his control slip, and who paid the price? The worry was, of course, it would be the one closest to him. His brother.

Ducky was rather surprised with how subdued Ace was when the three of them entered the conference room. The young man was just sitting at the conference table, one hand holding up his head as he stared blankly at a spot on the table. Ziva stood at attention just behind him, apparently ready to use force if the man started to act up for all the good it would do. For a second before he noticed them, the look on his face was conflicted before his cocky grin slid back into place. Doctor Mallard wasn't fooled by the mask, and he doubted the others were.

"I was beginning to think you had forgotten about me." Ace leaned back. "My feelings were hurt."

"Somehow I doubt that," Vance pulled out a seat directly across from the youth and sat, "That was an interesting trick you pulled with the door."

"I've got no clue what you're talking about." His manner was dismissive, all the anger he'd exhibited before was gone. Idly, the elder doctor wondered if it was just buried behind the mask, or if he'd actually been angry in the first place. The more he watched him, the harder it was to get an accurate reading on Ace.

"I find that difficult to believe. People tend to remember their fingers being on fire." Vance raised an eyebrow at him, "I'm expecting you to pay for the damages."

"And I'm expecting the world to stop spinning on it's axis. Hasn't happened yet." The man smirked. Interesting, his tactics have changed. Deflection instead of outright denial. "You know, physics and all that."

"I don't really see you as the type to be overly concerned with physics, given your, ah, unique abilities. Or morals, for that matter." Vance replied, the jab obvious.

"Whatever." Ace's shrug was easy-going despite the malice heating his gaze before he looked away and focused on Gibbs, "We done here?"

Gibbs actually snorted, "What happened to cooperating?"

"I am. You just haven't said anything intelligent. So I'm concluding that we're done." Ace put his hands on the table and went to stand.

"Why don't you start by telling me how you managed to blow up a storage room?"

The man's posture stiffened for a second before relaxing once more, "Seriously? No Fucking Clue. Never happened before. There. Happy now?"

"So you admit you were there?"

He rolled his eyes, "If it'll shut you idiots up, yes."
Ducky leaned forward, intrigued by the small tells Ace was giving off, the slight shifting in his seat, the way his hands fiddled with a pen. *What exactly is he so nervous about?* "When I examined the body, I noticed extensive damage. If I may ask what exactly Moria had done to incur your wrath?"

Ace looked at him for the first time, his eyebrows scrunched together and head cocked to the side. After a moment he started to laugh. It wasn't a nice sound, full of derision as a crazed look appeared in his eyes. The change was startling as it was frightening. It took only a few minutes for him to calm down enough to answer.

"Besides messing with Luffy, you mean?" It was the first time he'd even mentioned Luffy since they'd arrived in the room. Ducky wondered at that, and the tone he'd used, full of hatred, *but at who?* concluding he either truly felt nothing for the younger beyond a possession, or perhaps he was trying to keep the focus on himself. It was difficult to tell, and more than likely it was a combination of the two. He smirked, "What do you even know about Moria?"

"You mean besides the fact that he was a Devil-fruit user like yourself?" Vance challenged causing the young man to blanch, the smile falling away rapidly. "Not much. Except you killing him and setting him on fire, that is."

"Look, we seem to have a misunderstanding here." Ace held up a hand in a placating manner. Ducky watched him, wondering what he would say to hide his abilities.

Gibbs shook his head, "About you being a Devil-fruit user? Nope. I don't think there's any misunderstanding there. Not after that little display earlier."

"Not about that...well, about that, too? But that's kind of moot right now." Ace scratched his head, "You guys seem to think I'm the one who offed Moria. Don't get me wrong, I'm *glad* the jackass is dead, and I might have deliberately stepped on his face a few times after the fact, but I didn't kill him."

"You really expect us to believe that?" Gibbs leaned in, challenging him.

Ace shrugged, "It's the truth."

"Alright, assuming that we believe you, who killed him then?"

Ace's lie was obvious as he broke eye contact, "I don't know, some dude just paid me a lot of money to stash the body and light it up."

"He tell you where?" Vance pressed, getting a nod after a moment of hesitation. The young man was growing increasingly agitated, a faint crackling could be heard. "Why there? Why a navy base?"

"Didn't say, and I didn't ask." The mop of dark hair was brushed back out of his face, "Not my place."

Something about how he'd said that struck Ducky as odd. It didn't match at all with what he knew of the young man, nor did the sudden nervousness. In the span of a few minutes Ace had gotten spooked. *I need to stop this now, he's going to snap.* The problem was, he couldn't tell exactly what had triggered the change.

Gibbs' was incredulous, he brushed off Ducky's hand when he tried to warn him away from pushing the matter further. "The hell it isn't. You mean to tell me you just snuck onto a highly secure naval base and committed an act of terror and you didn't bother to find out why?"
"Stop asking me!" Flames danced to life on Ace's shoulders as he pounded the table. Ziva moved to jump on him only to be waved off by the Director as the young man glared daggers at Gibbs. He continued shouting, "I DON'T KNOW! I couldn't ask, alright?! That's not how it works!"

A moment passed in silence as all four of them watched him slump forward, resting his head in his hands as the flames slowly faded. He shivered as if suddenly cold and refused to look up at them, no longer the self confident young man from his earlier interview. Ducky kept a hand on his friend's arm, meeting Vance's eye. They gave Ace a moment to collect himself. Even still, he found himself wondering how much of it was an act, a play for sympathy.

"Not how what works, my boy?" Ducky finally asked. There was no mistaking the true terror in those dark eyes, the look that screamed 'I've said too much' however. Whatever Ace had done in the world, to his brother...it was obvious that the young man was badly broken himself, and Ducky wondered once again where he'd gotten his Devil-fruit at such a young age.

Ace shook his head, shutting down even as he opened his mouth. Whatever he was about to say however was lost when the door opened after just a cursory knock. A woman with shoulder length ebony black hair and icy blue eyes stood on the other side, dressed in a form fitting pencil skirt and low buttoned shirt. She surveyed the room with a half smile, tapping away on her cellphone before slipping it into her pocket.

Director Vance stood, stiff at the intrusion, "I don't know who you are, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave. We're in the middle of talking to a witness."

"Witness, now? Well, that's good to hear." The woman smiled magnanimously. "Where's the other one?"

"I'm not asking. Leave. Now." Gibbs was now standing, having taken one look at Ace's face which was full of scorn and worry he grabbed the woman's arm and attempted to push her out of the room.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. Robin Nico. I'm Ace and Luffy's attorney." She handed each of them a card.

"Don't want her. Get me a public defender. Hell, I'll do without an attorney."

"Little Luffy is a minor, Ace. I'm afraid you can't be rid of me that easily." Her smile was enigmatic as his was hostile.

"Get her out of here! Robin, you stay the hell away from Luffy, you hear me? I'm not playing any of your fucked up games."

"You sure you want to turn her down?" Ziva asked, holding up the card, "Ohara Law Firm is one of the most respected out there. Not to mention expensive."

"Yeah, I know. Problem is, a lawyer works for their client." He snapped back, confusing them.

Miss Nico laughed, "Ace, are you still going on about that? That was years ago."

"It was a year and a half ago, you bitch. And thanks to you, I ended up in solitary. Don't think I've forgotten the time you 'helped' Luffy, either. Helped him right into a six week stint in juvi, you harpy." Ace glared at her.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Ducky looked at the card, then at Ace. The young man shifted the glare to him, but he held his ground. After a moment it lessened at the man shrugged.
"A Lawyer's job is to help their clients, right? Well, I sure as hell can't afford some high class double-talking bitch like her." The woman continued to smile, "so why would she take my interests into account?

"My boy, I believe you are mistaken. That's not how it works. The client..."

"Is whoever pays our price." Robin cut him off, "It might not be the case in your world, sir, but I assure you, in the one Ace has grown up in, it is." The serine smile never wavered, despite her harsh words, "I can understand his hostility. However, Mr. Ace, you seem to be laboring under some false impressions."

"Like what? I can still refuse your 'help', damn the consequences. What do you care, anyway? You've already been paid." He snapped back.

Her phone buzzed and she took it out, ignoring his outburst. She typed a quick response before returning her attention to the young man. Robin raised a delicately manicured eyebrow, receiving a smug smirk in reply. The message was clear 'anything you want to say to me, you say in front of them. Witnesses.' It was obvious he didn't trust her.

Finally she nodded, "You could refuse. However, it's in my best interests if you don't. You see...my clients would be most put out."

"Clients?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. As in 'more than one.' At current count, I have four clients clamoring to take your cases jointly, and the office has received many 'suggestions' for a charity case, as it were." Her smile this time was a lot more real than the others.

Ace leaned forward, "Who?"

"The names are obviously confidential. However, I can say that a certain business mogul has expressed an interest in her future husband..."

"He's not going to marry her! She's like ten years older than him for Christ's sake!"

"...and brother in law. Two shipping companies have expressed an interest with unlimited backing as well..."

"Two? Who the hell?"

"And a certain man who wishes to tell you that 'blue really brings out the color of her eyes' as well." Her phone buzzed, "Ah. Looks like another shipping company has hired us to represent you."

"What the f..." Ace stared at her.

"Really, the only requests the clients have are as follows. One, I keep you and your brother's best interests in mind both in the short term and long term. Two, I do not force my services on you. Three, that man is to remain uninvolved, or removed from the situation if possible. Are these terms acceptable to you, Ace?"

"B-but...He, I, Lu...The money? I can't..." The look of confusion faded, "You'll help Luffy, first. No matter, what. Luffy always comes first."

"Of course." She smiled. Ace nodded, his shoulders slumping, "If I may say, this might be the most
lucrative venture for our Law Firm yet, so, it is a pleasure doing business for you, Ace."
"Hey Abby, I think I might ha-what is he doing here?" The man standing in the lab turned around and seemed shocked to have Luffy smiling brightly at him and waving. Then again, he had that effect on people.

"Oh, he's just going to sit in a corner and not touch anything. Right, Luffy?" The teen pouted at Abby before nodding. She'd threatened to kill him if he messed up anything in her lab, and honestly the way she'd said it was kind of like Nami on a bad day. And Nami was scary.

"Ok fine, but why is Luffy here, and you know, not up in interrogation? Or with child services?"

"Tim! That's a bit rude! Besides, we're not to bring up child services again."

"Alright...I'm confused."

Luffy just smiled brightly at him as he attempted to investigate some of the more interesting things in the lab. Abby stopped him with a hand on the back of his shirt, however and pointed to a chair. The teen puffed out his cheeks before hopping on a clear spot on the table instead. It was close enough, and it gave him a better view. Tim was staring at him the same way his old teachers used to sometimes.

"Ace pulled a Halloween on them is all. But then they still wanted to send me away, which is stupid, because I punched someone, and that's not how it works. So I told them no, and now I'm here. Oh, and Ace might have burned some stuff on accident. Oops. Shishi." Luffy grinned at him. "So, what's there to do around here? I'm bored."

"And the handcuffs?" The man asked in that strained tone some people got when talking to him.

"Picked them. Oh! How about some food! Please? I'm starving!"

"I'm pretty sure you just ate, didn't you?" Tim hesitantly put in, looking to Abby who was already fiddling with something for confirmation.

"Are we talking before or after he was put in interrogation? Because Tony says he stole someone's lunch, and then ate about ten dollars worth of junk food from the vending machine. And that was before Gibbs brought him food." She turned and looked at him, "Honestly, where does it all go?"

Luffy grinned at her, "Nami always says the same thing. Whacha doing?"

"Oh, uh, working on another case. Don't mind me." The gothic styled woman shifted to block his view of the screen. There was a picture of a man crumpled at the bottom of some long stairs, his neck and legs bent at odd angles.

"That's the Gale case, isn't it? I heard about what happened, sounds bad." Luffy didn't miss Abby elbowing the man in the ribs as he pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Luffy. He ignored the man's nervousness, but not the soda he was holding. In seconds Luffy was drinking it down.

"HEY!"

"My bad. So...do you work down here with Abby?"

"Not always. But I was helping her out with some things." Tim's gaze slid over to where Luffy noticed his cellphone, along with Ace's. "I've, ah, got a Masters from MIT in Computer Forensics."
"Hey, cool, our phones! Ace would have been worried if you guys lost them! We're supposed to be testing them out or something." He reached for his phone, only to have his hand slapped away by Abby.

"That's evidence right now. Tim's helping hack into them."

Dark eyes blinked up at her, "Huh? Why would you want to do that?"

"You mean besides your brother being a suspect in an ongoing murder investigation?" The other agent's tone was disbelieving.

"Noooo, I mean why didn't you just ask for the codes?" Both Abby and Tim stared at him like he was nuts, "Ace said he was gonna cooperate, so I guess I can unlock the phones if you want. Besides, I think they're supposed to be hack proof or something. Franky's bro Ice... Icecube? Icecream?...Well, Franky's bro made them."

Abby took a break from whatever it was she was doing, which looked really boring anyway, and handed him the phones. "Hey, Luffy...didn't you say you were testing these phones? Test them how?"

"It's all technical, so I wasn't really paying attention. Ace n' me are supposed to push them to the limits or something. All I know is I've dropped mine in the toilet twice and it still works fine!" His brows furrowed as he turned his phone over and over in his hands, "Ice-man makes them or something, so we don't have to pay him s'long as we test them."

"How do you know this guy?" Tim reached around and picked up Ace's phone. Luffy noticed that his brother had missed a call or something because the icon light was glowing. "He a friend?"

The teen grinned, "Not really. He's a jerk. But Franky's cool, right Abby?" The woman nodded distractedly, "I told Abby and them about him. He's a part of my gang! He's a super-awesome pervy mechanic. His brother is kinda mean to me, Franky says that's just how he is though. But he gave us these phones, so he can't be all that bad."

"Is he Iceburg?" Abby pulled up an image on the screen next to the one she was working in. There was a man with a crewcut wearing a striped shirt. His hair obviously dyed blue, much darker on top, and he had lipstick on. Luffy nodded, grinning widely as he recognized him. "Luffy, do you realize who this is?"

"Yeah. He's Franky's brother!" Luffy rolled his eyes.

Tim did a double take, "Seriously? You don't know who he is? He the CEO of Galley-La corp. They're one of the biggest privately owned suppliers of military equipment. Mostly things like heavy grade computers and...cell phones."

Luffy just grinned at him, "Really? Franky is still cooler. Whacha doing, Abby?"

The screen in front of her looked so cool, like a video game. There was a person who kept falling repeatedly down the stairs, though, which was boring. He wondered why the person didn't flip out of the way, or if he was being chased by something. As far as games went, it was pretty lame.

"I told you; another case. Nothing for you to worry about." She bit her lip, "I can't seem to get the angle right..."

The teen cocked his head to the side, "are you trying to figure out how that dude fell?"
"Yeah. The report says he fell, but every time I run the simulation, the wrong bones break..."

"That's cause he was pushed." He shrugged a shoulder, "You can tell because of how his legs and arms are. If you fall, you kind of put your hands out like this" he held up a his hands, "Not this" and shifted them again, "which slows your fall. He hit the stairs hard, though. Someone pushed him."

"You can tell all that from a picture?" Tim looked at him sharply, "Don't tell me you make a habit of pushing people down stairs or something."

Luffy frowned, "Why would I do that? You could really hurt someone. I do Parkour and Freerunning lots is all. So I'm good at...uh, Ace calls it Ragdoll something or other. Something like math, but not math? Cauze I fall a lot."

"Physics?" Abby sounded like she didn't believe him, "I thought you told me you weren't that smart."

He grinned nodding, "Yeah, that! My teachers always thought I was cheating, because I couldn't tell them how I got the answers. Shishihihi. Physics is fun! Not as fun as food, but still."

Both looked at him with bemused expressions before Abby turned off the simulation she had been running. She smiled at him, "You're really interesting, Luffy."

"Thanks!" He grinned before pointing randomly to one of the slightly more noisy machines, "What's that do?"

"Oh, that's Major Mass-Spectrometer. It measures how much tiny things weigh and how much there are." Her face lit up as she was talking about it, and Luffy could tell that this pace was important to her, even if he didn't understand a word of what she was saying.

"I see. It's a mystery machine!" He smiled brightly instead. A thought crossed his mind, "Hey, do you have one of those Star-Trek things?"

Abby looked at him, confused, "A what now?"

"You know! You put your hand on it and it goes all glow-y green, and bzz and bam, and oooohhhh fingers!"

"Are you talking about..." Tim's brow furrowed, "A fingerprint machine?" Luffy nodded brightly, only earning a muttered, "how is that Star-Trek?"

"More importantly, how did you figure that out, Tim?" Abby seemed impressed, even as she walked over to one side of the room and carefully picked up a machine that looked vaguely like Ace's scanner which Luffy wasn't supposed to touch and set it up.

"Oh! Is that one? Huh? Is it?"

"Yes, silly. It's an older model, so it's a bit bigger. You place your hands here and then it takes a picture of your fingers. Wanna try it?"

"YES!" He hopped over to her and held out both hands, "This is so cool! Shishshi. Ace n' Zoro never let me play with the fun stuff!"

Her smile was indulgent as he placed his hands on the screen, "I can imagine why."
The machine lit up with a green light and the screen his hands were on got a little warm, but not uncomfortably so, He shifted, trying to see what it was doing. All Luffy could see was the green glow, and he wasn't sure how that was taking pictures of his fingers, but Abby said it was. So he went along with it. The machine beeped, an error message showing on the computer monitor.

"Luffy, you can't squirm around like that when it's working, or it won't scan, alright?" Tim sounded like he was about to laugh.

"But I wanted to see how it works!"

"It just does, alright?" The woman rolled her eyes, "Put your hands back and we'll try again. Hold still this time."

He grinned as he put his hands on the screen again. This time he tried really hard not to move, even if he did want to watch. After a moment, the machine beeped. "There we go, you're fingerprinted."

Looking at the ten fingerprints now on the screen, Luffy couldn't help the wide grin on his face. "Wow! Is that really what my fingerprint's look like?"

"Yeah," Tim gave him an odd look, "Haven't you been printed before? I mean, I know you've been arrested. Fingerprinting is a part of the procedure."

"They always came out all smudgy. Something about it not being fingerprinting? Anyway, they stopped doing that. It's not like they don't know who I am, right?" He looked at his hands, then back at the much larger images of his fingerprints.

"Huh, that's weird." the man tapped one of the pictures, "Hey, Abby, you sure your machine is clean?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Tim?" She glared at him before turning her attention to the display, "That is weird. But I just cleaned the glass."

"What are you talking about?" Luffy blinked at them, looking at the thin and thick lines that cut across the images.

"See those?" Abby pointed to them, "They distort your fingerprints. It looks almost like scars..."

"Oh, that! Shishishi! I get into lots of fights!" He held up his hands for inspection, "Chopper does a good job though, right? He always fixes me up."

"How did..." Ace's phone started screeching out some music, which took them by surprise causing them to jump slightly. After a second, Luffy recognized it as Incubus, meaning Marco was calling. He tried to go over to the phone only to be stopped by Abby's hand on his shoulder as her co-worker went over to the phones.

"Just let it ring, I guess." Tim said right before it stopped. "You know who that was?"

Luffy nodded, "A friend. He's probably called before. I think Ace'll be mad."

"Too bad. We're not here to answer your phones, you know. I should have just turned them off or something..."

Luffy shifted uneasily as Ace's phone once again went off, this time playing I gotta feeling. He knew that was Thatch's ringtone, and for him to call right after Marco...Luffy wondered if they knew Ace had been arrested again. The phone stopped, and all three stared at it for a moment.
before Luffy's phone started blaring out *Invader Zim*, causing the boy to grin.

"That'd be Thatch. I should really answer that..."

Tim quickly snatched the phone which was telling him to *ride the pig!* "I don't think so," he held it out of reach, a scolding tone entering his voice, "This is still evidence, and you are still a...ok, I'm not exactly sure why you're here. Ah-ah-ah, No." The phone was held over his head and out of reach.

"But it could be important..." He whined, looking over at Abby, "Come on, please?"

She shook her head as the phone stopped ringing, "Sorry, I'm with McGee on this one."

"Awwww...meanie!" Just then his phone rang again, this time blaring out *Party Rock Anthem*. Luffy's face stretched in a grin, and his hand snapped out, snatching the phone out of Tim's hand. "Got it! Hey Marco, sup?"

"Luffy, where the hell have you been?!"

As he politely put the phone on speaker he noticed the shocked looked he was getting from the two agents that had been keeping him company and thought that maybe he possibly broke them. Tentatively he waved his hand in front of Abby's face, only to have her snatch it and stare intently at his fingers like they were made out of meat. "Mmm, hey are my fingers made out of meat, Marco?"

There was a long suffering sigh, "*Luffy, you can't eat your fingers. It would be very bad to try.*"

"Wow, I could eat them?! Hey, is that what 'ladies fingers' are?"

"*Focus! Luffy! Do you know where Ace is?*" He could hear Thatch in the background.

"Didn't you hear? Ace kinda messed up and got arrested again." He was dragged over to a table past the still shocked Tim, "Why, d'ya need him?" He grunted out as Abby shoved his hand under some weird machine. He watched it warily waiting for it to bite him.

"But he's alright?" Marco sounded worried.

"Yeah. Hey, what's this thing do?"

"Hold still, will you?" Abby scolded.

"...Luffy, who was that? Where are you right now?"

He shifted the phone, talking fast, "They were gonna take Ace away, and he was all panicky! So...I punched one of them."

"*Oh thank God. He's alright, Thatch.*" Luffy got the feeling he was missing something, "*Which precinct? I'll come and pick you up at least.*"

"Um...I'm not exactly sure where I am. Shishshihi. Except, it's a really super cool lab! Abby won't let me touch anything, though. Cause she's a meanie."

"Of all the...Fuck. Thatch! I take that back! The bonehead's in a lab. Shit. Hang tight and I'll...Wait, if you're in a lab, how are you answering your phone?"

"That would be because he snatched it out of my hand! How the heck did you do that?" Tim
interrupted.

"Luffy! Your brother is going to flip when he hears..." Marco began.

"He already might have sort of lit things on fire." Luffy pointed out, "So, it's alright. As long as they don't use those stupid cuffs anymore. You promised, right, Abby?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, No handcuffs, scouts honor. Hey, is it just your skin, or are your bones made of a poly-"

Thatch's voice cut in, "As fascinating as I'm sure this conversation is, I'm going to interrupt here, because somebody seems to have forgotten why we called. Luffy, we swung by when we got back, and I hate to tell you this...but kid, your apartment is trashed. Like, completely ransacked. So, Marco here got all worried about you two. Heh, guess he had a good reason, huh?"

Luffy turned a hurt expression to Tim, "You trashed our home? Why?"

"Hey! It wasn't us!" Tim shot back, "Don't you think you should call the police?"

"Given that we thought you did it? Uh, no."

"We're NCIS, not the police." Tim had a weird expression on his face, "Why would the police..."

Marco chuckled, "Navy Cops. Figures. Ace really stepped in it this time, huh?"

Thatch muttered something that sounded like an agreement under his breath, "Wait, message from Pops...Great. This would have been nice to get oh, like, ten minutes ago. Hey, Luffy, he said he sent help...and more's on the way. Tell Ace to keep a lid on that temper of his till then, alright?"

"Shishishi, sure! I gotta go, Tim looks really funny...Oh, hey, who's 'Pops'?" He asked, only to have the line go dead on him. "Huh. Oh well. I better go find Ace!"

Tim was hot on his heels as he took off out of the room and towards the elevator Abby not far behind, "Wait! No, Luffy, stay!"

"Why?" He pushed the button, "This is important! Someone wrecked our home! Ace needs to know!"

"Did you have anything important there?" Abby's look was sympathetic as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Mmm, not really. But it's still home! You don't just go breaking someone's home for no good reason! That makes me so mad...Ah, elevator...which floor? Where's Ace?"

"If we take you to your brother, you got to promise to calm down, alright?" McGee sighed, giving in. Receiving a nod, even if his look said he didn't believe it for a second, McGee pressed a button.

"Gibbs said he would be in the conference room. So I guess we'll start there." Abby latched onto the back of his shirt and prevented him from running off, "This way. Behave, alright?"

In moments they arrived at a door marked Conference Room 1 and before the others could even knock, Luffy shoved open the door, catching the people on the other side by surprise. The room was very full, and now everyone was staring at him. He recognized Gibbs, and Ducky, as well as the Lion-guy and the woman who had tried to fight Ace. He smiled when he spotted his brother, though.
"Ace!" His brother smiled reflexively, the scowl he'd had vanishing. The boy knew he only had a few moments before someone tried to push him back out of the room, so he gushed out, "Are Marco and Thatch brothers?"

Tim grabbed him and glared, "You dragged us all the way up here to ask him that? I thought you were upset about your apartment!"

"Well, it's important! They never told me they were brothers!"

"Because they're not, Lu." Ace's expression was serious again, "What's this about our apartment?"

"Oh, Marco called and Thatch said that someone trashed our place." Luffy shrugged, knowing there really wasn't anything they could do about it. Still, it was good that he'd told his brother. "Then they went on to say...HEY! Robin!"

"Hello there, 'Captain'. Would you mind putting me down?" The woman chuckled slightly as he picked her up and spun her around. When he'd placed her back on the floor she smiled warmly at him, even if it didn't quite reach her eyes, "It's good to see you again."

"Why are you here?"

"Robin is our lawyer, apparently." Ace sounded annoyed but not angry. Luffy blinked at him, confused. Robin was nice when she wasn't working, and she always seemed sad when she was. But her being here meant that Blackbeard sent her...except Ace wasn't angry. He took a big step away from her all the same, eyeing her with suspicion. "No, not like that. Someone else sent her for a change. A lot of someone elses."

"You are in good hands." She smiled again, and this time it was a bit warmer. Luffy tugged down his hat and looked at his brother, only receiving a slight shrug and a nod. "Ok then! You gonna help Ace? Right?" He grinned back up at her right before his stomach rumbled loudly. "I'm hungry."

There was an answering rumble from where Ace was sitting. Noticing everyone's eyes were on him, his brother bristled, glaring at the lion-guy. "What? I'm hungry, alright!"

"I believe it is getting late. If I might suggest," Robin began, pointing at a clock, "continuing in the morning? I have some things I wish to check regarding what Luffy has just brought to my attention."

"Great, so we get to spend the night in a cell?"

"Like a cell would even hold you," came the amused reply from Gibbs. "You'd just walk right out."

Ace glanced at Luffy and looked away, chewing his lower lip. "Whatever."

"We can put them up in a hotel for the night. But just for the night. I'll figure out something more permanent later." Lion...no wait, Leon...Leon said, looking annoyed. Luffy wondered why, but shrugged it off. He was hungry! Where they stayed the night wasn't as important so long as they fed him.
Gray eyes met green, battling for dominance. While the boss was off with Luffy, who Tony had affectionately dubbed 'the brat' in his head, getting a change of clothes for the boys, he was supposed to get them rooms. As in two. One for him and Luffy, and one for Gibbs and Ace. Ace, however, saw things differently.

"I sure as hell am not spending the night in the same room with you. Alone." Tony snapped out.

If possible, the glare got icier, "Who asked you to? One room. Not two."

"And sleep in the same bed as you? Yeah, no. You might think you're hot, but I don't swing that way."

"I'd rather die. Lu and I will share a bed. You bunk with your boss."

Actually, that sounded scarier. Not to mention Ducky still wasn't sure what to make of the Marshall boys' relationship. He'd have DiNozzo's head if they shared a bed. "Yeah, no. Not happening."

"I'll tell you what's not happening. You. Staying in a room with my little brother alone. I'll kill you first." The way he said it, Tony believed him.

"And we're back to square one. Are you trying to be difficult?"

"There a problem here, DiNozzo?" Of course Gibbs would show up now.

"No, no problem at all, Boss." He lied, glaring daggers at the youth as the other two came up to them.

Ace rolled his eyes, snagging a slim-jim out of his brother's hand and ripping it open, "Yeah, there's a problem. I'm not letting you put Luffy in a different room. It's not happening."

Luffy handled the loss of his food well, rummaging around in a bag for another snack, "Why would we be in separate rooms? Are you guys shy or something?"

Gibbs for his part just eyed the two brothers before sighing, "Forgot, you sleep in the same room, don't you?"

"Got a problem with that?"

"I might." Ace bristled, though Luffy seemed indifferent, "Worry about that later. Tony, get us a room. Double beds."

"Yay! Sleepover! Oh, does this place have a pool?" He heard the younger brother ask excitedly.

His brother sounded almost indulgent when he answered, "You don't have a bathing suit."

"I can go in shorts! Zoro and Usopp do it all the time." From the sound of it, his friends were bad influences. He turned and looked. Sure enough, the three of them had followed him over.

"You can't swim, you idiot." He turned to see that Ace was giving Luffy a noogie, the boys both grinning like fools, though Ace's eyes were still wary. He wondered if Luffy even knew how to be wary.
Tony chose to ignore the byplay, instead handing a room key to Gibbs, "Room Two-thirty-one."

The four of them walked towards the elevators, heading past a small dining hall and a gym. "Hey, looks like there is a pool after all, Lu...Lu?" Ace stopped, right next to the pool, a look of aggravation on his face as he turned back the way they had come, "Dammit, where did he run off to this time?"

"I'll get him. Probably saw something shiny. Stay here." Gibbs' expression was bemused as he headed back out into the hall.

DiNozzo sighed gustily. He wasn't very happy to be left with the pyro-man again and it looked like it was mutual. Or the guy was constipated. Since his expression seemed to be permanently stuck on some form of 'pissed-off' it was a little hard to tell, even for a senior agent like him. He watched as the young man paced by the edge of the pool, running a hand over his disheveled hair while huffing. He wasn't exactly sure why he did what he did next. Maybe because the kid looked too tense for his own good, or maybe because part of him wanted revenge for being slammed into a wall earlier that day. Alright, it was because he wanted revenge. Tony smirked as he pushed Ace hard and fast. The color drained out of his face as his arms windmilled for a second as his foot connected with the open air over the pool.

**SPLASH!**

The water wasn't that deep, just eight feet. With his height, Ace would easily be able to climb right back out. Tony laughed, "You should have seen the look on your face!" The lapping water was his only answer.

He eyed it with trepidation, thinking the guy might be planning something. As the surface of the pool settled, it became obvious that that wasn't the case. Dark hair floated in the water, almost obscuring the lax expression on his face. As he watched his knees slowly buckle, he remembered what Ducky had said, what he had read. *Devil-fruit users can't swim, they lose the ability.*

DiNozzo lunged for the edge, "SHIT!"

Reaching into the pool up to his shoulder while bracing with his other hand he was just able to grasp Ace's slowly sinking wrist. He pulled as hard as he could, bringing it to the surface. It was frighteningly limp and the guy felt like he weighed a ton, but Tony didn't give up. He sat back on his heels and dragged on Ace, sliding dangerously close to the edge himself. Just when he thought that he might have to get into the water to get the apparently paralyzed man out, Ace's head broke the surface and he sputtered to life. Arms that DiNozzo knew could lift someone bigger than him weakly scrambled on the edge of the pool, and between the two of them they managed to get him out of the water. Both lay there panting for a moment.

"What the fuck was with that? Why didn't you move, man?"

Ace wheezed back, "I can't swim, you idiot."

"Oh no. You didn't even try to swim. You could have pulled yourself out! Scared the shit out of me." He panted as he sat, "Are you alright? Gesh. Seriously, I wasn't expecting that."

The younger man leveraged himself up onto his elbows, looking over at him. There wasn't any hostility in it, only misery, and something else. Then Ace sighed, "We're 'hammers' in water. At least, that's what I've heard others call it. It's...you can't move, it's like your body just locks up. If you're lucky, you don't drown right away."
"Are you serious?"

He nodded, "What really sucks is I used to be able to swim. I was good at it, too." Some of the fire came back in his gaze but he still looked worn out, "Don't push Luffy into water, ever. Stupid idiot'll drown before you can get to him with my luck."

"Let me guess, I do, and you'll make me regret it?" Tony smirked. That kind of threat he was used to from back in the day. Hearing a door squeak, he looked up and saw Gibbs pushing the object of the threat in front of him and nodded. "Hey, Boss."

"You guys decide to go for a swim while you waited?" A sardonic smirk, it said he knew what had happened.

"No fair, Ace! I wanted to go swimming, too!" Only a quick hand stopped the teen from flinging himself in the water.

"You can't swim!" The three of them chorused at Luffy, earning a laugh. He and Gibbs still might not know what the boy could do, but his reaction to the cuffs were a dead giveaway after all. Tony did not want to fish him out of the water.

Luckily Luffy was easily dissuaded, settling for jumping on his brother instead. The two of them rolled around on the tiled floor, laughing. He watched them, waiting for it to turn violent or wrong in some way, but it continued to be just playful fun. After a while, Gibbs put a stop to it, looming silently over the elder brother who'd managed to pin the squirming giggling mass that they were all pretty sure was a human and not a puppy on the floor face down.

His boss raised an eyebrow at the two of them as they stared at him silently, "Up. Let's get to the room."

The laughter stopped, replaced by sullen, bruised looks. Ace swatted Tony's offered hand away with a snarl, rising easily to his feet and pulling Luffy up with him. The two paced silently between the NCIS agents, only the squelching of Ace's shoes reminding them that they were there. The elevator ride was uncomfortable, to say the least. Luffy seemed jumpy, and Ace stared straight ahead, literally steaming. DiNozzo couldn't help but stare, even if the burn of chlorine was starting to make his eyes water by the time the elevator stopped. Gibbs took it all in stride, leading the way to their room. He signaled them to wait outside as he quickly checked the room before nodding them in, flipping on the lights.

Ace sniffed, "I smell like gym socks. I need a shower. Lu?"

"Nah, I'm good!" that grin stretched impossibly wide, and Tony couldn't believe what he'd just heard. *Did he just ask if he wanted to SHOWER with him?* He saw Gibbs' cool blue eyes flicking between the two, calculating. Both were silent as the freckled man shrugged and closed and locked the bathroom while the younger bounced onto a bed, flicking on the TV. The shower came on.

"Cool! *Adventure Time!* oh, *Die Hard*, I like that movie. Boring, boring, boring. News, boring, weather, boring, seen it, own it, lame, eh, *Die Hard* it is." He muttered as he flicked through the channels, not bothering to pay them any attention as the two of them moved about the room. He seemed to be ignoring them, or so Tony thought until he went to sit on the bed with him, "Ace'll sleep there."

He blinked, "Excuse me?"

"You can sit there if you want. But Ace is going to sleep there." He didn't even bother to turn his
head as he said this. His tone was flat, and DiNozzo worried that he'd been coached. Fingers picked at the comforter, or worse.

"Hey, that's fine. I'm sure you roll around a lot anyway. Just wanted to get a better view. Love this movie. It's a classic." The fingers paused their nervous dance, only to start again when the bathroom door opened.

"Fast shower." Gibbs pointed out from his bed, tossing a pair of sweatpants and a tee at Ace. The man grabbed them one handed, towel still wrapped around his waist and stared hard at DiNozzo. It clicked. They're...scared? Of us?

He felt Luffy tense next to him when he sat up a bit straighter, meeting the dark warning gaze across the room. Tony felt sick, but didn't let it show in his voice, "Die Hard. Great movie. Can't pass up watching it, man. New one's coming out, soon. 'yippie ki-yay' right?"

Ace's gaze shifted to the TV, then back to him. The tension he had felt faded as the man nodded, "It's alright. I like the second one more."

"Sacrilege!" He cried, pretending to be scandalized as Ace ducked back into the bathroom. He turned to the television again, keeping Luffy in his peripheral. The boy was calmer, almost absorbed in the movie, but he could tell he was also paying attention to the two of them. Waiting for us to do something.

He stomped down the feelings of anger and pity, instead focusing on how much more relaxed Luffy was when his brother joined them on the bed as he shifted back against the headboard to make room. He wouldn't be Tony if he moved away when a movie was playing, after all.

He did move over again for Gibbs to join them on the bed, though. Ace glanced at them over his shoulder before actually moving slightly to make more room. The movie two thirds of the way over. To begin with, it was awkward. The two brothers were stiff, Gibbs was doing a great job appearing absorbed in the film while watching them Tony was sure, and for his part, he was thinking of ways to break the tension that was building again. The first commercial break he passed out sodas, his plan of attack ready. It started simply enough, saying the lines with John McClane. A little side commentary on the bad guys. By the time Die Hard 2 came on, both boys were playing along, at ease. He caught his boss's look, one of pride, and knew he had done a good job when Luffy leaned back against his legs, yawning.

It came as a shock when Ace's shoulder flared briefly for a second, an answering puff of fire following a second later on the other arm. He blinked, confused even as Luffy turned and shoved him HARD into Gibbs and off the bed, a look of determination in his eyes. The picture frame above the bed shattered with a tinkling sound.

Ace was there, wedging them between the beds, "DOWN! NOW!"

"What are you doing, idiot?!" Gibbs snapped, attempting to drag Ace between the bed, even as spirits of flame danced across the young man's body as he stood there. Oh God, he's being shot! Tony realized.

"Luffy, window!" Ace ignored them, sending his brother, his younger foolish going to get killed brother across the room.

Tony attempted to force his way back up, only to have Ace shove him hard, "No, stop him! You're going to get him killed, you idiot!"

He got a withering stare, "Stay down, 'Detective'! You're not bulletproof." Ace turned away for a
second, still resting all of his weight on them, pinning them effectively, "What's it look like, Lu?"

"Uh...looks like one guy. Long range, feels like semi automatic...Want me to go after them?" Luffy sounded angry, even angrier than he had when yelling at the Director.

It was then Tony noticed that nothing had broken in the room for a while, only a Thwanng sound could be heard. He risked a peek, craning his head over the side of the bed, and was shocked at what he saw. He hadn't really believed Tim when he had claimed Luffy's arm had stretched. It was a bit harder to ignore or rationalize the push of skin that just kept going before snapping back with that Thwanng as another bullet was deflected back out the window the teen had stretched across. Ace's hand shoved him back down.

"Can you reach them?"

A pause, "Yeah, I can rocket there."

"Then..."

"Don't!" Gibbs' commanding voice cut Ace off, the freckled face turned to stare at him incredulously.

"Why not?" Dark eyes narrowed in anger, "They're shooting at us!"

Gibbs pushed him off, managing to stare them both down at the same time, "That's what they want, you moron! You said it yourself; you're bulletproof. So why shoot at you?"

The moment stretched as the two looked at him, not cowed, and Tony was impressed. Luffy turned, shifting his top half oddly to look at his brother, a question in his eyes. Ace bit his lip, looking at Gibbs, obviously thinking hard and fast. Then he nodded, and Luffy let go of the window, arms returning to normal as he turned to face them. Then he stumbled, his eyes widening as he gasped.

"LUFFY!" Ace reacted instantly, diving to catch his brother as he crumpled to his knees, one arm lashing out still to knock out the lamp as he went down. The moment the light went out Ace dragged the boy to them, a stick, no arrow shaft? sticking out of his side. The moment they had him, Gibbs held him close while Tony applied pressure. "I'm gonna fucking kill Auger!" The fire man snarled, flaring into brilliance for a split second before returning to normal and grabbing them, "Shot Luffy! Come on, if he's using night vision, he'll be blinded for a while, let's move!"

"Tony, call Ducky, have him meet us back at the morgue." Gibbs looked at Ace, "Figure you won't want to go to a hospital."
Ace was going to kill Gibbs if this was some kind of trap. He'd spent the whole ride huddled in the back of the SUV with his brother bleeding on his lap arguing with the man. Gibbs was adamant, they were going to take Luffy to the morgue, which was seriously messed up, because Luffy would be FINE he always was, he had to be, Ace needed him to be, why wasn't he waking up yet? He took another deep breath, calming the flames that threatened to burst to life at looked back down at his brother.

"I can cauterize the wound." He found himself saying out loud, "We don't need any help."

The vehicle turned, slowing. Apparently they had arrived at Quantico. "Yeah, I can see how well that's been working for you." Gibbs looked at him in the rearview mirror, "Tony, how's he holding up?"

Ace had to stop himself from punching the man as he lifted the shirt they'd been using to apply pressure with, causing his brother to moan as blood sluggishly seeped out. "Still bleeding, Boss. Looks like it's slowed some."

"Ace, that normal for your brother?" Gibbs' tone tore his eyes up from Luffy's still face and he looked at the man. "It's important."

"Of course it's important! You're taking him to a fucking morgue!" Ace snapped back.

Tony interrupted him before his rant could begin anew, "Ducky used to be a doctor before he was a medical examiner. So anything you can tell us would be a real big help right now."

"I...Oh." The SUV stopped, the doors unlocking even as he scooped his brother up in his arms carefully. He didn't want to touch the shaft, he wanted to burn it out of existence but if it was made out of that damn coral, or if the arrow head was, he'd splinter it with his heat. If he managed to get a flame going, that is. Both thoughts terrified him.

The morgue was just a tense, insanely long elevator ride away. Ducky was ready and waiting for them. The man's kindly looking face was drawn in harsh lines when he saw the arrow, much like the expression Hiruluk wore. He IS a doctor. Ace gently placed his brother on the table, "P-please, help him. The arrow, and I, Luffy... he..." his voice got small, "What do I do?"

"Calm down." Gibbs' hand on his shoulder made him flinch.

Ducky was cutting away at Luffy's shirt, his tone reasonable. "Gibbs is right, my boy. Dare I say your brother is in good hands. I may be a bit rusty, but some skills are never forgotten. We'll have him patched up in no time."

Ace looked down at his own shirt covered in blood and shuddered before pulling it off and tossing it onto the floor. "Fine! Just help him."

"I notice the bleeding has slowed greatly...If you don't mind telling me, what exactly is Luffy's Devil-fruit? Tony mentioned something about bullet-proof on the phone."

"What's it matter?" He tensed at the word, years of hiding it making him instantly suspicious.

Ducky paused in his work and looked at him. He saw a flash of annoyance before something akin to understanding replaced it, and he glared at him, "My- Ace. Listen to me for a moment if you
will. Gibbs brought you here, to me specifically because I have worked with Devil-fruit users before. I am well aware that while some are completely physically normal, there are others, like yourself for instance, who are medical anomalies. I understand you are afraid, but you need to trust me right now. I'm just trying to help."

"I'm not a medical anomaly, Doc, I'm a freak." He smirked a bit at that, before looking at Luffy. "He's such a little idiot! You hear that, Luffy? You're an idiot! Putting me in this situation...he's rubber."

"Rubber?" Ducky had pulled away Luffy's shirt and was lightly fingering around the wound, "that might account for the lack of bleeding, I suppose."

"It might?" Ace was surprised, "Really? So, he's not, like, bleeding out or something?"

"If his powers are active, his flesh has most likely sealed around the shaft. Do we know if prism coral was in the shaft or the arrow-head?"

"No clue, Ducky." Gibbs replied, "Hey kid, how does your brother activate his powers?"

Ace cocked his head to the side, "Activate? What are you talking about? Luffy just is rubber. I keep telling him it's the lamest power out there."

"So, even when he's asleep he displays the properties of rubber?"

"I don't see why this is...oh!" Ace took the two necessary steps to his brother's side and pinched his cheek. Taking a deep breath, he pulled drawing the skin out. He grinned widely when he was able to keep stretching the flesh way past what he knew to be normal, "YES! No coral! Want me to burn it?"

Gibbs whacked him on the back of the head, "No, you idiot, you don't go burning everything that causes you problems, do you?"

"No, but not for lack of trying..." Ace muttered as he watched Ducky take two probes and pull the flesh away from the shaft, "that's just creepy."

"I'll say." Tony put in, "Whatcha doing, Ducky?"

"Removing the arrow with as little damage to the surrounding tissue as possible." Came the distracted reply as the doctor carefully pulled out the barbed arrowhead in a rush of blood.

It was apparently enough to wake Luffy up, at least part of the way. His hand close around Ducky's causing the man to jump and he whined, "Ouch, that hurt Chopper. Whacha poke me for?"

"Oh my! It seems as if our patient is up. Do hold still for a moment longer. I need to check to see if the arrow damaged anything inside you."

Luffy immediately started to squirm, "Arrow? What arrow? Ace, what happened? Where am I?"

"Hold still, you idiot!" Ace snarled, "Well?"

"It's amazing. It appears as if there is no damage to the soft tissue, only the muscles. I'm afraid you'll still need stitches."

Luffy sat up, pulling away from the doctor and shot him a startled look, "Why?"

"Because some idiot shot you with a fucking arrow. Good news? You're going to be fine. Bad
news? You're not arrow proof." Ace growled out, standing behind him. His younger brother looked
at the arrow with it's thin blade-like tip on the table next to him and started to laugh, causing the
tension to drain out of him. Trust the idiot to not take this seriously...if I had sent him out after the
shooter, after Auger... he frowned, slamming his fist hard into Luffy's head. "It's not funny!"

"SHISHISHISISHISHI! But Ace! I'm fine!" The boy continued to laugh, both of them oblivious to
the dark looks Ace was getting, "I'm not even bleeding anymore."

He shook him, "Luffy! Be serious for once! You could have died! Do you understand? Died, Lu! If
you had been out the window...or turned differently...then you didn't wake up," his voice cracked.
"Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'm sorry." Luffy stopped laughing, pouting instead. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I guess I was
really sleepy or something. Ace? Ace, don't be sad, ok? I'm alright, really! It barely even hurts. I
bet it'll leave a cool scar! Wait till I show Zoro!"

At that he couldn't help but smile. It was just so typical of his little brother to share something like
this with his best friend. It made him wonder what the cop thought they actually got into, really.
Then again, Zoro would be the type that wouldn't bat an eye at the truth, he was sure. All the more
reason to keep him out of it, he sighed, resting his head on Luffy's wild locks with a contented sigh.

"You seem to be very protective of your brother." Gibbs' voice pulled him out of his happy little
world.

Cracking an eye open, he cocked his head to the side, "It's only natural for a guy to worry about his
kid brother, right?"

"That's true...But here's a question for you," Tony asked, "if you're so worried about him and all
that, why'd you give him a Devil-fruit?"

"Wh... of all the...I didn't give him anything!" He tensed, staring at them, Are they fucking NUTS?
"Do you know how dangerous those things are? They can kill a person. We're talking a fifty-fifty
chance of instant death, man. No way I'd give one to Luffy." he hugged him closer.

"Actually, it's more like three in four die." Ducky put in while he finished the last few stitches and
started to wipe off Luffy's drying blood.

"Wow! That's so COOL!" Luffy laughed, "Hey, Ace, we're really special then, right?"

He gaped at the man, barely hearing his brother as his arms fell limply to his sides, "Seriously?
You...you're kidding me, right? Th... The odds, it's got to be better than that!"

A steadying hand reached out, Gibbs guided him into a chair. For once, Ace didn't fight it, he felt
like he was going to be sick or pass out, and he must have looked it, "You didn't know?"

He could only shake his head, eyes wide. Even Luffy was silent, picking up on his distress even if
it was obvious he didn't really understand what was wrong. But the simple boy always lived in the
now, giving very little thought to the future, and even less to the past. Ace found himself thankful
for it this time.

"Even if you didn't give him it, I can't see how you'd allow your brother to take such a risk. You
were obviously aware of the danger to some extent. Honestly, what were you thinking?" Ducky
pressed.

"That's not right. Ace wouldn't ever do something like that." Luffy spoke up, suddenly angry, "He's
"Good big brother's don't let their little brothers have something that could kill them, Luffy."
Ducky's tone was kindly, even though the look he gave Ace was anything but.

"He didn't give me it! He told you that already! Besides, Ace was copying me."

"Luffy, that's enough." he sighed, attempting to rein his brother in.

They all ignored him, Tony voicing the obvious question, "Come again?"

"He means he had his ability first." Gibbs explained, "Isn't that right, Ace?"

He stared at the old man defiantly. It was something he swore to never talk about. He didn't want to remember that night that his brother had gone missing, with only a note left behind. The panic as he searched the slums though the day, the fights, hoping the cops would be able to help...being too late, too late by far to protect Luffy. It was in his eyes, the haunted look that didn't belong on his nine-year old face.

He might not have wanted to share anything, but Luffy had no such qualms."Yep." He glared at his little traitor of a brother, "Ace got his like a year later."

"Gesh, Lu, why not tell them your last name while you're at it?"

"Ok! It's...I forgot, Shishishishi!"

"Idiot." He shook his head, "But I can't say I'm surprised. Any other pearls of wisdom you feel like sharing with the world?"

"Uh, Japan's talking about building a real working gundam?" He beamed, "Franky want's in on that project."

Ace blinked, "Wait, seriously? That would be awesome!"

"I know, right!"

"Hold on just a minute, I'm lost here." Tony waved a hand.

"Gundam. Giant mechanized humanoid robot. Blows shit up with lasers. Pretty epic. 'Course, without a standing army..."

"Not that, The Devil-fruit thing. How long ago did you guys say you got these powers? Like, a few years, right?" Tony looked at them, then at Gibbs and Ducky, "Right? It's got to be just two or three, max, right? I mean, we're talking some majorly dangerous black market sciencey-magic-mojo here...right?"

All three turned and looked at the brothers, waiting for an answer. He didn't like the disapproving look Gibbs was giving him. It wasn't like he'd asked to be like this, for any of this. Ducky's was the hardest, Ace thought. It was so knowing, and full of something akin to pity as he watched them that it just pissed him off. They sure as hell didn't need some old coot's pity. Not now, not ever. They were doing fine, weren't they? Tony...he couldn't help the chuckle that worked it's way out of his throat. It wasn't a nice sound, and the man frowned in response.

"Anthony DiNozzo, homicide detective, first class. Philadelphia Police. Cell phone number, two-six-seven, eight-nine-four, four-three-three-one. That answer your question, detective?" he smirked,
knowing it was a dark look.

"Wait, that's my old number. How do you know that?"

Ace rolled his eyes, "You were there, asshole. You were there the night our lives went to hell."

The silence was deafening, and seemed to stretch forever. Finally, Luffy, broke it. Ace wasn't sure if remembering bothered him as much, it was Lu after all, or if he was just bored with the tension. Knowing his fun-loving trouble making little brother though, it was probably some combination of the two. He shifted uncomfortably before looking at the three men who were staring at them and gave them his best idiot-stare.

"I'm all sticky. Is there a shower?"

Ducky was staring a little too intently at his brother, "Yes, over by the gym. It's on another floor, I'm afraid."

"Cool, What floor?"

"Uh, lower level. I'll..."

Ace snatched his brother's hand and headed towards the door, "Let's go, Luffy. I could use another shower, too."

"Mind the stitches!" followed them as they made their temporary escape.
Gibbs rested a hand on Tony's shoulder, offering both worldless support and stopping him from following the two brothers. It was obvious that the elder of the two needed to calm down, and he was starting to become impressed with how well Luffy read him. Not that he doubted the boy wanted to get clean, but his gut told him there was more to it than that.

"Boss, I...I swear I..." Tony stuttered.

"Is he telling the truth?"

The man sighed, once again the calm professional. There was a pause, "I donno, boss. I mean, that was my number, so it's possible. But I never did anything to the kid. Sorry."

"Not saying you did." He gave Tony a slight push, "He just said you were there. Go get some sweats for them."

"Uh, boss, where?" Tony pointed to the clock. It was just after five in the morning.

I'm sure you'll figure something out." He smirked back as his subordinate left, grumbling about the unfairness of it all.

Ducky was cleaning up, bagging the arrow for Abby to look at later. The two stood there in silence for a moment before his friend spoke up, "I am at a loss, Jethro. Every time I think I understand those two..."

"I know exactly what you mean, Ducky. You did good, though."

"It worries me how little Ace seems to know. Tony has not been in Philadelphia in almost a decade. They should know more about Devil-fruits by now, even if they'd just happened to stumble across them. And yet his control seems fine. Jethro, we are missing something important here."

"Well, we'll figure it out. I'm going to go keep an eye on them." He patted Ducky's arm as he left the morgue.

"And make some calls, no doubt." Came the tiered response as Ducky finished cleaning. "So long as I am here, I may as well get to work I suppose."

It actually wasn't the first time Gibbs had been in the office so early. It was always a little odd to see the usually busy building so empty, though. The gym was completely deserted when he got there. The sounds of the showers running echoed through the expansive room, and from the sound of it, they'd raided someone's shampoo and soap. He couldn't say he was honestly surprised. In fact, he'd kind of expected that. Occasionally he could hear snippets of conversations, mostly inane random things. Tony found him a short time later, carrying a bag stuffed with what looked like goods from the gift shop.

To his raised eyebrow the man replied, "Janitor let me in. Left my card and a list of what I took. Did you know the sell underwear? That's just so wrong. Convenient, but wrong."

"Probably for agents who need a quick change of clothes." He smirked, taking the bag and heading over to the showers. The shower room was hot and steamy, most likely from the two prolonged showers that were still going on. His foot caught on something and he looked down, noticing a mostly burned pile of soggy clothes. *Looks like he does tend to burn things that bug him.*
"Lu, you done with the conditioner yet?" A bottle went flying over the wall of one stall to another two away with unerring aim. He wondered why they were not right next to each other, actually. "Dammit, Luffy! You used most of the bottle!"

"Shishishi! There's still some left!"

"This is why we can't have nice things...I'll leave a note or something. Gesh. No wonder Nami never wants you to visit. You done yet?"

"Yep. Um, Ace? All I got is a towel."

Now Gibbs spoke up, "Brought you boys something. Change of cloths." Two heads poked out, one from behind a curtain, the other from above it. Ah, that would be why he's a stall away. He held out the bag for them to see and placed it well away from the burned cloths before turning to leave. "Be out in the hall if you need me."

Tony tried to hide a yawn when he came back into the gym. "S-sorry Boss."

"Don't worry about it. Go on up, I'll keep an eye on these two. And DeNozzo? Work doesn't start for another two hours at least." Gibbs never suggested for his agents to sleep on the job, and he himself wouldn't be getting any sleep for a while, but he saw no problem with Tony taking a quick catnap at his desk. With that settled, and the two trouble making brothers at least somewhat contained and content, he settled in the hall. It wouldn't do for any agents to come in early and startle the two. It was still early, but it wasn't impossible.

Now came the annoyingly hard part. Calling Vance and letting him know what had happened. Not to mention he should call his team and tell them to be careful. It was unlikely that the gunman would be going after them, his target had apparently been the brothers, but he wasn't one to take risks. First though, was calling Vance. The man was not going to be happy, he hadn't been happy when Gibbs had called him briefly and told them that they'd been shot at.

"Gibbs? Talk to me."

"Yeah. Looks like Luffy is alright. Took an arrow to the gut. Nasty bladed piece of work. Abby'll have to check it out."

He heard cursing, "How bad is it?"

"Not too bad. Blood loss and stitches, but he's alright. Turns out he's rubber. Saved the kid's life."

"That...would explain a few things." Vance shifted around, "Where are they now?"

"Getting clean. Ace let it slip that he and his brother have met Tony before."

"Oh?"

"Apparently, he was there the 'night our lives went to hell' Ace's words." He leaned against the wall, remembering the look of torment in the young man's eyes.

"What did he mean by that, I wonder."

"Tony's got no clue."

"But you have your suspicions." Vance's tone wasn't sarcastic, but he could almost hear the smirk, "What's your gut telling you."
"...They've been Devil-fruit users for a long time, Vance. And they're terrified. Ducky says they don't know nearly as much as they should." He sighed, hedging the question. "I don't like where this is going, Vance."

"Neither do I."

The director sighed, "Sit on them for now. Call your team and let them know what's going on. I'll figure out what to do with our two troublemakers later."

The calls to the rest of his team were simpler, just short messages letting them know that he and Tony were alright, and so were the boys. He finished it off reminding them to be careful, and he'd see them in a few hours. Of course, it still took time, and he began to wonder why he had not seen hide nor hair of the boys. Worried, he opened the door to the gym. Everything was silent.

A quick glance around showed him exactly why it was so silent. The two had made a nest out of towels on top of some spare mats and were sleeping soundly back to back. He watched at Luffy rolled over in his sleep and slapped a hand across his brother's face. Ace muttered something and nudged the other, now laying on his back. Gibbs felt a small smile tug at his lips at the scene. Both looked so peaceful, so harmless, it was an amazingly unguarded moment. A moment he knew that had been brought on by lack of sleep, adrenalin, and in Luffy's case, blood loss. With a shake of his head he sat on a nearby bench to keep watch, leaving them to their dreams.

It was a little after seven in the morning when he heard them start to wake. Or, to be more accurate, when the fight over the towel started. Up until that point, every time someone had popped into the gym, he's held a finger to his lips and pointed to the two, earning wary nods before the room was once again vacated. It was apparent that office gossip had been fast at work the day before. So they were alone when Ace attempted to roll over, taking the large towel his brother had been using as a blanket with him. Luffy hadn't let go, his arms stretching for a bit till a frown creased his brow and he pulled hard. The elder brother muttered something, tugging again on the blanket. Luffy almost tore it out of his hands with the next pull, grumbling himself. Ace kicked him, and Luffy's head snapped back bashing into his own. Neither were awake as they continued to wrestle over the towel. RRRRRIIIIIIIPPPP They both rolled apart, falling off the opposite ends of the matts. Gibbs was amused to see that when both sat up glaring at each other they both still clutched the tattered remains.

"Gesh, Ace! You stole my blanket!"

"I stole your blanket? You ripped it, you asshole!"

"You don't even need one!"

"That's besides the point!" The elder brother snarled back, tossing his half down on the mat. "You trying to start something?"

Luffy's response was to throw his piece on the ground, cracking his knuckles, a wicked grin on his face, "Bring it!"

He was shocked when the two of them launched each other in a fury of blows. It only took a moment to realize that few if any of those blows were actually connecting, and most of those were that happened to be blocked or deflected. Neither seemed to be using their abilities, either, and both were smiling widely giving the impression that it was more of a game. As Gibbs watched them critically, he could definitely see how Ace guided his younger brother's movements, teaching him in the midst of a fight. It was very apparent to him that Tony had been correct, the elder knew at least the basics of many different fighting techniques which he combined flawlessly. Luffy's style, however, was erratic, despite Ace's attempts to guide him. Yet, Gibbs leaned forward as a fist narrowly grazed the freckled cheek, he's got a actual technique going. Unpolished, though. His
eyes narrowed slightly when the boy wobbled a bit dodging a kick.

"Alright, that's enough." He clapped his hands, "Break it up."

Both turned and looked at him for the first time, apparently surprised to see him. Ace immediately reached out to catch his brother before he could fall, through, "Shit! I forgot."

"Yeah, Kind of thought you might have. How you feeling, Luffy?"

The boy blinked owlishly at him, eyes slightly unfocused despite not being out of breath. In fact, neither boy was is out of breath, he noted. Luffy flashed him a wide smile, "I'm fine, old man..."

"You don't look so fine." Gibbs pointed out. Half joking he continued, "Did you forget that you were shot with an arrow a few hours ago?"

Luffy gaped at him, "I was?! When did that happen?"

"You idiot! How can you forget something like that?" Ace thumped him on the back on the head. "Shishihihi, it'll be fine! I'll just eat some meat!"

"No, you'll drink a lot of orange juice and eat something other than meat." Gibbs wiggled his finger at them, turning to go. He was sure it due to hunger that they followed him obediently to the cafeteria, bickering the whole way. Gibbs pushed them towards a table before heading over to one of the many refrigerators. He'd asked McGee to stop and pick up a few meals for the two bottomless pits currently under their care, as well as juice. Looking inside, it seemed that he'd spent a goodly amount.

Luffy took one look at the bags and lit up, "Is that all for us?"

He smirked down at the boy, handing him a large cup, "Drink your juice."

It was gone in a gulp. The senior agent could only watch while sipping his coffee as a food fight broke out. Not generally how these things go, is it? he mused as Luffy growled at his older brother's hand as it snaked over to one of 'his' meals. When that proved ineffective, he snatched at the offending limb only to miss. Ace had fast reflexes. Reflexes he used to guard his plate in return from a sneak from the very hand Luffy had tried to grab him with. He was amazed, both were still managing to stuff their faces while the war for more food escalated. Before long, Luffy had gotten warned away by a spirit of flame, and Ace almost lost a sausage to a rubbery arm coming from the far side. They'd finally gotten to the point of stopping the other by stabbing each other with the plastic forks. Even Gibbs could tell before that started that it wasn't going to work. Luffy just stretched, and Ace melted three of them. The food was gone in less than fifteen minutes.

"Drink your juice." He repeated, placing the full gallon between them. He raised an eyebrow as the two sulked before giving in. "Pretty open use of your powers there."

"Yeah, well, not like you don't already know or anything." Ace pointed out. Gibbs noted how he hunched down lower in his seat, despite his blaze tone.

"Didn't think it'd be something you'd normally do, is all. Both of you seem to have blended in really well."

"Thanks!" Luffy grinned, "Ace n' me try really hard! You know, except for when we gotta..."

"LUFFY!" Ace snapped, cutting him off. The boy's dark eyes widened in shock as he stared at his
brother before looking away and picking up his juice. The awkward silence dragged on.

"That was an interesting fight this morning." Gibbs leaned back, ignoring the tension in the air, "You've got good form, Ace, but Luffy..."

"It's effective on other people." Ace muttered as he stood, looking annoyed.

His brother quickly followed suit, hoping to his feet and cocking his head to the side, "What now?"

"Well, now we get you back up to the rest of my team." He rolled his shoulders, and headed off the storm he saw brewing. "Your lawyer isn't supposed to come in till ten, so until then, just stay out of trouble."

As they trucked down the hall, Luffy started to fidget, Ace glanced at his brother before returning his sullen glare to the floor, "Try not to fall in."

"That only happened once!" The teen replied, "Usopp told me it was a portal to demon world!"

"And you're the idiot who tried it! Just...hurry up and go to the bathroom, already." The young man sighed, leaning against the wall. Gibbs wordlessly took up a spot directly across from him. After a while Ace looked up, gray eyes meeting his blue for a split second before he looked away again, "Luffy...Thanks. For bringing him back here, instead of a hospital."

"Yea, Ducky's good like that." He smirked, "Must have been tough. Kid brother made of rubber. Can't imagine the trouble he got into."

"You've got no idea." Ace snorted in reply, a smile gracing his lips.

"Well, I saw you snap his neck, so I think I might have some idea. He didn't seem in too much pain when Ducky was working on him, either. No anesthetics."

The smile vanished, Ace looked at him. His eyes once again reflected misery, "It's not like he can't feel pain, you know. It just takes a lot."

*I bet you both know exactly how much it takes, too...or what it takes,* he thought of the bladed arrow, the speed Luffy had moved to the window. For a moment, he felt overwhelming anger at whomever had destroyed two young boys' lives. None of that showed on his face, though. "That why you teach him fighting yourself?"

"Yeah. Submission holds don't work on him, and because he's an idiot he doesn't realize what they do. Throws, kicks and punches he has trouble gaging what's acceptable force. So, we improvise."

"You don't seem to have that problem."

Ace smirked at him as Luffy came out of the bathroom, "I'm a better judge."
"This is so dumb. We can't even be sure the boys will be here!" whined Thatch as they clipped their visitor passes on.

Marco ignored him. They knew where their friends had been taken; and while it was early this was the best shot on finding them fast. They'd been a bit delayed in heading down by Whitebeard. In his wisdom, Newgate had wanted to be sure that they had all the facts available before he allowed his two trusted men to leave. Not that he could have stopped them, not with one of their best friends in trouble. *That's the great thing about Pops, he knows when to bend and when to stand firm*, he mused as they reached the elevator.

The bullpen was pretty busy, but they had a rough idea on where to go. Word on the street was the guys that had arrested them were lead by one Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Something Zoro was able to confirm after a quick phonecall to his friends in the precinct. Sometimes it was a good thing to have a undercover cop on your side. Granted, he and Thatch had to dance around the green haired young man on more than occasion... something they were more than willing to do, given the man's strong loyalty to a simple-minded kid. *A kid who deserves a better hand then the two of them have been dealt.* He closed his eyes for a second, fist clenching as they rounded a row of cubicles, *Maybe this time we can actually do something for them.* When he opened them again he was sorry to see the cubicles in this little row were nearly empty, save for one. A younger man sat, talking to an older fellow with a look of mild concern on his face.

"I assure you, Timmothy, both boys are quite all right. The events of last night have caused me to reevaluate my profile, however. Some disturbing things have come to light." The older man was saying, his back to them.

"Well, if you're sure, Ducky..." The agent noticed the two of them standing there, not that they were particularly hard to miss. "Can I help you with something?"

Marco was once again aware of how much he and his friend stood out like sore thumbs in places like this. At least he'd convinced the other to change out of his renfaire clothes. "I was wondering if you could help us, yoi. We're looking for our two friends, was told they were brought here yesterday."

"Alright, who are these friends of yours?" The agent's reply was willing enough, but guarded.

"Oh, if you met them, you'd know 'um. Two brothers? Dark hair, dark eyes. One's got a masters in 'piss off' the other's friendlier than a puppy," Thatch began with that easy going nature of his, "kinda hard to miss. So, you seen them around?"

"What exactly is your relationship with them?" Well, he supposed it was a logical question. What didn't make sense was how tense the agent became, or the man he'd been speaking to. Marco ran a hand over his head, worried. *What the hell did Ace do this time? Luffy said something about lighting stuff on fire... I swear, can't take my eyes off that boy for a second and he's causing trouble.* He huffed, "Listen, we just want to check on our friends, alright?"

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that." Tim began, standing, "Your two 'friends' were shot at last night, as were two of our agents."

Thatch's laughter was more of a sharp bark, "Fat lot of good *that'll* do. We sure we're talking about
"As the assailant ended his attack with an armor piercing arrow, I'd assume so." The older man began, his face drawn tight, "I find it interesting that you were aware of their impervious nature."

"Ducky..." The younger agent warned. Marco blinked. He knew that nickname. It had been a long time since he'd heard it, though. He stared hard at the man.

"Wait, is Luffy ok?" Thatch's sudden panic drew him back to the present as he raised an eyebrow at his friend. Why do you assume it was Luffy? Clear on his face. Thatch turned and looked at him, "Arrow, Marco. Against Ace? Why not piss him off a bit more, eh? You know as well as I do what an arrow like that looks like, man..." He turned back to the two, "please tell me the little brat's alright?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," came the once again guarded response as both men gave them calculating looks.

Marco sighed, Trust Thatch's way with words to make us suspect... "We work at a renfaire, yoi. You think we don't know what different arrows look like?" He snorted, "Bet Ace didn't let you go to the hospital. So, you the one that patched him up, Ducky?"

The older looking man startled, "Yes, yes I was...I'm sorry, but have we met before?" He fixed Marco with a look.

The blond realized his mistake, and looked away, "I have one of those faces." he fought not to toss in the 'yoi' as he was apt to still do when upset. He remembered meeting Ducky a long time ago back in 'Nam. The then much younger man had been working as a medic, and due to a series of events had stumbled across Marco's secret.

Thatch was giving him a weird look, "Oh yeah, because so many people have pineapples for hair." He thought for a moment, "Outside of anime, that is."

"I'm sure we've met before...what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't." He turned away, "This is pointless. We should just contact Robin and see what's going on."

"Hey! You were the one who wanted to come here! What about the change of clothes I brought, huh?" Thatch held up the small duffle bag, shaking it to make his point. Then he turned to the older man with a huff, "I'm Thatch, and Mr. Moody here is Marco. We're good friends of those two idiots. So please, anything you can tell us would be a big help."

Marco turned just in time to see Ducky's eyes widen, "Marco? I can't believe it...Could you possibly be Marco Zharptitsa?"

All eyes were now on him, Thatch was giving him that look, the one reserved for when he had excellent blackmail material. He sighed, it was obvious his friend had figured it out. Marco tried to stop what he knew was coming by narrowing his eyes at the other, only for Thatch's chocolate eyes to dance with mischief. He swore revenge, right then and there, and the worse part was his friend knew it. He could see the other judging if it was worth it before he even opened his mouth.

"Hey, Marco..." He practically sing-songed, "Don't suppose that means 'Phoenix' does it?"

"It doesn't! Drop it, Thatch." He hissed back.
"Actually, it's Russian for 'firebird'," Ducky offered helpfully.

Marco rubbed the bridge of his nose as Thatch broke out into peals of laughter, "Seriously? Firebird? That's even better! What's next, 'fried chicken'?

"If you don't shut up now, I'm going to kill you, yoi."

"One more, just one more... 'flying turkey'...alright, I'm done." Thatch swallowed a giggle as Marco glared him into submission.

"Ducky...do you know this man?" Tim spoke up. The two mob members had completely forgotten he was even there.

"Hmm? I...I do believe I do, Timothy. If my guess is correct, he would be the man that introduced me to Devil-fruits as it were."

The other seemed confused, "Wasn't that a long time ago?"

"Yes, back in Vietnam, to be exact."

Marco felt like hitting someone, preferably Thatch, "You've got me confused with someone else, yoi."

"No, I don't believe I do. I remember that verbal tic of yours quite well. I must say, you have aged remarkably well."

"Oh, ha-ha, very funny." The blond snapped back, "Listen, if I knew you were here I would have sent this dumbass up alone. See if I ever push you out of the line of fire again."

Tim was staring at him in shock, "but that would make you at least in your fifties...How is that even possible?"

"I age well. Leave it at that." The look he must have been giving was fierce, as the man gulped and sat back down. "So, back to why we're here. Where's Luffy and Ace?"

Just then a familiar voice could be heard, "M-Marco? Is that you? What the hell are you two doing here?"

He turned with a relieved smile, spotting the brothers heading over to them followed by yet another agent. At least this guy wasn't someone else he knew. "Hey, man. Didn't you get our message? We're the cavalry."

"Message, what message? I was just told you called to tell us our place was trashed. You forget to tell me something, Luffy?" He caught his brother in a headlock and proceeded to give the boy a noogie.

"Shishishi...maybe! Hey guys! Oh! Guess what? I got shot! By an arrow! How cool is that?"

"Um, not very cool, little man." Thatch pointed out, shaking his head before grinning. "Show me, k?"

"Sure!" He pulled up the T-shirt that was emblazoned with the NCIS logo, revealing a small cross shape that had been stitched closed right in his gut. Marco winced in sympathy, the location looked painful. He was doubly relieved to see the boy up and moving. "Ducky fixed it. He's not as good as Chopper, but he's alright I guess." The blond felt a smile pulling at his lips, high praise
"Hey! Do you think Zoro will like it?"

"Since he's as crazy as you are...probably." Marco shook his head, "Good to see you haven't lost your skills, Doctor."

"Yes, well, it has been a while since I worked on a live body. I'm a medical examiner now."

Ace looked back and forth between the two of them, his brow wrinkling, "You know this guy, Marco?"

"Actually, my boy..."

"My old man saved his life once during the war." Marco interjected, "Thought Mr. Mallard here was going to have heart-failure when he saw me; told ya I look just like him."

"Oh, yeah. Your old man fought in 'Nam, didn't he?" Ace's look relaxed, "Small world."

"I know, right? Anyway, Thatch and I brought you guys a change of clothes...which it looks like you'll need."

"Please tell me it's not our ren garb?"

"Would I be that cruel?" Thatch looked hurt, particularly when all three emphatically said yes. "You have such little faith in me, it hurts. Take your clothes, dumbass."

Ace laughed, taking the clothes even as Luffy bounced on his heels, "Hey, hey hey...Does Robin know you're here?"

"Not yet...Where is your wonderfully overpriced lawyer anyway?"

"She should be here shortly..." The agent that had been following the boys said, glancing at the clock, "Why don't you two go see if she's checked in with the Director?"

"Boss, the Director is in the command room on a teleconference..." Tim began as Luffy took off, dragging his brother behind him up the stairs. "...with the director of Mossad right now." he finished lamely.

Thatch shook his head, "Well, that's going to be awkward to explain. That's Luffy for you, though. Loveable idiot."

"Uh-huh." The older agent nodded, watching the boys disappear from sight before turning his attention back to Thatch and Marco. "Mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"Checking up on our friends," Marco pointed out, "Robin know about the shooting yet?"

"Probably." The man replied, "There a reason you lied to your friend?"

"Don't know what you're talking about, yoi. I've never lied to Ace."

"How about starting with how you know Ducky."

"Think made for TV movie. 'Nam, wrong place, right time, yoi. Not important right now."

"My dear fellow, there was much more to it than that! Jethro, this fine man saved my life." Ducky stared openly at him in amazement, "You really haven't aged a day." The way Ducky was looking at him was making Marco a little nervous. He placed the other's name though, now realizing he
was with the man who'd had his friend arrested, for better or worse.

"Another Devil-fruit user? And here I thought it was rare."

"Two, actually." Marco smirked, ignoring Thatch's indignant squawk. *That'll teach you to call me a chicken.* "It's not common, but there's a few of us out there, yoi. Jethro is it?"

"Gibbs." The other said. Marco nodded his understanding. "I take it Ace and Luffy don't know?"

Thatch snorted, "Now there's a great idea, 'Hey, Ace! Listen, you know how you and your brother are a little special? Well, guess what? We, your two best friends...in fact, your only real friends, are too!' Seriously, do you want him to kill us?"

"What my friend means is Ace isn't very trusting, and he's got a bit of a temper. We've decided to leave well enough alone unless he asks." Marco translated. "Kid's very good at hiding his abilities, so we didn't realize he was one right away."

'Seems to me his control slips quite a bit when he's upset." Gibbs mused.

Marco shook his head, "That's where you're wrong. Only time he's not in control of it is when Lu's in danger. Everything else? Deliberate. The why is really none of your damn business, yoi."

Thatch nodded his agreement, worry and anger crossing his face, "Yeah, what is is catching the slimeball who hurt Luffy. Did you catch the shooter?" When the agent shook his head, the pompadour sporting man looked ready to break something, "Dammit! Rat bastard's probably three steps ahead, Marco. We'll never catch him."

"You know who did this?" Tim interjected.

Marco lazily met his friend's eyes before shrugging, "We might, yoi."

"Don't suppose you want to share that information with us?"

"If I thought it would do any good...Hey Ace! What's this I hear about you burning shit without matches?"

The young man grimaced, joining them once more, "I really don't wanna talk about it."

Thatch draped an arm around his friend, "What are you doing back?"

"The Director told me that Robin'll be here any minute. I think he was trying to get rid of us, but you know Lu... the harder you try to get rid of him, the more he sticks around. Like a cold."

Tim spoke up, a look of confusion on his face, "Did you just call your brother a cold? I don't get it."

"Because he sneaks up on you and then BAM he's in your face. Plus, you 'feed a cold, starve a fever' and he's always eating...Hey, Ace, if Luffy's the cold and we feed him, then are you the..."

"Finish that sentence and I show you exactly how I light things on fire, Thatch."

"Mr. Ace, I really don't think this is the time to be threatening your friends." Robin's voice reached them from the end of the row of cubicles. "How is Luffy?"

"Fine. Or he will be in about a day." Ace replied, "Thanks for asking."
"It is good to know the 'captain' will make a full recovery." Her smile was genuine, apparently catching Ace by surprise, Marco noticed with some amusement.

"Yeah, well...Ducky did a real good job patching him up."

"I see," Robin flipped open the file she had been carrying in her hands, "I would like to discuss your notes, Doctor Mallard."

"Please, call me Ducky."

Robin half smiled, "Well then, Ducky. It says here that you suspected Luffy was stuck in a dependent, stockholm-esque relationship with his elder brother, correct?"

"Ah. That was before new information had come to light. You must understand, both were being quite difficult, and given their living conditions, it seemed to be the most likely scenario."

"Stockholm?" Marco mused, his lazy blue eyes falling on Ace. If anyone would understand the shrink talk, it would be his friend. Ace, however, looked like someone had just slapped him with petrified coral in the face.

"It's when a victim forms a strong emotional and psychological attachment to their tormentor." Robin clarified, amusement dancing in her eyes.

He frowned, I don't see what's so funny about Luffy forming any kind of attachment to his 'Unc... "Oh...OH, I see." The humor made much more sense. He felt a grin pulling at his lips.

"You thought Ace was abusing Luffy?" Thatch cracked up even as the dark haired man in question gaped at Ducky in shock.

"What?!” Ace finally squeaked out, "I'm just worried about my little brother! I'd never do anything to hurt him!"

"He's a fantastic big brother. Always looking out for Luffy..." Marco began, enjoying the opportunity to once again tease the young man about his brother complex.

Thatch picked it up, "Like, oh, following Luffy on his way home from school."

Ace sputtered, "I had to make sure he knew which apartment building it was!"

The two friends chorused, "repeatedly."

"It's Luffy! He could forget!"

Marco smiled at his friend, draping an arm around his shoulders even as Robin continued, "What about that time you punched a salesperson at the mall who bumped into Luffy?"

"She was trying to feel him up, I swear it!" Ace protested.

"There was that time he stole a hotdog cart because Luffy was hungry..." Marco mused.

"Chopper told him to stay in bed, and it was just right there!" Ace was grinning a little now, the earlier tension gone, "I mean, really, you know how he is. It was the only way to get him to stay!"

Thatch added, "What about when he pushed him into the middle of a street fight that one time..."

"He said he was bored! And I was right there in case something happened!"
"Actually, that's not the *best* example of brotherly love..."

Robin smiled benignly at the younger agent, "Perhaps not. Particularly when he was there to potentially protect others from his younger brother. If I recall, you spent two days in jail for that, and Luffy was given community service."

Ace shrugged, "It seemed like a good idea at the time, alright? Plus, they were asking for it. Called Luffy a monster."

Marco winced. He hadn't heard that part of the story before. He knew very well how sensitive of a topic that was to the both of them. *Hell, it's a touchy subject for any Devil-fruit user, let alone two kids forced into this, yoi.* "Not a smart move on their part."

Dark grey eyes stared at him for a moment before switching over to Thatch. "How long have you guys known?"

"Wh-what are you talking about, Ace?" Thatch sputtered.

"About me n' Luffy. Don't play dumb, Thatch." Ace narrowed his eyes, "I *know* you know."

Running a hand over his patch of blond hair, Marco sighed, "Little over two years. Saw Luffy get hit by a car. Freaked me out until he got up and waved to the driver. Kid blabbed when I confronted him about it," he lied.

While he *had* seen Luffy get hit by a car, he'd known about the boys before that. Ever since Blackbeard had approached Pops bragging about his two new 'pets', he and his brothers had been aware of the existence of two Devil-fruit users working for the man. It was only after he and Thatch had stumbled across Ace carrying his brother that the true depth of the situation hit him. Until that moment, they'd all assumed that the man had either found two users, or had convinced some of his cronies to take the risk. When he had brought back news of two brothers terrified of 'Uncle Teach' Whitebeard had been furious.

For three years they had been hearing about the trouble Teach's 'secret weapons' had been causing. Three years of feeling disgust that any Devil-fruit user would stoop so low as to work for a treacherous coward. Three years of actively hating them when a shipment arrived smashed, or was burned to ashes. Years spent blaming two victims. He'd never seen Pops so mad as when he figured it out what the man had done. Mad at Teach...and mad at himself for not suspecting he would do something like that.

At first, Marco had gotten to know Ace out of a sense of guilt. After all, not only had he been Teach's mentor when the man had been running with the Whitebeard's, he was also the one to introduce the slime to Devil-fruits. It wasn't long before guilt transformed into respect and genuine friendship. The only guilt he felt now was at his own inability to rescue them from their personal hell.

He felt Thatch place a hand on his shoulder, "You know how Luffy is. Wouldn't shut up about how cool you were."

"You don't...?" Ace trailed off. Marco could easily imagine what he was asking, *care, hate me, think we're monsters...take your pick."

"It doesn't matter, yoi. You're still you." He quickly affirmed, much as they had done with Luffy that day. He couldn't help but add, "Always said you had a fiery temper."

"Who else knows?"
"Zoro, for sure. At least about Luffy. He spends enough time with your brother it would be a bit hard to miss." Thatch pointed out as a Gothic dressed woman came bustling up to them.

"Gibbs! It's horrible! Those marks on Gekkō's ankles? They're hand prints!"

"Any prints, Abby?" The older man asked.

"That's just it! I was able to pull a few, and Gibbs, they're Luffy's. Which doesn't make any sense, because the prints are clean, and his fingers have all these little scars on them, so they can't be his, but everything else matches."
Director Vance often found himself looking forward to his meetings with the Director of Mossad. The two men had been long time friends in spite of the political hoops both found they had to jump through. Over the years, neither had let their respective positions get in the way of their friendship. While Vance didn't always agree with Eli's stance on many things, he did respect the man greatly as a director. It was why he was willing to take time away from his current headache to help his friend deal with his own. Their friendship was largely the reason he'd requested Ziva stand in on the teleconference. He was aware of the awkwardness between father and daughter, after all.

Currently the two men were discussing the sudden increase in terrorist cells that were becoming active. The odd thing was the group, which called itself Baroque Workers, did not align with any religious teachings. It seemed to be a strictly political group that was gaining power. Eli suspected someone was spreading the movement among the disenfranchised. Someone who most likely was well off. Unfortunately, they had been unable to find any leads to confirm this, or even a hint at a name.

A young woman with long vibrant blue hair pulled up tight in a ponytail was placing a teacup in front of the Mossad Director, temporarily distracting Leon from his line of thought. "And who's this lovely lady?"

"Allow me to introduce you. This is my niece," Eli waved a hand as the teen turned and smiled at the camera, inclining her head politely.

Ziva blinked, her mouth hanging open, "Vivi? What have you done to your hair?"

"I dyed it. Do you like it?"

Vance raised an eyebrow, he seemed to remember that Eli's brother was some sort of important diplomat. He couldn't imagine the man being alright with his daughter's new hairstyle, given their high profile life, "Does your father know?"

The girl smiled, "Of course he does. Papa said it really brought out the color of my eyes. He seemed a bit disappointed that I wouldn't be able to go with him to his summit, though, so he sent me to Uncle Eli."

"I can not believe you would do such a thing, Viviv!" his agent grumbled, "Your hair was so beautiful."

"Ziva, relax. It is only hair dye. Besides, I think it looks..." Eli began, only to be cut off as there was a knock on the control room door.

Vance had left strict orders for them to not be interrupted for anything. Still, his thoughts turned to the two wayward brothers who had, for all intents and purposes, taken over the gym that morning. Thinking it might be another emergency with them, he nodded to one of the techs to check the door. He wasn't expecting the poor man to end up with a nearly broken nose for his effort as Luffy shoved open the door with all his might the moment it was unlocked, catching the guy in the face. Everyone stopped and stared at the happily grinning teen. As Luffy flitted into the room Leon noticed the teen had a firm grip on his elder brother's hand, and Ace looked less than thrilled by
being lead around like some kind of dog.

"Hi Lion-Vance! Have you seen Robin?"

He felt his brow wrinkle, "Excuse me?"

"Robin! You know, Robin-Robin! She's, um, tall...dark hair, blue eyes...wow, I know a lot of tall
ladies with dark hair and blue eyes, don't I, Ace?"

"You know a few." The elder brother granted, his eyes darting around the room suspiciously.

"What are you two doing in here? Could you not tell the door was closed?" Ziva snapped, "It meant
'keep out!'"

"Well, Duh! That's why we knocked first. The old dude said Robin might be in here with you guys,
so we came here. Oh, look! We have new clothes!"

Old dude...? Gibbs. Vance thought fast, piecing together that the man had not realized that he had
been in a conference when he'd conveniently sent the two headaches after him. "I see...Well, Miss
Nico was not arrived yet. As you can tell, I was a bit busy, so if you don't mind..."

"Leon, who are these Charming young gentleman? You have not introduced us yet." Somehow, he
was not surprised by the Mossad Director disrupting the attempt to get the two to leave. He could
hear the laughter in the man's voice at the apparent welcome distraction. Welcome for him, at
least.

Ziva turned to face her father, a frown on her face, "No one of any importance," she said. Vance
was surprised to see Luffy flinch at her words even as a dark cloud of rage passed over Ace's face.
Any second now he expected the hot-head to go after her, and for the life of him he didn't know
why.

"Actually, Eli, they're helping on a case." He shot his agent a look to keep her mouth shut as he
tried to do damage control.

"Oh dear. Is there anything I may offer my assistance in?"

"No; not at this time. We have it under control." Leon's returning smile was tight.

Luffy finally looked up from the carpet, though his brother was still glaring a hole into Ziva;s head.
He looked right at the teleprompter and blinked. "Who's he?"

"I am Eli David, Director of Mossad. And you are...?"

"I'm...HEY! Desert Bluebell! Waz'up bastard? Things be applesauce here. Who the hell is the old
fart? Does he poop?" The teen grinned widely after a mangled and widely offensive attempt at
Hebrew.

Eli's face fell even as every NCIS member in the room stared at Luffy in shock. The man glowered
at the teen before opening his mouth, most likely to ream him out as he pushed his niece behind
him. Vivi apparently had other ideas, however, and smoothly stepped around her uncle. She smiled
brightly at the screen.

"Close, Captain. I think you meant maybe adventure instead of 'applesauce'. The elder gentleman
is my Uncle. I'm visiting. Do you like my hair?"
"I thought I said adventure, though..." The teen whined, "Didn't I, Ace?"

"Sorry, you said applesauce. Trust you to add food to everything. Not to mention how offensive that whole thing was. Thank you so much for not answering the other question, princess." The elder brother smirked, rolling his eyes. "Hair looks good, by the way."

Luffy beamed up at the screen, "Yeah! When did you do that? Does Nami know? Can I send a picture to Sanji?"

Ziva's tone was incredulous as she looked back and forth between the two brothers and her young cousin, "Vivi? Do you know these...people?"

"No," Ace's tone dripped with sarcasm, "She just likes getting insulted in her native tongue by a complete stranger. I mean, really. Duh."

"Vivi's my friend! We're penpals. Her dad's real cool, too. Mostly because he bought all the popcorn. Hey, how do you know her?"

"Hey, idiot, Vivi's uncle? Eli David. And what's this nice agent's name? Ziva David. Their related, dumbass."

"Oh. Oh! Oops. I kinda sorta got into a fight with your cousin, Vivi. Sorry. But, she was arresting Ace. She's a good fighter!"

Vance definitely had a headache now. He could tell by the bemused expression on the other Director's face that he was probably getting one as well. The most annoying part about the whole debacle was the cocky smirk on Ace's face, "Would you two go away?!"

"Be happy to. Know when our lawyer is going to be making an appearance?"

"She should be arriving any minute. Now would you please leave? Director David and I have important matters to discuss."

"Sure, sure." Ace turned and started strolling towards the door, "Good luck with that. Since you're stuck with Lu and all." He smirked over his shoulder, "See you later, 'Bluebell.'"

"Bye, Ace." Vivi waved her hand slightly before turning her attention back to the more energetic of the two brothers. The one who was making absolutely no move to leave.

"So, anyway, then Sanji won the competition. I don't know why he was even worried, since he's like the best cook ever. But you know how he is."

He looked at the teen who was engaged in an animated discussion with Vivi. The two of them had completely hijacked the teleconference, as Tony would put it. Ziva just shrugged helplessly, obviously at a loss on what to do when her attempt to steer Luffy out of the room lead to him easily slipping out of her grip. At least Eli seemed bemused by the whole thing as the man sat back in his seat and sipped his tea. Of course, it was completely possible that his tea was spiked with something. You know what? I take it back. He's smug. That bastard is gloating... He caught the smirk directed at him and fantasized about sending the two brothers to cause trouble in his country.

"Oh yeah...I was supposed to tell you something...what was it...?" Luffy's face scrunched up almost comically.

"Don't hurt yourself," Vance joked when his face started to turn red, "who asked you to tell Vivi something?"
"Um...it was that guy. You know? Bon-bons. I told you about him, right?"

"Vivi shook her head, "Sorry, no."

"mnmnm, I thought I did. Bon is an actor or stuntman, something. He's really super amazing! I met him a couple of years back when I was on this trip to Florida maybe...or was it Mexico?...anyway. He lives out in California I think. I'm not sure." Luffy rambled on, "He's super good at what he does, though...and he knows your dad. I think he's done something for him? I got a little confused when he was talking about it, cause he started talking in French a bit. Anyway, he and I still talk, because he thinks I'm funny, and I don't think he's weird at all, because, really, he's super amazingly cool! He's like mystique! You know, from the X-men? Shishihihihihi."

"He sounds like an interesting man. I'll have to ask Papa if he remembers him. You said his name was Bon-bon?"

Luffy waved a hand, "That's just what I call him. I think it's Clay-something. Clayface? Eh. Who cares? He's a fruitcake, so Bon-bon works. Ah! I remember now! He said to tell you to tell your father..." it's starting to sound like a game of telephone "tow watch out for the Sand...shark? no...aliga...ah! Croc! Watch out for the Sand Crocodile. Then he started going on in French again, so it got a little confusing because he mentioned something about a bad opera that he was running."

Vance raised an eyebrow at the pouting boy, "An Opera?"

"Yeah, I know! What's an Opera have to do with Crocodiles, anyway?"

"Boy, can you tell me his exact words?" Eli leaned in, attempting to catch the dark brown eyes.

"Ummm...I think it was 'Le Crocodile est de payer pour la baroque' and 'méfiez-vous des travailleurs dans la tempête de sable' which sounds like a really lame opera to me." Luffy started between Vance, Ziva, and the screen, obviously confused by the tension, "Was it something I said?"

Vance put a hand on his shoulder and being mindful of his injury from the night before gently turned the youth to face him. He stared intently into the honest looking face, searching for any hint of deception and found none. There was no sign that the teen had any idea at all what he was talking about, only confusion, "Luffy, can you tell me why your friend told you this?"

"Well, Bon-bon knows Vivi's my penpal, and he always says 'a friend of a friend is a friend of mine!', which I like, because I don't have a lot of friends...I wonder if Sand Coc is one of his friends, though? Oh, he also said something else which was really weird."

Leon had a momentary twinge of sympathy for him. He could see a few different reasons why the youth might not have many friends, and wondered which combination of factors it was. Still, he could easily believe that one of those he counted among his friends was something of a spy. Luffy did have a friendly nature overall, making it hard to dislike him. It did raise the question on why this stranger was willing to risk himself by helping Luffy's friend. "What was that?"

"It was weird. He started by apologizing for something. But he said he was trying to help, so I told him if he was trying to help he shouldn't be sorry. Then Bon started to cry. But he does that a lot." Luffy shrugged, "He's funny like that."

"I see. Well, I bet your lawyer is here now, so you might want to go find her before she accuses me of questioning you." He suggested.

The dark hair whipped around, looking at the clock, then at the clock in the room behind Vivi,
"WOW! Look at the time difference! I should go...Take care, Bluebell! I'll tell Zoro Nami 'n them you said 'hi', ok?"

"Yes, please do!" Vivi called out at his retreating back. When the door had clicked closed, the young woman sighed, "I am honestly glad to see he is alright. Papa was really worried about them when Nami called. Thank you for taking care of my friend, Mr. Vance, Ziva."

Silence reigned for a beat before Eli spoke up, "So now we have a name...tell me Leon, do you know anything of this 'Sand Crocodile'?"

Chapter End Notes

Translation of Bon Clay's words to Luffy: The Crocodile is paying for the Baroque...beware the workers in the sandstorm

Oh, and this is from Bard of Chaos about Luffy calling Vivi a bastard:

"What? It means bastard? I thought that Rosa Stone thing said it meant custard!"
"That's not any better!"

Yep. basically that's what happened.
Luffy leapt upon his brothers back. He wasn't exactly sure why everyone was standing around, or why Ace was so tense, but he figured it didn't matter all that much. Ace was always tense anyway. "Hey guys! Oh, did you tell them Vivi was on the tv-thing?"

Ace looked really worried as he peeled Luffy's arms off his neck, "N-no, Listen, Lu..."

He didn't like that look on his brother's face. He was fine just a while ago... Luffy huffed, "Oh, that's too bad. It was really cool to see her, too. Hey Thatch, guess what? She dyed her hair blue! It looks really good on her, too."

"Luffy, would you just shut up and listen to me for a second?!" Ace was using the tone that he only got when he was really upset about something.

"Huh?"

Robin answered from where she stood leaning casually against a desk, tapping away on her phone in an unhurried manner, "They think you had something to do with Gekkō's death."

"Oh," He blinked at everyone blankly for a moment before breaking out into a big grin, "Don't be silly! I haven't seen Gekkō in years...besides, doesn't he normally hang out around Hawaii or something? OH! Guess who called last week?" Luffy gushed, pouting when his brother just made a choking gesture at him, "No fun. Meanie...Bon-bon called! I think he was in California or something 'cauz he said something about Hollywood...Anyway, he wanted me to say 'hi' to you for him."

"Who is Bon-bon?" Gibbs asked.

"Bon Clay. He's kind of like an old annoying friend that you never wanted," Ace explained, apparently deciding it was better to just go along with Luffy, "he almost never calls though. So what the hell did he want?"

The teen shrugged one shoulder, "Oh. I donno. He kept crying about how he thought it was going to be helpful and how he was sorry or something. I couldn't really tell what he was talking about though, so I told him it was alright."

"LUFFY!"

"WHAT? He was going on about how he couldn't be my friend any more, and how he wanted to die because of it, Ace! I don't want Bon-bon to die!"

"He was just being melodramatic again, Luffy. You know how he is. So what was it this time?"

Luffy chewed his lip, "I'm not sure...Maybe he tried to be me?"

"Wait," Tim raised a skeptical eyebrow, "are you suggesting he's a Devil-fruit user?"

Luffy shot his brother a worried look; he knew he had probably said too much. Ace just sighed, "I...uh...guess... that's what I'm saying."

Now he was confused, every time he started to bring up something like that, his brother got really mad. "I thought we weren't supposed to talk about stuff like that?"
"Yeah, well, that ship's sailed."

"We're going sailing?! COOL!" Ace punched him in the head, causing him to laugh.

"Idiot!" Gray eyes rolled before the elder brother turned his attention back to the NCIS agents, "Bon's a small time actor. But he's also a con artist or something. He's got this way of looking exactly like another person."

Tim raised one skeptical eyebrow, "Like Clayface in Batman?"

The two brothers broke out into wide grins, "Exactly like that," Ace chuckled. "Guy's name isn't even really Bon Clay. See; when we first met him, like, ages ago. He sort of...scared the crap out of Luffy."

"I wasn't scared!" He crossed his arms and glared at his brother.

"You were! You kept screaming for the Batman to come and save you!" He couldn't really argue with that. "Anyway, Bon tried to rotate through the faces he knew, but it just freaked Lu out more and I wasn't about to help him...so then he goes 'Mon ami, I am a...a good Clayface! Oui, and much better looking! Clay Bonne!' And, well, Luffy started calling him Bon Clay after that."

"And this Bon Clay guy has the ability to copy people's faces?" Gibbs questioned.

"Well, a bit more than just the faces. It's scary how accurate he is, yoi." Marco put in, "He was in New York for a while and Luffy had him over to show off."

"You didn't tell me that..." Ace turned to glare at Luffy...He decided it probably wouldn't be a good idea to mention that Zoro had been there as well.

"You were out of town." Thatch shrugged, "Wasn't a big deal. When the kid went to bed Bon told us what the deal was. Did you know his copy is accurate right down to the finger..." everyone turned and stared at Luffy, "When was the last time Bon 'copied' you?"

"Oh...about two years ago. For my passport, remember Ace?"

Gibbs cut in, "You have a passport?"

"Yep! Needed one for this...uh...thing..." Luffy trailed off lamely, knowing better than to get into the details of one of the trips his Uncle had made him take.

"Forget that...Do you realize what this means, Gibbs? It means Luffy didn't do it! Of course, he couldn't have done it since he was in New York at the time...but now we know what happened!"

"YAY!" Luffy cheered pumping a fist into the air, "I didn't do it! Wait...what didn't I do?"

Marco and Ace both shook their heads while Thatch tousled his hair, "You little dope! You didn't have anything to do with killing Gekkō."

"But I said I didn't already..."

"But now we know why it looked like you did." Robin smiled, still not looking up from her phone. She's cool like that, Luffy thought, almost nothing affects her. Except maybe burning a book.

"...Ok?"

"Seriously, guys, give up. He doesn't get it." Ace chuckled, sounding relieved.
"Shishihihhihi, it's a mystery..." Luffy yawned.

"My boy, how long has it been since you have gotten any rest?" Ducky spoke up, eyeing him with concern.

"Oh, not long. Ace and I took a nap!"

"Yes yes, I heard about your...nap. Before that, though? Surely you don't think you've gotten enough sleep?" The older man continued to press. Luffy just smiled at him, I don't see what the big deal is, I'll sleep when I'm tired.

Ace growled, "What is with you guys? First you're accusing him of murder, and now you wanna make sure he's getting enough sleep? What the hell? Make up your mind!"

"Never thought he did it, hot-shot." Gibbs shook his head, "And Ducky's right to be worried. You've been up for what? Almost three days on little sleep."

"I don't know what yo-" Ace's eyes rolled back into his head as his knees buckled. Marco was there in a flash, slipping under one sagging shoulder before anyone else had a chance to react.

As the man guided him over to the chair Luffy quickly pulled out, Thatch crowed, "And down he goes! Man, that never gets old, does it?"

"Since I'm the one who always has to catch him, yes it does." the blond snorted in disgust.

"You don't have to catch him," Thatch's grin was wicked, "You could always just, you know, let him fall."

Luffy grinned, "That's what I do! Then I steal all of his food."

"We all know how well that works for you," Thatch laughed, "you are just lucky Ace loves you more than food."

Luffy just grinned in reply, focused on arranging his brother like his own personal manikin. He leaned his brother forward on the desk, resting his head on one open palm. He then began to stack a cup, the stapler, and...he looked around for more, pulling things from nearby desks to cover his brother with before standing back and admiring his handiwork.

"So I will take the boys to my place with Gibbs, and we will keep an eye on them there."

"We should go with you. Insurance." He looked up at Marco's words. It sounded like everyone had been talking about them while he was distracted. Not that it was a big deal. Marco and Thatch wouldn't let the navy people do anything bad to them.

"No can do. You're civilians."

Thatch was obviously annoyed about something, "Hey, now! I think we rank a bit higher than civi's. Besides, we know what you're dealing with..."

"You could just tell us, you know..." Tim suggested.

"not happening. Hey, and Marco here isn't exactly a civilian is he?"

Ducky shook his head, "He was discharged decades ago."

That sounded like an interesting story, but before he could ask about it, Ace twitched. In his typical
fashion, his big brother came back to the world of the living in a rush, even if his mind hadn't quite caught up with the rest of him. He sat straight up, sending the items Luffy had so carefully stacked on top of him toppling to the floor and looked around, his grey eyes hazy. Luffy waved in his face, careful to keep his hand out of reach. When Ace grabbed for it, he laughed, the sound apparently waking his brother the rest of the way.

"The hell, man?" Ace muttered.

"The hell is right, Ace. When was the last time you took your pills?" Thatch rested a casual arm on his shoulder.

"Nnn, uh? Day before yesterday. I missed a dose or two before that. Lu?"

Luffy shrugged, "Same. Why?"

"Great...Then you two are definitely going to go sleep it off at the good doctor's house. We'll get Chopper to send over your meds..."

"Actually..." Abby began, cutting Marco off, "I have a friend who'll be willing to examine them. He owes me a favor, and I know how they are about hospitals and..."

"We have a doctor!" Ace snapped.

Luffy nodded, "Yeah! And he's a great doctor! The best!"

Abby scowled, stomping her foot, "He gives you highly addicting drugs and homemade pills with enough caffeine to kill you. That doesn't seem like a good doctor to me."

"He's the best! You don't know him, so you can't say anything bad about him! Chopper's my friend!"

"Luffy...my point is I can't let you take medicine that is that dangerous without a second opinion at least. Please, you have to understand; someone shot at you yesterday. For all I know, this Chopper could be poisoning you..." She held up a hand, "I know he's your friend and he wouldn't do that. But I have to follow the rules, alright?" Abby turned her attention to Ace, her eyes pleading. Luffy looked to his big brother as well. Ace would know if she was lying, and he always knew what was best.

"This friend of yours...he'll keep his mouth shut?"

"Yes! I can promise you that. He takes his oath very seriously"

Gray eyes narrowed, "And you're not just going to drop this? Any of you?" Ducky and Abby shook their heads while Gibbs just stared him down and Tim tried to look firm. "Fine. But one toe out of line, and I roast the bastard."

"Good! Well, it'll take my friend some time to get here...so we'll meet you back here tomorrow morning, ok?"

"Where are we going?" Luffy cocked his head to the side, "We aren't going to a hotel again, are we?"

"No, you're coming to my place. Don't worry, there is plenty of room, I assure you, and Gibbs will be there as well." Ducky smiled down at them, "You'll be my guests."
Luffy gaped at the man. This didn't seem like a very good idea to him. He liked Ducky, he was cool. The teen knew his chances of protecting the older man were slim if Auger tried again, though. He looked at Marco and Thatch, feeling a little betrayed by the two. Neither made eye contact however, confirming to him that this was a bad idea.

Ace apparently agreed with him, "No. Bad idea."

"I think it is an excellent idea," Robin said, putting away her phone, "arrangements have already been made, in fact. I assure you that you and your brother will be quite safe with Doctor Mallard and Mister Gibbs. I'm sure your friends will see to that. All relevant parties have been contacted. Now that that is out of the way, I have a few other matters of pressing business to attend to. Good day." The woman turned and left, leaving everyone staring after her.

Tim finally broke the silence, "Is she always that...?"

Luffy grinned, supplying, "Bossy? Yep!"

"If you let her, she'll micro-manage your life. Usually she's not this bad, though. She's pissed." Marco ran a hand through his hair, turning his lazy blue gaze to Ace, "I'd do as she said, yoi. It's safer that way."

Ace just nodded, looking vaguely worried. Luffy for his part was glad that Robin wasn't mad at him this time. Just once she had been annoyed with him, and it had not been a good thing. Robin, he had learned then, made a horrible enemy...but she made a great friend, too.
Tripping on a Marathon

It had taken another two hours to finally get the two brothers corralled in a car and on their way to Ducky's. That was including another stop at the cafeteria, where Luffy and Ace had both inhaled a good amount of food left unmarked in the refrigerators. The way Gibbs saw it, it was a good lesson to all the agents. If you didn't properly mark your food, it was up for grabs. Expiration meant nothing to the two bottomless pits, either. Of course, the moment they'd gotten them into the car, the two had started grumbling about how they were hungry again, too.

He'd never been so happy to see Ducky's brownstone in his life. Now if he could just shake the feeling that they were being watched, he'd be happy. It was getting very annoying. Who ever had been tailing them since they left Quantico was good, very good, but Gibbs had been an agent a long time. He was one of the best out there still, so he knew when he was being tailed. It was a gut thing, and it had saved his life more than once. As he pulled into the driveway in front of the ornate lawn he glanced around. Nothing in the neighborhood seemed out of place. There was, however, a strange brown crate on Ducky's stoop.

"Expecting a package, Ducky?"

The man leaned forward, adjusting his glasses, "Oh heavens, no. I can't say that I am. I wonder where that came from."

That's what I want to know. Gibbs sighed, "Stay here. All of you." He glared at Ace and Luffy, "I mean it. Stay. Here. SIT. STAY."

The younger brother just barked while the older grumbled, "What do we look like to you? Dogs?"

He smirked, shutting the door, "Good boys."

It wasn't that long of a walk to the stoop, even when he approached cautiously. The box was rough looking, and came to his thigh; easily big enough to pack a few nasty surprises. Gibbs poked the crate with his boot, debating if it was safe to open. The two brothers had already had a few attempts on their lives, and he wouldn't put it past this strange guy to warn them off with a bomb of some sort.

The man knew he had to figure out if it was a threat quickly before the two nosy troublemakers came, though he hoped his friend would be able to slow them down. Ducky's attempts at stalling them apparently failed however when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He didn't bother to look, knowing by the height that it had to be the elder brother. The unruly dark hair swept forward as he looked down at the crate sitting on Ducky's stoop. There was no address on it, nor a return address. Instead, the side was decorated with a strange flower.

"Cool." Ace squeezed his shoulder before kneeling next to the crate and reaching for it.

Gibbs stopped him quickly, "Don't! It might be a trap."

The look he got said You're kidding, right? as Ace shrugged and reached out again. Luffy came bouncing up the steps with Ducky following just as the elder brother was about to lift the nailed down top. He didn't even need a crowbar, which was impressive.

"Whacha got there, Ace?"

"Looks like Hancock sent some stuff." The lid popped off, "Lets see...smoked meat, smoked
salmon, jerky. Scotch, guess that's for you guys. Hey, rum! Awesome. Dibs on the rum."

Ace had a real smile on his face as he handed the oversized crate to his brother as a confused Ducky unlocked the door. Logic kept telling Gibbs that Luffy should not have been able to easily carry it, but he did. The boy did have to be steered into the correct room, since he was easily distracted by all the interesting things in the house. Finally he place the crate on the floor of the kitchen and rummaged around in the box, coming up with a strip of dried meat and some kind of foreign soda.

"How did you know it was safe to open?" Gibbs couldn't help but ask, watching as Ace emptied the rest of the crate.

"This is Hancock's mark. Cool, right?" Luffy pointed to the flower. "She's got this awesome snake, it's like super big! She's had it forever, so people call her snake-princess."

"That makes absolutely no sense, as usual." Ace laughed, opening one of the bottles of rum, "But that's Lu for you. Might even be true. Never asked why, but it is Hancock's personal mark. Probably found out from Robin where we'd be staying. Hancock does stuff like this sometimes."

"She sends you booze?" Gibbs went to snatch the bottle, only to have the teen dance out of his way.

"Yeah, so?"

"You are under age, and Luffy is a minor." Ducky pointed out.

"I don't drink," Luffy put in helpfully, "tastes nasty, anyway."

"So what, I'm underage? I'm also highly narcoleptic and I drive a friggin motorcycle." Gray eyes rolled expressively, "Talk about unsafe behavior. Let's not forget that I'm a criminal."

"That is besides the point. You are not getting drunk in my house." The doctor reached for the bottle again.

Ace let him take it, grinning as Luffy tossed him another bottle. "Relax, old man. You're forgetting my, uh, unique constitution."

"And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Shishishi...Ace is fire, silly! Alcohol doesn't work on him." Luffy laughed.

"Really?"

"Might as well be drinking water." he took a swing of the rum, "Most depressing thing ever."

"Then why do you drink it? You like poisoning your liver?" Gibbs swiped the bottle.

"Again, Fire-man. If it burns, it doesn't work on me. I just drink it cause I like the taste." He tugged his brother's cheek, "Luffy here? No alcohol tolerance, and a bunch make him ill. I think it's got to do with the whole rubber thing. You know, because some alcohols can dissolve rubber. So. We don't let him drink. Plus, he's a mean drunk."

"Am not!" The boy pouted.

"You beat the crap out of Zoro when he let you drink his beer. Zoro, Luffy."
Gibbs raised an eyebrow, sure there was a story behind that one. Before long, Ace gave in, rummaging around in the crate for something different to drink. When he came up with a bottle of Fanta he cocked an eyebrow as if asking if they were going to steal that from him as well. Opening the bottle he began, "Zoro might be a cop, but he's always had this little problem with drinking. I think he's about my age, but I'm not too sure. Anyway. This one time Lu's over at his place and they're watching some crap on TV..."

"Wipe Out is not crap!" Luffy growled out, tossing a container of Jiffy pop at his brother.

"I beg to differ." Ace caught the tin with ease, swinging it by the handle, "Especially when you turn it into a drinking game. So, Zoro's getting trashed, and before I got there, apparently he has the brilliant idea to get Luffy in on the action. Next thing you know, half the precinct is there trying to wrestle all hundred-forty pounds of my brother off a very confused Zoro when a disagreement over the name of an obstacle broke out. Luffy turned out to be right, by the way."

Gibbs made a noise of agreement as he made his way to the window. It was obvious by the story that Luffy couldn't hold his liquor. He felt like they were being watched again. Casually he glanced out, looking across the well manicured lawn while carefully sipping at the scotch he'd poured for himself. His eyebrows rose in surprise. He had to admit, whoever this Hancock woman was, she had excellent taste. There was nothing in the yard however.

"Hey, you got a television or something?" He could hear Ace putting things away as he asked.

"Yes, I do. It is in the Living room."

"Cool!" there was a pause, "Where's that?"

"Right down the hall on your right."

"Awesome! Hey, Ace, I'm gonna go watch TV, K?"

"Alright, try not to break anything!"

"Fine fine! Oh! Look! Squirrel!"

"LUFFY!"

"I'm kidding!"

He turned to see Ace shutting the fridge. The young man had a sheepish expression on his face as he said, "I should, ah, probably go keep an eye on him. You know. So he doesn't break something. Like the TV. So, um. Yeah."

Ducky shook his head as they watched him carry an armful of food and drinks with him to the living room before turning to Gibbs, "Jethro, what is it? What's wrong?"

"We're being watched."

The doctor blanched, "by who? Should we call the Director?"

"Don't know yet. Doesn't feel hostile, though." He shrugged. Out in the yard, a shadow under one of the trees stretched and warped, becoming darker. Both men tensed. "Ducky."

"Yes, I see it."

Gibbs reached for his gun, cursing that he hadn't thought to load it with the coral bullets Abby had
made as he watched the darkness pulsate. After a moment a figure emerged and he drew his weapon. The person apparently had been expecting this reaction, though, and his hands were up in the universal gesture of surrender as he was suddenly visible. Gibbs had no other way to describe it, for he was still in the darkest part of the shadow and hadn't moved. One moment he couldn't tell who it was, and the next moment it was obviously Thatch. The man waited a second to be sure the recognized him, waved jauntily and vanished into the shadows again, the feeling of being watched the only lingering reminder he was still around.

"Devil-fruit user, huh?"

Ducky sounded as dazed as he felt, "Well, his friend Marco did imply that."

"Yeah." He turned away from the window, refusing to admit he was a little annoyed by the unwanted help in watching over the boys and wondering where Marco was. "Well, better go see what the brothers are up to before they trash your living room."

Luffy hung over the back of the couch expectantly as they entered the room. Holding the remote at the ready, he was twisted so he could see the two older men as they entered the room. "Hey, you're British, right? You have the BBC?"

Ducky smiled, settling into an overstuffed armchair, "It's the accent, isn't it? Scottish, actually."

"Same thing." The teen waved the remote, apparently impatient as he rolled his eyes.

"Well," His friend began much to his amusement, "In reality Scotland is..."

Ace cut him off, peeling the cardboard off a Jiffy Pop pan, "Look, do you get the BBC or not? If you try to explain it, he'll want to see your kilt next, and trust me, you do NOT want to go there."

"Ah." Ducky blinked, before turning to look at Gibbs who just shrugged. He'd seen the other in a kilt before; but something told Gibbs that Luffy would make it a big deal. Apparently his friend agreed, "Oh dear. Yes, yes I do get the BBC. Channel two-thirty-two. May I ask why?"

Both brothers grinned, and the elder started lightly shaking the popcorn container back and forth slightly before replying, "Two shows we watch on the BBC. Used to be more, but now they're on re-runs. Top Gear and"

"Doctor Who!" Luffy cut in, grinning widely as the aluminum started to bulge out.

"Doctor Who," Ace echoed, also grinning. "We always watch together when we get the chance. I mean, it's a great show...very campy, and awesome. Luffy wants a TARDIS, you know. Want some popcorn?" He pulled back the tinfoil, revealing perfectly popped popcorn, slapping his brother's hand away as it stretched over to snag some. "You can wait your turn!"

Gibbs reached over and took a handful, nodding over to the TV as he settled into the only other available seat. "Never seen the show myself. What's it about?"

"OOO! So there's this guy!" Luffy began, why do I get the feeling this is just going to confuse me more? He looked over to Ace, who was trying not to laugh, yep, definitely going to confuse me more. "This guy, his name's 'The Doctor.' That's it. Just, 'The Doctor.' But everyone goes 'Doctor who?'; which is funny as hell, because he just goes 'exactly!' OH! and he's got two hearts! Like, two! I think he's an alien or something because they call him a Timelord or something, but its not all that important except every time he kinda-dies-but-he-doesn't-really-'cause-hes's-The-Doctor he comes back looking different. Mmmm, and he travels with these people. He calls them 'Companions.' And they ride in his spaceship-time-machine-thing called the TARDIS which stands
for something really cool but I don't remember what it means, but it's a lot bigger inside than outside, like Ace says my stomach is. And now there's this new lady. Her name is River, or is that her title? I donno...but I think she's his wife or was or will be, but he doesn't know her, though she knows all about him... And we don't really know what she is. Let's just assume they're all aliens. Even when they're not. Because then they really are. And they go back and forth in time and space and Britain and change stuff to keep it all the same, because that's what The Doctor does. He fixes things."

Gibbs blinked, feeling a headache coming on, *yep. Definitely confused.* He looked over at Ducky who just had this benign smile on his face as he took the remote from Luffy and put the BBC on. The man caught him staring at him and explained, "It's actually a favorite of mine. Well, the old Doctor Who, really. I have not seen much of the newer shows."

"You don't know what you're missing Ducky!" Luffy cried, "The bowties! HEY! Ace, doesn't his bowtie remind you of Doctor Who?"

Ace started to laugh, "And you just noticed that now. A little, yes. It's...Wednesday, right? So, if I'm right..." he wiggled his fingers for the remote and pulled up the schedule before crowing, "YES! Doctor Who marathon!"

"Awesome!"

Somehow, Gibbs didn't think it was going to be so 'awesome'. Nine hours later he was beginning to see the appeal of Doctor Who. Not that he'd ever admit it. The guy had a certain tragic flair to him that he could respect. No matter what, he kept going forward. He was confused at first when they'd started out in Manhattan with these strange angel statues. When the strange man who Luffy excitedly told him was The Doctor had led his two companions, Ace supplies their names as Amy and Rory, to a locked room to watch an old man die. When The Doctor tells them that they just watched Rory die, Gibbs is very confused, but not half as confused as when Ace and Luffy shout "Again?!" During the commercial, Ace explained Rory's died about four or five times already, which was only half as confusing as him being River's dad. And things just got more confusing from there. Gibbs decided after trying to figure out the overall plot with the not-so-helpful-explanations of Ace and Luffy, he'd just take each episode as it was, and maybe ask Tim later. If he felt like it. Because he was way too sober for all this talk about paradoxes and time travel.

It was sometime around midnight when Ducky finally put his foot down. They'd spent the day in the living room, watching Doctor Who, eating, chatting, and generally having a relaxing day. Ducky wanted the boys to get a good nights sleep, however. That was something they were not going to get sitting in front of the television all evening. It turned out to be a harder task than the man had anticipated, though.

He had two spare rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs. Gibbs was going to take the couch, and the boys were going to take the spare rooms. The problem was, Ace didn't want to be separated from Luffy. The young teen didn't seem to have any qualms with the sleeping arrangements, nor did he have an issue with Ace sleeping in the same room with him. Luffy, Gibbs decided, would probably be content if they told him to sleep in a box out in the yard. Part of him was almost tempted to try it, just to see what would happen.

"Be reasonable Ace. Luffy is not a small child, he is more than capable of sleeping in a room by himself." Ducky huffed exasperated.

"You don't understand! Luffy has bad dreams sometimes, alright?"
"I do?" Dark brown eyes blinked dully, addled with exhaustion.

"Yes, you do. If he wakes up in a strange place..."

"You'll be just upstairs. Surely he's slept alone before?" Ducky asked. Ace said nothing in reply as his face became stormy.

Finally the man tried another tactic, "What if someone, I don't know, breaks in?"

"I'm right down the hall. No one is going to get past me." Gibbs didn't think it wise to mention Ace's friend's abilities with shadows. He didn't think that would help matters.

"See Ace? Everything is F-fiiine," Luffy yawned widely, "I'm sure it'll be alright till morning."

"If you're sure, Lu. But if you need me, shout. Alright?" Ace shifted his weight uneasily before hugging his brother tightly and heading to the stairs, worry etched between his shoulder-blades.

"G'night Ace!"

"G'night, Luffy!"

Gibbs wasn't sure exactly what had woken him up. He lay on the couch though, wide awake, staring at the ceiling with a frown wrinkling his brow as he tried to figure it out. It's quiet, the thought hit him in a rush, and he was throwing himself off the couch before he'd even processed why that was a bad thing. There was a moment of disorientation as he navigated the short hall, and he paused at the stairs wondering which way to go. Trouble was brewing and he wanted to get a lid on it. The question was answered for him when Ace appeared at the top of the stairs, his freckles stark against his blanched skin. His wide eyes quickly fell upon Gibbs and the young man practically flew down the stairs.

"Lu? Where is..." He sounded panicked.

"Calm down," He put a hand on Ace's shoulder, stopping him from rushing into the room, "I'm sure he's fine. I was just going to check on him. Breathe."

Dark gray eyes glared at him from behind a curtain of black hair as the youth took a few ragged deep breaths. He still took them, though, which Gibbs took as a good sign. Carefully, the agent eased past the Devil-fruit user to lead the way. It wasn't a long before Gibbs was cautiously peering in through the open doorway to the room Luffy was sleeping in, gun drawn and ready. Everything was still, quiet. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Luffy was sprawled on the bed, sheets half hanging off, pillow hugged to his chest as he breathed steadily. There was nothing else in the room. He was sure of it. Gibbs looked back at Ace and cocked an eyebrow, tilting his head for him to take a look.

Ace sighed in relief, then tensed, his eyes focused on Luffy. He pushed pasted Gibbs. "Stay here."

He wondered if the younger man had seen something, a sign of an intruder, "Why?"

"Because this is going to be bad." He gestured to his younger brother, "I told you it was a bad idea to let him sleep al-"

"NO! NONonoNONO! STOPIT! STOP! IT HURTS!" Luffy's shouting cut him off and Gibbs was shocked to see the teen up and thrashing about, limbs flailing everywhere.

"Dammit!" Ace stood in the doorway, torn for a moment. He shoved Gibbs hard in the chest,
causing the man to stumble back, unaware that he had even been attempting to enter the room, "YOU, out here. Stay. Keep Ducky out, too. Lu packs one hell of a punch when he gets like this...I'm going to go see if I can wake him up."

Gibbs nodded, hearing Ducky coming up behind him, "You going to be alright?"

"Yeah. He can't hit me unless I let him." Still, Ace looked grim as he entered the room. Gibbs noticed how he attempted to dodge as many of the now stretching limbs, he could only assume he was afraid of accidentally burning his brother. Before long, he'd reached Luffy and threw himself directly on top of the smaller body, hugging the boy to his chest. Still Luffy shouted, but it took on a less frantic note.

When things finally quieted down enough for him to speak, Ducky asked, "Gibbs, what exactly is going on here?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Duc. Woke up 'cause things were quiet. Next thing I knew Luffy was screaming bloody murder for no reason. Your guess is as good as mine."

"And there was nothing to set him off?" Gibbs shook his head. Ducky frowned, "It almost sounds like night terrors. A rather extreme case, though."

"ShhhhShhhShhh...It's ok...Go back to sleep now..." Ace looked at them over his shoulder, "That's what Doctor Kureha said. It didn't used to be this bad, back when he was a kid. I'll be right back, Lu. Ok? Go back to sleep. I'll be here."

They waited while the young man quickly tidied the room, his movements quick and methodical. Gibbs suspected that it was a coping mechanism, a way for him to calm down and collect his thoughts. After he was done, Ace checked on his brother again. He nodded to himself, apparently finding the younger asleep again. Gibbs could make out faint mutterings as Luffy stirred restlessly in his sleep. He assumed that was normal as the young man walked over to the doorway and leaned against the frame with a heavy sigh.

"This is why I sleep in the same room with him, alright? He..doesn't get any attacks really if there is someone else in the room with him. Or at least, the worst the happens is he lets himself out of the apartment...that was a hard thing to explain to Mrs. Binks down the hall." He rubbed his face tiredly, "Look, you got some government quack, no offence Ducky,"

"None taken."

"looking at us tomorrow. So, can we deal with all this after that? Because, right now, I just want to climb into bed and deal with my brother trying to kick my appendix out while I try to sleep. Alright?"

With a nod, he gave him a gentle shove on the shoulder, "Get going then. We'll see you in the morning."

The two men stepped further back into the hall and waited until they were sure the boys had fallen back asleep. The occasional mutter could be heard from Luffy, with an answering mumble from his brother. Most noticeable was the single word of "Adventure" answered with "sure". Gibbs assumed that the lack of replies is what had cause the teen to fall into a night terror in the first place. He looked at Ducky.

"This is most disturbing. Most disturbing indeed. Night terrors at his age. Most children outgrow such things. For Luffy to still experience them, and to such an extent, as well as
sleepwalking...Well, it is likely the boy is suffering from a worse case of psychological trauma then I had suspected. His brother as well. Night terrors have been linked to PTSD, as has Narcolepsy, though there is a potential for both to run in families. However, Jethro, there is something seriously wrong with how those two have been treated..."

"I know, Ducky. I'm trying to get to the bottom of it." Gibbs cut him off, "My gut tells me it's all a part of a bigger puzzle. We're going to figure this out. Don't worry about it."

Ace had been tight lipped at breakfast about his brother's night terrors, and Luffy didn't seem to remember anything. Instead, the boy had been surprisingly chipper that morning, yammering on about a dream involving rivers of chocolate, space ships, and meat. Everything always came back to meat with Luffy, though. The boy had apparently decided at some point that if this doctor was a friend of Abby's, he must be really amazing and had practically rushed his brother through the meal clamoring for everyone to hurry up so they could go meet him, despite the reservations he had had the day before. When Ace had told him to wait in the car, he'd finished the sentence to empty air, the kid was so excited.

The car ride had been pretty tame. He'd still felt like they were being watched the whole way, but it was less annoying now that he knew who was watching them. Ducky was called away to the morgue almost immediately upon entering the building, Palmer needing his expert advice on a case that had come in late the day before. Luckily McGee was there waiting for them. Director Vance had ordered for the boys to be accompanied by two people at all times, and though Ace had grumbled a bit at this, when Robin had agreed, he'd quickly shut up. It was almost funny, actually. That new rule found the four of them heading down to Abby's lab a bit ahead of schedule. Though, to the outsider, it probably appeared like the excited teen was dragging them to get in line hours early for the latest blockbuster. And it was an hour ahead of schedule he noticed as the door to the lab opened, revealing a tall man with his back to them as he arranged medical supplies.

Ace backed up, actually using Gibbs as a shield, much to the man's surprise. "YOU!"

The man turned at the sound of the voice. He definitely looked like one of Abby's friends, with dark circles under his iron colored eyes, black nail-polish, double piercings and a goatee that looked like it belonged in an indie horror flick. The fluffy looking hat ruined the look, until Gibbs noticed that the spotted pattern on it was continued on the pants. He looked surprised to see their audience.

"Oh, hey guys! We weren't expecting you so soon!" Abby chirped, still setting up her work table as a makeshift doctors bench. "Should have guessed with Gibbs with you though. Anyway, guy's this is my friend, Doctor Law."

"Your name's Doctor Law? COOL! Isn't that almost the coolest name ever, Ace?" Luffy gushed, stars in his eyes until his brother's arm shot out and grabbed him, hauling him back.

"Stay away from him Lu!"

Doctor Law smirked, "To think that the mystery patients my dear friend Abby called in a favor for me to check on would include you, Mr. Ace 'I-refuse-to-give-you-my-last-name'. It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

"Not long enough! Why the hell are you here?"

"Haven't you guessed? I'm your doctor for the time being. Procedures and all that."

"You're an underground doctor of death, Trafalgar Law!"
"You flatter me." The man just continued to smile the same way some serial killers had, "But that job is just a front, as it were. My real work is in, uh, cutting edge medical science. Government funded, of course. My work with the underground is strictly for my own benefit, I assure you. Still, I never imagined I'd see you here. Small world. And this must be your darling little brother?"

"Stay away from Luffy!" Ace snarled, "You're a monster!"

Gibbs felt it was a little like the pot calling the kettle black, but let that slide, "How'd you two meet?"

Trafalgar turned his attention to him and explained, "Oh, I was doing some work out in Chicago a few years back. There had been a nasty shooting, hospitals were full up. Lots of people died that day. That is neither here nor there, however. I, in my role as an, uh, unlicensed medical provider, was approached by a couple of street people. They wanted medical care for their friend who had been shot badly in the shoulder while shielding a mother and daughter. The fool boy refused to go to the hospital of course, and was now in critical condition. Naturally, being a good samaritan, I took the job."

"You took all my money!" Ace growled out, still half hiding behind Gibbs, "That's not being a good samaritan."

"Reimbursement for supplies. Anesthesia, pain killers..." returned the other only to be interrupted. "You didn't use any! And you CUT OFF MY ARM!" Gibbs turned and looked down at the angry youth at that. His arm didn't look like it had ever been severed.

"You were, as my friend Bepo puts it, tripping.' Law snapped, the smile melting off his face. Looks like Ace hit a nerve. The man continued, "In my persona, I use Ketamine. You happened be more resistant than I had anticipated, and remained semi-cognitive, if not lucid."

Gibbs frowned at that. Ace said he can't get drunk, and Ducky suggested that drugs wouldn't work normally on him, because he'd burn them off too fast. This guy is lying. Why? "If I had cut it off, and that's if, obviously it was for a reason, as it's back in place and you are still alive."

There was a moment of tense silence, and something seemed to pass between the two young men before Ace relaxed minutely, "Is that how it is?"

Law's smile was back, "Exactly. Look, everything that happens here will stay within this room, if you're worried about it. I never did go looking for you, and I must admit, I was quite curious."

"Riiight. Like that isn't creepy in the slightest. I'm warning you now, you hurt Lu, and you'll see just how interesting I can be. Got it?"

"Oh, I assure you, we are on the same page. Now then, why not hop up here on the table and let me get a good look at you?"

"Fine fine...Hey, Luffy, mind waiting outside for a bit?" Ace cocked his head to the side, and his brother eagerly nodded. Luckily Tim was there to keep an eye on the boy, and Gibbs flicked his eyes to the door in a silent order to follow him.

The exam that followed was remarkably tame for all the fight Ace had put up before hand. He complied grudgingly enough to Law's directions, glaring at the man. When the young doctor held up an empty syringe with a wicked half-smirk dancing on his lips, Gibbs swore the other actually growled at him. It wasn't a pleasant sound. Still, he didn't so much as flinch as the other drew a vial of blood.
"Alright, we're done here. You seem to be in good health. I'd love to get a demonstration of your abilities again, but I fear you might attempt to burn me, so I'll refrain from asking."

"How kind of you."

"Don't mention it. You may go now. Send that adorable little brother of your's in on your way out, ya?"

As Ace slid down from the table and stormed towards the door, Gibbs swore he heard him mutter, "Freak Doctor."

Luffy, in typical fashion, bounced into the room. His eyes shone brightly with excitement as he hopped up onto the table and practically wiggled in place while he waited for the doctor to begin the exam. Trafalgar Law for his part just stood there with a smirk on his face.

"So," The man began, pulling on a new pair of latex gloves, "You are the infamous Luffy."

"Yep! That's me!"

"You seem a lot...different than your older brother. More relaxed. He seems to be the kind of guy who's angry all the time. I imagine it's been a long time since Ace has had a girlfriend."

"Huh? I donno what you mean. Ace wasn't angry. You made him nervous, silly! MMMM, but he hasn't had a lady friend in forever...And the last one was cheap." Luffy's expression became clouded, and Law actually paused in his exam, looking over the boy's head to meet Gibbs' gaze to see what he thought. Gibbs didn't like what his gut was telling him, not one bit. "When he'd pick me up from Iva's, he'd have bruises, too. I didn't like her." The boy smiled again, "Iva took care of it though! She was nice! Ace would leave me with him when he had a date or something at night, and she'd watch me. He was kinda weird, but nice. I wonder how Iva's doing? Wow, it's been like...before forever!"

Just that little bit of information went a long way in explaining Ace. The fact that this 'Iva' was watching Luffy instead of his 'Uncle' suggested it was before Teach had gotten custody of the boys, meaning both had been children. Children living on the streets, most likely, he mused, looking at Luffy sitting there humming happily. It was even more amazing with the glimpse into his past, and he wondered not for the first time just how much Luffy was acting, and how damaged the boys really were. He was doubly glad Abby was out of the room.

Law met his eyes again, his as cold as steel. Gibbs knew that look. It was a look that recognized him as a soldier and held him responsible for whatever pain Luffy, his brother, and others like them might have suffered. He wondered who the soldier had been in Law's life, and how badly they'd screwed up to make the man so judgmental. But his voice gave none of that way as he teased, "and what of you, then? I'm sure you're popular with the ladies, what with that stretching body of yours. Or is it the boys that turn your head?"

"Mmmm. Well. I kissed Nami once. She said it was going to cost me ten dollars, though she did it for free."

"Oh?" Law moved to check his reflexes, and barely got out of the way in time as Luffy's foot came up.

"Yeah. We were in the park, and Usopp was talking about his girlfriend, right? So I said I wanted to know what the big deal was about kissing and stuff. Nami said she'd show me for a price. Zoro got all mad and accused her of being a money grubbing witch and a bad friend, but I think he was
pissy because she tricked him into buying her stuff the day before." Luffy paused as the doctor drew blood, watching it with a slight frown before continuing, "I told her that wasn't what I meant, though."

"And what did you mean?"

"Shihihih, that's what they said. Nami looked confused. Then she got all pissed and hit me. 'What?! I'm not good enough to kiss?' But, kissing and stuff for money, that's boring. People do it all the time, and it doesn't mean anything. At least, I never found it all fun...and then she kissed me for some strange reason. It was weird. Ace laughed at them when he found out."

"I can imagine. You are something else, you know that?"

"I get that alot. But Ace says I shouldn't worry about things, because that's what he's here for. So all's I gotta do is make sure I have enough fun for the both of us."

"Yeah, you usually get into enough trouble for the both of us, too. Like when you get kicked out of the movie theater, or the zoo, or the mall, or that time at the Statue of Liberty." Ace said from the doorway. "Which is you having fun, I guess. But then I worry. Actually, I think I'm beginning to notice a cycle here, little brother."

Luffy just grinned widely in reply as he hopped off the table. Gibbs shook his head and looked over at the doctor, "They done here?"

"For now. I shall have the results back by tomorrow at the latest. Sooner, I hope, if Abby allows me to use her lab. Penguin and Bepo will be jealous they didn't come today."

"Alright then. I'm gonna take these two upstairs then. Tim, Any new leads?"

McGee fell into step with him as the two brothers continued to tease each other, pushing and shoving as they waited for the elevator. "Sorry, Boss. Nothing Solid yet. We tried tracking down this 'Bon Clay' guy, but without any good idea on what he looks like, it's no good."

"You guys think you can shed some light on that?"

"Huh? Bon Clay?" Ace looked up from the headlock he had his brother in, "I've seen his real face before...Luffy here has, too. Not going to tell you, though. I mean, the guy is a friend, and he was trying to help. Besides, he doesn't usually go about wearing it, so knowing what he really looks like wouldn't do you any good."

Gibbs had been expecting that. He sighed as the elevator dinged and the four of them got on. "You know, we are just trying to help you out."

"I know." Ace shrugged, "But, Bon's...I get why he hides. I respect that. So even if you're trying to help..."

He made a frustrated noise, "Right, right. You're not giving me much to work with here, kid. We're going to start having to ask you questions. Questions you're not going to want to answer. Like questions about how you knew who shot at you." Gibbs caught the subtle way Luffy flinched, curling closer to his brother, and Ace's clenched fist.

Tim apparently caught it as well. He met Ace's challenging gaze and held it, possibly for the first time, and Gibbs was proud of him when he said, "Whoever was behind that was also the one who had Gekkō killed, wasn't it?"
"He-We-I-" Ace bit his lip and looked away, actually drawing blood. He didn't have to say anything. Just that was enough for both agents to know they were on the right track. Gibbs had a name, too. One shouted out while Ace was too busy thinking about his brother to worry about repercussions. Auger. Now they just had to look for anyone near the two with that name, and they'd have another piece of the puzzle.

"It's alright. We'll catch him. Whoever he is." Gibbs offered a smile as the doors dinged, knowing better than to offer physical support to them now. They were too tense; ready to snap, and he wasn't sure if it would be in a flurry of blows or into tears. It wasn't worth the risk, either. Ace didn't strike him as the type to get upset easily, and for him to feel threatened by this unknown person made Gibbs angry. He was determined to help them, whether or not they wanted it, or if Vance approved.
Ace jumped when the doors opened to show Ziva standing there waiting for them. The Israeli woman seemed almost as surprised as he was until she noticed Luffy. Then her face lit up. She laughed, "You are coming with me. My cousin says you are quite the expert at that thing. You know, that one where you run around and bounce off things?"

Luffy cocked his head to the side, "Parkour? Freerunning?"

"Yes! That!" Ziva grabbed his hand, "You will show me, yes?"

"Um...?" The boy looked at Ace, his brown eyes wide and pleading. It wasn't often he was asked to show off. Ace had seen him eyeing some of the decorative art outside speculatively as well.

"Sorry, Lu. Not my call." It actually hurt to say that, but he almost laughed when the full force of the puppy-dog look was beamed upon Gibbs.

The man just sighed. "Who else is going to be there?"

"Oh...just a few dozen agents or so. And Tony. Tim as well." Ziva smiled.

"I can see you planned this." The man half smirked, "Fine, get out of here. Be careful and try not to break anything."

"Thanks, Gibbs!" Luffy cheered, hugging the man and actually lifting him off his feet for a moment before dropping him and allowing Ziva to drag him away, grinning happily as Tim gave them a sheepish smile and followed.

"That is one strange little brother you have."

"You think that's strange? You should see his 'happy dance'."

"Happy Dance?" Gibbs lead the way through the bullpen towards the conference rooms.

"Yeah. He sticks chopsticks up his nose, holds them in his lower lip, and shovels with a bowl. I think he saw it in an anime once. _He_ thinks it's funny as hell. _I_ think it's just a step up above the _Hamtaro_ dance he was stuck on for awhile." He looked into the room. It looked like it was just going to be the Director, Gibbs and himself, "Don't I need my lawyer or something?"

"We're just going to talk. As friends." Vance gestured for him to have a seat, which he took reluctantly. "You and your brother seem to have interesting friends."

"Look, if this is about Bon Clay, for the last time, I'm not going to tell you anything."

"Actually, I was referring to Vivi Nefertiti and her father. She speaks highly of you." Vance sat down as well.

"Oh, her. She and Luffy are penpals. Can't say I was expecting the blue hair, but it does look good on her." Ace leaned back, comfortable with the line of questions for now.

"And you've never tried to take advantage of this relationship?" The man asked.
Ace felt his brow furrowed, "No, why should I? Got no interest in politics beyond pointing and laughing. Don't even suggest Luffy would. You've met him. Worse he's ever done is asked her to send 'exotic meat' to him."

"I see. And what about your Uncle?"

"What about him?" He felt his shoulders tense, and made a conscious effort to relax as he felt Gibbs watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Vance didn't seem to notice, "Has the man ever tried to take advantage of your relationship with the ambassador's daughter? The man does seem to be that sort of criminal."

"So? What if he is? He's got no say in our friends. Won't let him." He stretched his legs, feeling his toes pop as a familiar warm cottony feeling warped his limbs. Vance's voice took on a distant nonsensical quality just before his head pitched forward. He was vaguely aware of it hitting the desk with a resounding Wack! before everything went completely dark.

It felt like a longer fit. Kuraha always said it was in his head, but Ace swore that he always felt more mussy after a longer sleep attack then a short one. Reluctant almost to wake up fully. Still, he could hear voices. Echoy and watery at first, but voices all the same. Usually a sign to get up. What was I doing again?

"...ust wondering if it could be deliberate is all." Gibbs was saying.

"No. I looked into it. You can't deliberately trigger an attack just like that. Emotions maybe can bring one on though...but I don't think this was deliberate." That would be Vance.

He guessed they were discussing if he was faking it. It was more than a little insulting. Not that he hadn't ever faked an attack. He tried to move and his finger twitched just slightly, Great. Sleep paralysis. Wakey Wakey body. He would've hit his head against the table in frustration if he could.

At least he remembered now what he had been doing when the attack hit. If it was one of those episodes, he would be really annoyed.

Gibbs sounded worried, "He's been out for a while. Last time it was only a few minutes."

A few more moments ticked by before Vance sighed, "If it's annoying for us, I imagine it's twice as annoying for him."

Finally Ace could wiggle his toes. He sat up and made a show of stretching his arms, "It's very annoying. Ever fall asleep in a bowl of pudding? Not pretty. Where were we? Marshall trying to take advantage of Luffy's friendship?"

"Yes," The Director looked surprised, caught flat footed by his sudden cooperation. Ace was fine with that, he didn't want to talk about his narcolepsy with this man. Not when he'd obviously been looking into it and it made him feel uncomfortable. "That's where we were."

"Not saying the guy hasn't tried a time or two dozen. But to get to Luffy's friends, particularly Vivi, he would have to go through Luffy or me, and that's just not in the cards. He's our problem, we deal with it."

"What do you mean by that?" Gibbs asked, pinning him in place with a hard stare. He was beginning to think maybe he might have said a little too much.

There was a knock at the door before it opened. Ace couldn't say he was exactly happy to see that it was Trafalgar Law, but he was happy for the distraction. He assumed the man was there with the
results of his stupid little tests. Not that he would be able to tell them anything new. Ace knew what was in the pills Chopper gave him and his brother, and he also knew how healthy he and Luffy were, despite their unique anatomy and a diet made up of mostly meat. They were in very good shape, thank you.

"Not interrupting, am I?" The man's steel colored gave swept the room as he let himself in anyway and closed the door.

Vance just sounded amused, "No, not particularly. Why?"

Law tossed down some scrap pieces of paper, his handwriting neat across them, but his signature scrawled at the bottom, "Prescriptions, ya. Your little doctor friend is good, but try this stuff for a bit."

Vance and Gibbs shared a look before heading to the door. Ace barely noticed as he looked at the paper, his mind already having switched gears. "We'll be just outside."

"Don't go too far, ya. Shouldn't take long."

Ace waited until the door clicked closed before tapping one of the papers with his name on it, "Methylphenidate? Isn't that like, Ritalin?"

"Similar. Stronger. Some have success with treating Narcolepsy with it, as well as ADHD. I'm suggesting your brother try it for his...focus issues."

That's putting it mildly." Ace chuckled before he noticed the two other prescriptions, "What's this? Tofranil for Luffy and Xanax for me? Isn't that like, an antidepressant or something?"

"You are smart." Law sat looking Ace in the eyes, "Look, physically, you two are in great form. Makes me want to cut you up and see how you tick." Creepy freak-doctor Law smirked, seeing the thought on Ace's face. He tapped his fluffy hat, "But up there? You have issues. Don't need to be a doctor to see that, ya? So, for you, Anti-anxiety medication."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like jumpy people who can light themselves on fire in my operating room who are easy to spook, that's why!" he snapped back before offering a half smile, "With a brother like that, you probably need it anyway."

Alright, apparently he's still a little mad about the whole almost-burned-his-pace-down thing. Ace huffed, thinking if anyone should still be pissed, it should be him, since he had woken to find his arm off with Trafalgar grinning like a madman over it. He chose to ignore the comment though and focused on the second statement, "I can't exactly argue with you there. He once jumped off a roof to see if he could fly you know. Scared the crap out of me. And that was before he was rubber. Landed on a pile of garbage, stunk for days."

Law just stared at him with an unreadable expression for a moment, "I rest my point. You, take them."

"Alright, fine. What's with the Tofranil?"

"A little birdie told me that your brother suffers from extreme night terrors"

"I'm going to kill Ducky." Ace cut in before glaring at Law, the warning clear in his eyes, "That's a private matter, alright? I'm handling it. Luffy's fine. Nothing is wrong with him! He"
"Is not fine." Law snapped back, "Look at him, Ace! Look at him."

"I am! Luffy's fine!" Ace looked away, refusing to believe the other man could be right. He couldn't be anyway. Luffy was fine, THEY were fine. Just fine. Everything was alright...nothing wrong. Luffy was ok. He had to be. "I-I take care of him." his voice broke, clutching at the table as hard as he could. "He says he's fine. So nothing's wrong."

He could hear the clock ticking, but he refused to look up from his white knuckled grip on the table. Ace knew the other was watching him, thinking he was an idiot. Only a fool like Luffy would claim nothing was wrong. Even Luffy didn't believe it...it was a lie they told the world, and Trafalgar Law obviously knew it. He was going to call him on it any second now, and he wasn't going to be able to tell the doctor why...

"So, Tofranil." Law cleared his voice, "Good results on stopping night terrors with that, when 'outgrowing' them isn't an option. Couple other drugs we can try if that doesn't work. It's an antidepressant, so watch him the first few weeks for mood-swings, got it?"

Ace risked looking up, but Law was studiously looking at his notes, "A-anything else?"

"I'd say see a shrink, but...well. Beyond that, you both are in very good health. Especially considering from what I can tell you know next to nothing about being a Devil-fruit user. I'm leaving some information for you guys to look over. Please try and eat more greens. Luffy could use some more Calcium as well. I'm going to let the other two in now, ya? Have some things here they'll be wanting to know. Sorry."

"Other...?" It hit him. The blood Law had taken.

Briefly, he considered lunging across the table and snatching the thin files he was holding, but dismissed the idea. Mostly because he could tell Law was expecting him to. It wasn't like the man wouldn't have backed up the information onto Abby's computers or something. Still, the gesture would make him feel better. He was still speculatively eyeing up the files that were now placed temptingly before him as Vance and Gibbs sat back down at the table. Ah, what the hell? With a pointed finger, both manila folders went up in flames, causing Vance to curse, and Gibbs to just smirk in reply.

"Do you feel better now?" Law rolled his eyes, using his dark sleeve to wipe away the ashes and placing two new manila folders down. "They were empty, by the way."

Meaning the doctor had baited him. "...You're an asshole."

"Just confirming a theory." Trafalgar sat.

Director Vance was the first to speak, "Now that the fireworks are done, I believe you said you had information to share with us?"

"I do." The man smiled slightly, "As part of my exam of the two brothers in your care, I took blood samples. Mrs. Sciuto was kind enough to allow me to run tests on it using her lab in order to obtain the results quickly. It was her hope to possibly find any surviving family they might have."

Ace tensed, feeling the urge to either lunge or punch the doctor. Gibbs noticed apparently as he placed a restraining hand on his shoulder and said, "Those the results right there?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Ace sunk down under the hand, wishing he could disappear. He had been hoping he would be able
to hide it, but it had been foolish to think so. Now everyone here would definitely start treating him and his brother like the monsters they were. What was worse, their friends would find out; Teach would find out. He'd find a way to use it against them, Ace was sure of it. All those years of running, of hiding it, ruined, because of Teach's plan. And worse, Luffy would be greater danger than ever before.

"Well? Out with it, man." Director Vance was growing impatient, but Ace could tell Law was enjoying dragging it out.

"Interestingly enough, the boy's fathers had DNA profiles in the system. Provided by INTERPOL." The man said. "I was quite surprised."

"Fathers?" He felt Gibbs turn and look at him, confusion clear in his voice, and it stabbed at him like a knife.

"Yes. Fathers. As in 'more than one man sired them.' Ace's father is Roger D. Gol. I'm sure you've heard of him. Even I have. International terrorist, claims to be something of a Robin Hood type of man. Except he's left thousands dead in his wake. Luffy's father is none other than Roger's long time associate, Dragon D. Monkey. I wonder what his parents were thinking when they came up with that name. They're both highly dangerous, rarely seen, and tend to leave no witnesses to their crimes. Bit of a shock that they had kids, ya?"

"I think it's more of a shock that their kids aren't with them." Vance was glaring at Ace, and the young man returned the look.

"What the hell!? Like it's our fault the guys are criminals? Really? We didn't exactly ask for it, you know!"

The director tapped the table, "I could say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Ace flinched, "There were...reasons. We were alone, and at first, on the streets, you just do what you have to, you know? Because Luffy needed me, we needed each other...but then...things got complicated fast."

Silence greeted that statement. Ace guessed that really, there was nothing they could say to that. Vance sighed muttering under his breath, "Wish you'd tell us how'd they got complicated."

Law cleared his throat, "Back to my findings. The boys mother. Unfortunately, there was no match."

Ace's brain stopped as he stared up at Law. He blinked, feeling like he was suddenly moving through molasses. The room felt warm, am I about to have another fit? He shook his head, "Come again?"

"I said we couldn't figure out who your mother was." The man looked annoyed at being interrupted again.

"That's what I thought you said." Ace frowned, "But that's not right."

Vance leaned forward, "Why? Care to shed some light on that mystery? Suddenly going to be cooperative for a change?"

Ace hunched down, warring with himself. It was his biggest fear that someone would find out. Bigger than who their fathers were, even. It didn't matter, not really. Not to Luffy, and definitely not to him, but to everyone else it would. He knew it would. If they knew...they'd have grounds to
take his little brother away from him. But he felt his eyes slide over to Gibbs. The man had been
patient with him, and kind in a gruff sort of way. Ace knew he wanted to help, and Luffy liked the
people here. *They'd understand, right?* He so wanted to trust them...

He looked up at Gibbs, pain clear in his face tried to explain. "We...come from different moms.
But, he-Luffy's my little brother. He's *always been* my little brother. When...when my...Mom." He
took a deep breath, "She died. When I was born. I-I killed her. My fault." He paused, swallowing
thickly against the guilt, "Lu's, I never met her...I think something bad happened, though, 'cause
one day, he was just *there*, you know? Into everything, so *annoying!* But kind of sweet. He needed
me, and that was all that mattered. That's family, right?" Silently he begged the man to agree with
him, to tell him that *yes, Luffy was his brother.*

Gibbs nodded, and he felt like his bones had melted with relief. "Yeah. That's family, alright. You
look out for each-other."

"Well, that's touching, ya." Trafalgar spoke up, "But my tests don't lie." He tossed a chart on the
table down in front of Ace. It was a side-by-side comparison of DNA. "You're mitochondrial DNA
matches. That means you got the same mother."

"Impossible. My mom *died* giving birth to me." Ace snapped back.

Law shrugged, "She could have frozen some ovum knowing something might happen to her, or
donated some for whatever reason. It wouldn't be the first time a woman has done so. Really, you'd
have to speak to your fathers. The point is, for whatever reason, Luffy actually *is* your brother. Or
at least your half-brother."

"I," Ace blinked at him, looking at the bored stare of the young doctor. There was no way the man
was lying. He had no reason to. "I think I need to sit down."

"Ace. Look at me." Gibbs turned his chair to face him, concern etched in every line.

"I really need to sit down."

"You are sitting, son. Deep breaths. No one ever told you?"

Ace glared at him for a second before resting his spinning head in his hands, "I was *seven*. No one
bothered to even explain what the fuck was going on, *ever!* Just fucking *ignored* us most of the
time." He snarled into his hands, venting the old hurt. "Then the old man snatched us up and those
two bastards just let him. Like it wasn't upsetting Luffy! Like it was *expected!* No reason, not a
'Hey boys, sorry about this.' He was crying and screaming, *begging* them...I *hate* them. You can't
just *do* that to a kid, stick them somewhere new, tell them their name isn't *their's* anymore and just
leave them alone for months on end."

"No. No you can't." The agreement sounded too calm. Ace looked up and found Gibbs watching
him with a closed expression.

"What did you do, ya?" He looked over his shoulder to Law. Truthfully he'd forgotten the other
was even there. He could see Vance as well. Vance's expression mirrored Gibbs' but Trafalgar was
calculating and angry. Ace lowered his hands to get a better look at the young doctor. Law
elaborated on his question, "You're smart. I doubt you would have taken that kind of treatment
without *some* form of retaliation. So, what did you do?"

Ace grinned, "Raised hell. Right up until some damn hurricane hit the crappy island the old man
dumped us on when we pissed him off too much. Wasn't risking Lu getting hurt, so we made a raft,
got to port a few miles away, and snuck aboard a cruise ship. Next stop, Florida. Been looking out for each other since."

"Wow," Law whistled, "And you were what, seven and four?"

"Eight n' five when the old man fucking kidnapped us, I don't care what he calls it." Ace huffed, holding up a finger. He held up another, "Ten n' seven; Miami."

He pauses, looking at his two fingers and debates what he wants to do. So far, all I've shared is stuff that they could probably find out with a little digging. They knew who our fathers are...and it wasn't like the distant past mattered to him any more. Roger and Dragon weren't any more real to him then the boogeyman, not when he lived with a real monster. A monster who would make him wish he was dead if he found out he was even thinking about continuing the timeline. Ace chewed his lip, just the ages...that can't hurt anything, right? Help them understand maybe? Understand what, he wasn't sure he wanted to think about.

Another finger went up, "Twelve n' nine Phili. Luffy...yeah. Life goes to hell right then." He makes a sour face but forces himself to continue, "Thirteen n' ten, I agree to take the damn drug. Life gets worse, if you can believe it." Two fingers go up, "Fourteen n' eleven, we move to good old NYC...And that about sums it up until I moved out on my own at eighteen, and then this bull right here. So, now you know my life story. Happy? I shared."

He grinned at Vance, fully aware it was a parody of a real smile, but too rattled by his own admissions to care. The Director's expression was severe in comparison. His lips were pressed so tight they were white. Idly, Ace wondered why he was so pissed off. Gibbs looked stoic, and Law had that same unreadable expression from before.

Finally Gibbs spoke, "Yeah, he's real thrilled that you shared with us. Really." The man put a hand on his shoulder as he stood, "I've got to go check in with Abby. Drop off her Caf-Pow. Why don't you go find your brother?"

"Don't I need an armed escort or something?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be fine. He shouldn't be too hard to find. Just ask around. Heard there was a betting pool going on." The man left the room.

He turned and looked at the Director, who just shrugged, then at Law, "So. Wanna go watch my brother bounce off stuff and tell him we're actually related?"

Law's expression morphed into a creepy grin, "It should be fun, ya."

Chapter End Notes

You can see why I won't be answering some of your inevitable questions, right? Things will be explained, I swear I have a plan. I want to mention quickly that the drugs Law prescribes are real medications for Narcolepsy/ADHD, anxiety and Night Terrors. Narcolepsy attacks can actually be triggered by times of heightened stress, like, oh, say, and interrogation The attacks can last from just a few moments to an hour or so, and can be accompanied by sleep paralysis and rarely short term memory loss (Person keeps doing things, even though they're sleeping, really). In this chapter, Ace got hit with sleep paralysis where his mind woke up before his body did (I've had this
happen to me before, it's unnerving.) He was glad it wasn't the 'other kind', or the type where he forgot what he had been doing right before/during the spell. Interestingly enough, people who suffer from night terrors? They can also suffer from narcolepsy or other sleeping disorders like sleep walking. All can run in families, too.
The Story Thus Far (or at least up to chapter 28):

Ace and Luffy were living on the streets. They started out in Florida where they met Bon Clay. The man befriended the two youths, mostly because they were not freaked out about his power after Luffy's immediate reaction. From there, the two boys made their way up to Philadelphia. Why they chose Philadelphia is a mystery. There they continued to live on the streets doing what they had to in order to survive. Iva/Ivan took them under his/her wing in a way. It is likely that Ivankov was a friend of Bon Clay and agreed to look out for the boys. S/he would occasionally allow them to sleep at her place. It was definitely a work-friendship between the Drag-queen and Ace, though the two kept in touch afterwards.

One night Ace left Luffy in a dinner while he took care of a job. He was unaware of the fact that Teach, the man who had given him the job, had done so to get him away from what the man saw as an easy target. When he found the note left behind he spent a day looking for his brother only to end up in a fight less than a block away, ending up in a police precinct. He met Tony for the first time, but his natural dislike of authority made him hesitate to ask for help. It was too late anyway, as Marshall arrived with frightened Luffy in tow, already a Devil-fruit user. Teach had been a member of the Whitebeards Mafia, and when things hadn't gone his way, he'd left. The man wanted a group to rival Whitebeard's, but he had a lack of Devil-fruit users. He'd been offered the drug, but Teach Marshall is mortally afraid of death. In the end, the odds were too much for him and he chickened out.

After some thought of recruiting Devil-fruit users, he decided he wouldn't be able to trust someone like that. So instead, he snagged a street kid that looked easy to manipulate in case the drug worked, and watched the results. Luffy lived, but Teach thought the power wasn't as useful to him as it could be. Still, Luffy proved easy enough to control, and of course, the kid's older brother showed some promise...so he obtained a second dose of Devil-fruit and coerced Ace into taking it to 'protect' his younger brother. He survived as well, and his power turned out to be a lot more destructive...and more to Teach's liking. So he trained them both up (Or to the rest of the world, tormented, brutalized, and humiliated) made their alliance nice and official-like (Illegally adopted them) and thought he got everything he wanted with none of the risk to himself.

While Ace and Luffy were being conditioned by Teach, they were moved to New York City. This was to be Marshall's base of operations for his growing gang, a way to thumb his nose at his former boss. Naturally, he'd already bragged to Whitebeard about how easy it was to get Devil-fruit users who were much more reliable than his former comrades. Whitebeard and his group naturally assumed he had found two adult criminals, and were disgusted. That is, until Marco and Thatch were heading to a meeting about the latest shipment that had been destroyed the week before and come across a young man running through the streets with a mostly naked boy in his arms. Thinking the worst, they gave chase. It turned out to be the worst, but not the way they had originally thought. Whitebeard was furious. He's threatened Blackbeard over the boys, as well as even offered to buy them from the man, but he's had no luck.

Time passed, and Ace and Luffy continued to do whatever jobs Blackbeard required of them. Refusing, doing poorly, or angering the man would lead to being punished. Sometimes he just thought they were going to betray him in some way, he'd punish them. Teach would threaten Luffy to keep Ace in control, and threaten Luffy's very few friends to keep him in control. Only once did he threaten Ace, and Luffy had completely panicked, attacking Blackbeard even though he was only eleven. Luffy has a bad scar on his chest from the incident, and he doesn't seem to
remember it at all. During this time, Luffy somehow managed to befriend an undercover cop, much to Ace's chagrin, and a diplomat's daughter.

Ace has noticed the look 'Uncle' Teach has been giving his little brother recently. He's becoming increasingly worried as Luffy's eighteenth birthday draws near. He's got plans that the moment the younger brother becomes an adult, they're going to run for it and not look back, because something tells him if they don't, Teach is going to make sure they never, ever think about running. For now he focuses on doing exactly what Blackbeard tells him to do, paying his rent, taking some classes, and trying to keep Luffy out of trouble. He thought the body disposal job was a little funny, but it wasn't the first time Marshall had him bring a dead guy somewhere weird, or the first time he blew up a building...just the first time he did both together. The explosion was definitely not normal, though. The Navy Criminal Investigative Services were called to look into it.

Ducky, the medical examiner, reveals that the dead man was shot before being lit on fire. He also proves that Moria Gekkō was a Devil-fruit user with the help of the team's forensic scientist. His claim is backed up by both Gibbs and Vance, as well as the evidence. When the team arrives as the marine base to investigate, there's not a lot to find. The only evidence they were able to obtain was a badly burned hat, and some disturbing footage of debris apparently passing through the suspect, leading Gibbs to wonder if their suspect could also be a Devil-fruit user as well. The team is given a lead to a possible witness who will be at the New York renfaire, and make plans to question the man further. In the meantime, Abby makes some headway with the hat, uncovering that it's from New York, and identifying the marking on it as a gang symbol.

Upon returning to the city, Ace finds that his brother has completed high school. Luffy, in typical fashion, could care less and is more interested in the chance to have some fun at the renaissance faire with his brother, Marco and Thatch. Ace reluctantly agrees, thinking it will be good to get out of the city and away from Blackbeard, who seems to be up to something. While at the renfaire, the two brothers run into a team from NCIS who are investigating a murder. Ace suspects something is up, but is unable to prove it. He doesn't realize that they've noticed the symbol on his bike, and now suspect him.

The team follows Ace and Luffy back to New York City. The boys go about their everyday business. Ace does some welding under-the-table for a construction company using poor materials and gets pissed. Eventually he switches to using his powers, unaware that Tony is watching him. In the meantime, Luffy is hanging out with his friends Zoro and Usopp. Zoro is aware of the tail, but can't spot Gibbs. After helping a woman find a lost child by calling Ace for a translation, the trio move to the park. Gibbs is a little shocked by the antics of Luffy and his friends, but decides to give up following them when they are chased by the cops.

Tim and Ziva have spent the day going through Ace and Luffy's apartment, looking for evidence that Ace is the guy they are looking for. They don't find any accelerants, lighters, or matches, but they do find a large number of medications, sparring equipment, and strange hard plastic globs stuck to a rug in the single bedroom. Eventually, they return to their base to find Abby and Ducky waiting. The two have come to offer help, and Ducky gets to work analyzing the apartment while Abby discovers the pills are for Narcolepsy and ADHD.

Tony eventually loses Ace when the young man enters a bar to begin working. Knowing that he'll be pegged the moment he enters, he calls his boss, who sends the only two people Ace has not met yet. Ducky and Abby find Ace's mood swing when he notices three apparently powerful criminals sitting together mildly offsetting, but not as much as when he wakes from a sudden bout of narcolepsy to see his brother there. Luffy, who is way too young to be at a bar, seems to have been welcomed by the bouncer at the door along with his friends, and is more than happy to join in the ensuing bar fight that breaks out. Right up until his brother scolds him and sends him on his way.
Gibbs feels like they have enough evidence to take Ace in after seeing the footage Tony had gotten earlier that day, and hearing Ducky's opinion on him. They move the next morning and arrest him on the street, using Prism Coral, a rare type of coral that all Devil-fruit users are allergic to. Ace knows instantly that he's in a lot of trouble, but his first thought as always is for his little brother's safety. He deliberately causes a scene to draw his brother's attention and tells the other to go to a friend, Shanks, and have the man get him out of the city. Luffy decides to speed the process up by returning and punching Tony instead and getting into a fight with Ziva, forcing them to arrest him, too. Zoro returns right before they handcuff him more than a little annoyed. Luffy got hit by a car in in rush to return and kept going, leaving Zoro to deal with an upset driver. He hears Luffy out and promises to take care of letting everyone know. Luffy reacts strongly to the coral in the handcuffs, and Gibbs has to prevent him from falling.

During the ride back, the brothers are separated into different cars. Luffy rides with Abby, Ducky, and Tony. His brother rides with Ziva, Gibbs, and Tim. For the most part, the team transporting Luffy have a much easier time, only having to really deal with his fidgeting and appetite. Ace's group, however, discovers he is a real handful. He attempts to kick out the window and jump from the car while on the highway. Failing that, he attempts to convince the person at McDonald's that he has been kidnapped with mild success.

They arrived reasonably safely, and the two boys are placed into separate integration rooms, but not before Luffy manages to steal a lunch from some poor agent along his way. Gibbs lets the boys stew for a bit, something he quickly determines is pointless. He takes the opportunity to go to the director though. Vance wants to know why he brought in Luffy and Gibbs shares his suspicion that he is also a Devil-fruit user. Returning to interrogation he's found that Ace has warned them to not mess with his things and then apparently fallen asleep, where his brother is either too dumb to realize where he is, or doesn't care, and uses the one-way-mirror as a mirror and dances. While he waits, Ducky has run down to the morgue to tell his assistant that he is back and will be observing the interrogations. Palmer informs him that while he was away, another case was brought in, but it's nothing he can't handle on his own. He also shows Ducky some unusual bruises that he discovered on Gekkō's ankles, and asks what the doctor thinks. Ducky is intrigued, but a bit pressed for time.

Gibbs starts with Ace's interrogation. Ace finds Gibbs lack of tricks refreshing, but still refuses to admit to anything, even though he knows he's caught. He even goes so far as to scoff at the picture of him on fire, claiming it was obviously photo-shopped. However, Gibbs make him slip up a little when he brings up Gekkō's Devil-fruit abilities. Gibbs asks if Ace knew that the man could manipulate shadows. Ace, after getting over his shock, says he never heard anything about the modern pirate being able to 'hijack' shadows; confirming to Gibbs that the two had more of a history than Ace had let on. He moved on to what he saw as the likely connection. Luffy.

Luffy's interrogation was was a unique experience for the NCIS senior agent. It was definitely not Luffy's first time being interrogated, and it quickly became apparent that most of his interrogations involved people telling him to sit down, shut up, and not to break anything. After watching him inhale two sandwiches while keeping a running commentary on how amazing his brother was, Gibbs could see why. The way Luffy spoke of Moria suggested that the simple boy had met the man at least once and had not liked the experience. When shown the pictures of the dead man, the boy calmly informed Gibbs that Ace wouldn't have shot Gekkō. When asked if either he or his brother had any special powers, Luffy somehow managed to avoid answering the question and giving everything away with his inability to lie by bringing up the zombie apocalypse, leaving Gibbs very, very confused.

Ducky met Gibbs in the observation room to discuss what they had learned about the brothers. It was very obvious that both had suffered through some hard times. The doctor was now more
convincing than ever that there was something seriously wrong with the relationship between the brothers. Since he was only able to see Ace lashing out verbally at everyone, including his little brother, and the way Luffy immediately took directions from him, he concluded that the younger was in a controlling relationship. Given the nature of the crimes Ace had committed in the past, he thought it highly likely that he was abusing the boy, and that Luffy was emotionally dependant on his brother. He suspected a case of Stockholm syndrome. Ducky confessed his fear that Ace had given Luffy the Devil-fruit drug in order to increase his dependence on him, as the elder was also extremely attached, possessive even, of his brother. Gibbs did not like what he heard. Leaving the two brothers apparently asleep and secure in an interrogation room, he and the others went to report what they had learned to Director Vance.

Ace and Luffy, however, were not sleeping. After checking to make sure the cost was clear in a highly unorthodox manner, Luffy got to work picking the locks of the handcuffs using some tools he had stashed away in the band of his hat. Ace was a little shocked, since he hadn't been aware that Luffy knew that particular skill. Once his hands were free, he picked Luffy's, and for a moment, the two rested, recovering some of their strength while Ace pondered just how he had gotten into the mess he found himself in. He concluded, a bit reluctantly, that he had been set up. While he wasn't exactly surprised, it worried him. Luffy pulled Ace out of his musings to inform his brother that the door to the room was locked, and since the lock was on the outside, he was stuck. Ace rectified that situation, and the two made a run for it down the hall.

They hadn't gotten far when they came face to face with a very shocked Gibbs, Ducky, Vance, Ziva and Tony. Luffy, predictably, waved cheerfully, not caring that the others had quickly pulled their weapons. Fearing for his brother's safety all the more when child services are brought up, Ace takes a desperate gamble. He pretends to snap Luffy's neck. The move shocks everyone, but not as much as his apparently cold disregard for his brother's body as he antagonizes them into a fight, attempting to draw them away from the teen who is waiting for his chance to run.

The plan is spoiled when Palmer and Abby come up the elevators behind Ace and attempt to revive what they believe to be a dead Luffy. Luffy, of course, is having none of that, and immediately runs to his brother to avoid being kissed, missing the point of mouth-to-mouth completely. Naturally, this shocks everyone and halts the fight. Just when it looks like Ace is ready to come to blows over them sending Luffy away, the boy shocks everyone by threatening Vance, telling the man that he isn't going to leave his brother, and he'll fight to stay if he has to. And impasse reached, Ace reluctantly agrees to cooperate on the grounds that Luffy is allowed to stay.

After checking Luffy over and finding no actual lasting damage was done, Ducky is worried to learn that the boys apparently got the idea for this 'trick' of theirs from watching horror movies. Something Luffy tells them Ace is quite fond of. He remembers the strange bruising on Moria Gekkō's legs and wonders if perhaps the fire-man had gotten another idea from a horror movie, but is reluctant to share his suspicion with Palmer. Instead he hurries to Vance and Gibbs.

Both men are relieved to hear the boy is alright. However, upon watching the video from the interrogation, all three men start to seriously question the mental health of both, and the wisdom of not turning Luffy over to Child services. They do finally obtain the evidence of how Ace managed to break into a locked room. With their new understanding they make their way to where Ace is being kept in a conference room.

In the meantime, Luffy is busy exploring Abby's lab, or as much of it as he can see from the top of the table he is sitting on. He notices a flaw in the video reenactment of a guy falling down the stairs and points out to Abby that if the man was as hurt as he looked in the picture, someone had to push him. When questioned on how he knew this, Luffy informs them at he's good at rag-doll physics and physics in general, claiming it's because of parkour. In truth, his elastic nature has led
to a lot of trial-and-error mishaps over the years that he's learned from. He's learned how to predict results and trajectories, but the exact math escapes him.

In an attempt to amuse the hyper teen, Abby agrees to fingerprint him using a scanner. She's confused to find his fingers are covered in small scars. Luffy laughs it off by saying he gets into a lot of fights. The real reason, though, is from a building fire. When the apartment building he and Ace had been living in had been set fire to as a warning to the two brothers, they had rushed to save everyone who was still inside. In order to get to one of the tenants, Luffy had battered his way though a number of doors with his bare hands, sustaining significant damage. In the end, everyone was saved, and to Luffy, the damage was unimportant.

When Ace's cellphone, which had been down at the lab to be examined, rang, Luffy suggested that he should answer it. Both Abby and Tim thought that was a bad idea. His cell rang next. In a bout of childishness, he stretched his arm and snatched the phone out of Tim's hand in time to talk to Marco, who had apparently been trying to reach the brothers. He and Thatch, who had also been calling, revealed that the apartment they boys lived in had been completely trashed, and they were worried. Marco became even more worried when he heard Luffy was at a lab, but calmed down slightly when he realized where Luffy really was. Thatch said help was on the way.

Ace wasn't having quite as much fun. Gibbs was pressing for answers that the young man couldn't give him. In an attempt to appear cooperative, he admitted to being the one to dump the body, and since he could no longer deny it, to being a Devil-fruit user. He denied knowing who'd killed Mora, though, claiming it was 'some dude' who paid him a lot of money. Ace thought he was a dead man when Robin walked into the room, interrupting things. He figured she had been sent by Blackbeard in order to make sure he went along with whatever plan that man had, whether he wanted to or not. And he most definitely did not. He was quite shocked to learn that Robin had not been hired by Teach, and more than a little touched by the apparent pleasure in her voice at the fact. Instead, she stated that she had been hired by five clients and multiple suggestions to take them on as a charity case. He was able to quickly peg The business mogul as Hancock, because of her infatuation with his brother, but was a little lost until much later about the "certain man who wishes to tell you that 'blue really brings out the color of her eyes' as well", who he later realized to be Cobra Nefertiti, the father of Luffy's penpal, and incidentally, Ziva's uncle. Ace is still trying to discover who the shipping companies are, unaware that his friend Jinbe is one of them, and that Luffy's hero Shanks is another. Nor is he aware that the third 'shipping company' owner, or Mob Boss, has sent two of his most trusted men in order to make sure the boys are alright. Not even when Luffy bursts into the room to tell him that Teach and Marco called. Then again, he never asked about their job.

**Characters who are known Devil-fruit users:**

**Ace.** Made out of fire. Ace is still trying to figure out how it actually works. When he was first changed, he had to think about becoming fire in order to light up, though if he was in pain or frightened he would also spontaneously combust. He has now mastered his control to the point where his physical form is always in a state of ready-fire, even when he is asleep, allowing everything from just raising his already elevated body temperature to becoming a walking fireball. This prevents him from being harmed by physical attacks if he so chooses it, but has lead to the death of a few alarm clocks. Ace has also become quite proficient in launching certain flames, making him an arsonist in high demand. Ace's fiery nature make him immune to the effects of alcohol, unlike his brother. He's used this to his advantage and become very good at mixing drinks. He is the second youngest Devil-fruit user.

**Luffy.** Made out of rubber. Luffy's body is elastic, everything from his skin down to his bones. This has given him extreme flexibility and dexterity. Dance lessons have given him coordination,
something he uses in burglaries and parkour. Luffy also happens to be a lot stronger and more durable than he appears at first glance; another side effect of being rubber. Because of his nature and the abuse that was heaped upon him directly after he changed, Luffy has a very high physical pain threshold. Unfortunately this means when he gets into a fight he tends to go overboard thinking other people can keep up. Most likely because of his rubbery-nature, Luffy can't handle any alcohol, and gets drunk easily. He's a mean drunk, too. Luffy is the youngest known Devil-fruit user ever.

Gekkō Moria: Shadow thief. Had the ability to steal other people's shadows. The shadow could then be implanted in another, granting them the same abilities of the original person, but only for limited amount of time. Holding more than one shadow proved unhealthy for people who were not Gekkō. However, the more shadows Gekkō had, the more powerful he became. Unfortunately, the shadows he collected had a tendency to die off on him, leading him to collect more by kidnapping victims. Gekkō used his ability to steal from various governments, and selling to others. He was killed.

Thatch. Made out of darkness. Much like Ace is fire, Thatch is the embodiment of darkness. He has discovered that if he concentrate, he can exert a gravitational pull to some extent, which can interfere with someone's attack. With enough concentration, he’s been able to make a very small weak black hole, about the size of a softball. So far, Thatch has only been able to do so in a controlled environment. without Marco throwing things at him. Thatch is also exceptionally difficult to hurt, as he tends to just melt into dark inkiness when he wishes. Primarily, he uses his abilities to act as a lookout for his gang, or to spy for information. Of course, being Thatch, he usually uses his skills for lurking in dark alleys and popping out of the closet to scare the crap out of his friends (particularly ones that squawk when scared).

Marco. Phoenix. He's able to regenerate, giving off bluish flames when doing so. Marco has an alternate form which is why he calls himself a 'phoenix' it's an incredibly large peacock-like bird with blue flames on it's wings and tail. Unfortunately, because of the laws of conservation of mass, his bird form is too heavy to fly really. The most he can do is glide, or as Thatch puts it, 'fall gracefully'. Thatch also makes a lot of cracks about chickens, turkeys, and how Marco should court brightly colored tents (peacocks are not known for being bright and tend to court anything, going to full display). Marco is also one of the oldest known Devil-fruit users.

"Bon Clay". Shape-shifter. Able to change his physical appearance into another's after physically touching them. Everything changes, including fingerprints, blood-type and voice. Oddly enough, the DNA doesn't. He retains the form for as long as necessary, but the form does not age or change at all. Bon has big dreams of becoming a famous actor, but fears people finding out about his ability. He spends much of his time disguised as such, and hears a great many things that he knows he shouldn’t to make ends meet, he sells much of the information he gathers though one of his personas.

Trafalgar Law. Control over spatial placement within a limited area. Primarily useful for moving other objects, oneself, or even parts of other people with no loss of blood or pain. It can lead to death of the severed part if the item is removed from the 'operating room' as he calls 's primary use of his ability is in his medical work. He frequently removes whole sections of damaged flesh and bone in order to get better access to it. His work has been called 'groundbreaking' and he is on the cutting edge of modern medicine. Of course, his patients tend to react badly to seeing whole sections of their body, sometimes entire limbs, removed, even if it doesn't hurt. Because of this, he only works on unconscious people. Since some of his work is done in underground hospitals (some places are just testy about experimental procedures) He uses animal tranquilizers. That way, if his vi-patient starts to come around, he can pass anything they see as a bad 'trip'. Like the time a little
girl thought Bepo looked like a polar bear.

**About the Devil-fruit Substance:**

During WWII some mad Nazi scientist doctor created the Devil-fruit drug. Now, the drug itself is the same for everyone. It reacts on a genetic level, which both causes the dramatic change and leads to the high mortality rate. So because everyone has differing genetics, the chances of someone ending up with the same power and SURVIVING the change is about the same as someone having the same fingerprints as you. And since the guy who made the drug died, there is only a limited amount out there. Of course, he DID make enough for an army...

Now, I've been asked what would happen if, say identical twins took this stuff. There have been studies that show even identical twins are not *really* identical, just incredibly similar. A good example of this would be cloning as well. For example, they cloned a calico cat a few years ago, and the clone was a tabby. It's the TWIN or CLONE of the original cat. Same genetics, but a different expression. Even identical twins have different fingerprints, after all., So I'll go with the powers would be variations of the same, and chances are the only ones who'd notice the difference would be twins (I picture two people sitting watching a news broadcast very annoyed by the announcer saying that they have the SAME power). That's assuming you'd be able to find two identical twins willing to take it and have them then *BOTH* survive.

Devil-fruit kept in a hard pill form, one pill is a dose, and it can be taken that way, or it can be mixed with a saline solution and injected. There's some debate if doing so decreases your chance of survival, but general consensus is it just gets everything over with a lot faster.

The drug itself tastes horrible. People who've gone the injection route still complain about the lingering taste of *shit* in their mouth. Worse still, the genetic changes are very painful, and nothing has been proven to help with that. Immediate general side effects would include cramping, nausea, blinding headache, fever, chills, impaired vision, loss of mobility, and pain. There would be screaming. Lots of it. Lingering general side effects for the next week would be loss of appetite, soreness, aches, continued fever, weakness, pains that came and went, and a persistent headache. Of course, in the end, long term side effect is a superpower.

If the Devil-fruit drug reacts badly to your genetic code, you die almost instantly, but you could still die from the short term side effects. And like in One Piece, you can't take two, you take it once, you're immune from the drug.

**Fun Facts:**

Earle is a naval base broken into three parts: Mainside, Waterfront, and Pier Complex. The body dump occurs at Mainside.

If you give a spider caffeine, it can't build a web. It tries, but it's kind of a case of epic fail.

Too much caffeine can kill you (duh).

The energy drink VAMP contained the maximum amount of caffeine you should take per day back when it first came out. (Not sure about now, I haven't seen one in over 10 years)

Not all narcoleptics collapse. Actually, very few do.

It's thought that a lot more people have narcolepsy than are actually diagnosed.

Ritalin was created BEFORE Attention Deficit Disorder was discovered. Makes you think, huh?
Tim McGee is left handed.

A 'shank' is a rough, sharp weapon used to stab someone, like a broken piece of glass with a fabric wrapped handle. Being 'shanked' is being stabbed repeatedly. (It's got to be the biggest disconnect in name-to-personality ever.)

Terms used to sometimes indicate organized crime include "shipping companies" "Protection brackets" and "Import Export businesses".

This story is almost completely plotted out at this point in time, because frankly, I put way too much thought into it.

The author thinks that (in this story) Ace's song would be "Let it rock", and Luffy's would be "Moves like Jagger". But, anything by Kevin Rudolf works for Ace, and Luffy's really hard to pick for...Though "Bad Apple" is good, too. The brother complex is "Just too close to love you."

**Omakes:**

**Shanks' Box**

The drunk stumbled down the streets, humming happily to himself. Judging by the time, it was either just getting dark out, or possibly the sun was thinking about coming up. He wasn't too clear on the facts. Not that it particularly mattered anyway. He had nowhere he had to get to...except for maybe out of the rain. He looked up, the brim of his straw hat mostly protecting his eyes and his red hair as he eyed the fat drops, "When did that start?" a rumble of thunder answered him. It was just his luck, too.

Still, the cold rain was slightly sobering as he began to hurry on towards the nearest shelter he was sure to receive a warm welcome; Rip-off. It was raining quite heavily now, and he could barely see where he was going as he ducked down into an alleyway that would cut two blocks off his trip. He didn't see the cardboard box until he was on top of it, leg thumping against a solid mass of something in the box sending him into a near sprawl into a dumpster.

"AHHH...OW! Damn, what the hell is in there? Bricks?" He peered through the rain at the sagging brown sides, rubbing his shin. The box shifted and whimpered, "A dog?" No, that couldn't be right, a dog would have bolted. Not like I was being quiet or anything...probably just some homeless dude. With a sigh tapped the soggy walls with his shoe, "Sorry about that, whoever you are. Didn't mean to trip over your home. Might think about moving it off to the side a bit, though."

There was no answer and he frowned, wondering if he'd accidentally killed them or something. He circled the box, standing in front of the dark hole that was the opening, mostly covered by a half torn off flap. It was covered in some kind of goo, too. His nose wrinkled in disgust as he crouched down and lifted the flap, peering into the box. At first, he saw nothing. The man cursed, thinking maybe it had been a dog, and he'd just missed it's escape. But then his eyes adjusted to the gloom and he could make out a small figure curled tight in the back of the box, shivering. That's a very small homeless dude...

"F**k! Just had to be a Goddamn kid in this? First the rain and now this. WHY? SHIT!" he cursed louder and the child hiding in the box flinched. He forced himself to calm down and reached a hand into the box, "Hey, can't be very comfortable in there..."

There was a sudden blossoming pain between his thumb and pointer that sobered him up instantly. Unfortunately, when he instinctively snatched his hand back, the kid stopped biting him. He eyed the bleeding crescent mark with respect. The child had a really strong bite...
"Why don't you come on out? I'm not going to hurt you, alright?" He cajoled, bracing himself to stick his hand back in there and drag the kid out if he had to. He really didn't want to, though. Being bit hurt.

The child still didn't answer.

"Are you lost? Maybe I can help?" He hummed, box is too study to just rip... "I'm Shanks, by the way. What's your name?"

"...ffy..."

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that over the rain. Come on, stop hiding away in the back there and tell me your name where I can hear it." He smiled, hoping the kid would be dumb enough to come all the way out of the box.

His luck wasn't quite that good, but now he could at least reach the boy, and it was definitely a boy he saw, without groping blindly. Dark colored eyes warily watched him as the boy sucked on his lips. "Luffy."

"Ah. Good to meet you Luffy!" Shanks smiled. Quick as a whip his arms snaked into the box and around the boy's wrists and one shoulder. He was bitten again and kicked hard in the arm for his efforts as Luffy screamed bloody murder, but he got him out of the box. "Sorry about that. Now, let's get a good look at you."

Luffy was a smallish child, particularly when he'd stopped struggling. He hung limp in Shank's grip, staring at him through the grime that coated his hair and face. His clothes looked decent but not great. That, combined with the look that clearly said the moment Shanks dropped him he'd be gone told him this kid had been on the streets for a while, but not too long. Still, awfully young to be alone. Brats this small usually had a keeper or ran in small packs.

"Not much to look at, is there?" The redhead sighed. It was like holding a wet stray puppy. He just knew he was going to regret this.

"Let me GO!" Luffy struggled as soon as he found his feet under him, but Shanks was an old pro and didn't lose his grip on the wet wrist no matter how much the boy bucked at twisted.

He calmly continued, "Well, let's get you to Sankky. She'll feed you at least. 'Course, going to have to hose you down, first. You smell like..." he paused, now in front of the bar and in better light and looked down at the still struggling Luffy in confusion, "Actually, you don't smell all that bad."

"And YOU smell like beer and women! LET ME GO!" Luffy tried to kick him, "ACE! ACE HELP!"

The redhead sighed and banged on the door. Given that it was getting lighter out, he'd assumed it was, in fact morning. Meaning the place was closed. Shanks wasn't worried, though. The owner of Rip-Off and her long time uh, associate, lived just above the place. Someone was bound to be home, and Sankky was a light sleeper.

"What do you have there, Shanks? Isn't he a little bit too young for this place?" Rayleigh laughed as he opened the door and let them in from the rain, "Plus, you do realise that's a boy, right?"

"Would you stop screaming already?! Of course I noticed that! It's just some street kid I tripped over." He turned to look back at the boy who was now standing in front of his old friend shaking like a leaf.
Silvers just shook his head as he locked the door. "This isn't a street kid, Shanks."

"Well, yeah, I know he smells a little nicer than normal, but Ray, the brat bit me!" He pointed at Luffy, "Look! He's covered in...gri...Luffy, where did you get those bruises?"

The boy turned wide eyes at him, hugging his arms to his chest and just shook his head mutely. After a moment a dull grumble could be heard. Rayleigh sighed and crouched down a little, "My breakfast is on the bar over there, see it? Why not go eat that up for me, huh? Before it gets cold." Both men watched as the boy raced for the counter and practically fell upon the food.

Shanks spun, facing the older criminal, ready to run in he needed to. Silvers took exception to people who hurt kids. Shanks had seen him go after people for it before, and the man was scary in a fight. "I swear to you, all that happened was I tripped over a box he was hiding in, Rayleigh! I wouldn't ever...! I mean, yeah, I dragged Luffy out of the box, but..."

"Relax. I know where the bruises are from."

"Oh. Well, mind telling me? Because, honestly, I thought you were going to kill me for a second there."

"You hear how Teach is back in town?" The statement was a little out of left field.

Shanks rubbed a hand over the scars along his eye, "Yeah, Benn might've mentioned it over drinks last night. Honestly can't believe the asshole's trying a move like that right under Newgate's nose...what of it?"

Ray pointed at the boy who was now licking the plate clean, "That is one of Marshall's adopted boys. Don't know where he got them; don't know why. But I'll give you three guesses on what one of them is doing running around at the crack of dawn."

"That might explain some of the bruising, then." He looked at the small hunched figure, feeling ill. Shanks had never really been fond of drug trafficking, and he despised the practice of using children as runners. Blackbeard, however...he'd almost butted heads with Newgate on that very issue more than once. "Wait. There's two of them?"

"One older one. Goes by 'Ace'. Saw them both last week when Teach came by to tell Sankky he was back in town...more like offer the boys up for rent, if you know what I mean. Didn't go over too well. Anyway, apparently he hardly ever lets the little one, this guy, out of his sights. I know for a fact the older one's familiar with the name of every important player in this city. I'm surprised he hasn't contacted you with the same offer yet."

"He should know better than to try!" He snarled at Rayleigh. Shanks strode up to the bar and sat next to the boy. He noticed immediately how the shoulders tensed, it was hard to miss. Still he acted casual, "So, got lost, huh? New city. Kind of understandable. Starts to rain and you duck into a box?"

"Y-yeah?" The boy nodded, "I was supposed to go get um. That thing Stinky-ol Bl...I mean Uncle Teach likes to drink, and the store wasn't there. Then I couldn't find my way back...and...I want my brother..."

Shanks looked down at the kid who refused to meet his gaze. "You're a really bad liar, you know that?"

"I want Ace..." Luffy pouted up at him, keeping an eye on the other man who now joined them.
“Right. I got that the first time. So. What were you doing on my turf, anyway? If I know Teach...”
Shanks snatched up the boy's shirt and lifted it, expecting to find a stash taped to his chest. Instead he revealed more bruises and a blood stained bandage around his chest. "Fuck! Kid, what the hell did he do to you?"

Luffy blinked up at him, no longer struggling to pull his shirt down as Rayleigh came over. "What do you mean? Did Ace draw on my belly again?"

"Stand up, boy." Silvers ordered. Luffy immediately tensed at the tone but did as told. He cringed away from Rayleigh as he carefully felt along the boy's ribs. "Nothing's broken. All this is under a week old. Someone worked him over real well... explains why I haven't seen the other one about, though."

"You think he's worse off?"

"Could be." Rayleigh shrugged, feeling down Luffy's pants. The boy let out a strangled whimper but made no move to get away, "He feels clean. Could have already made the drop."

"Or he could be full of drugs. Dammit." Shanks crouched down next to Luffy, ignoring the fear in the boy's eyes. "Hey, Luffy. Look at me for a second. There's a good man. I'm not mad. Alright, I'm not mad at you. I just want to help, alright? Did Teach make you swallow anything funny recently?"

"Funny how? Because, there was this one time he gave me something that smelled really bad to drink, and I got sick all over the place. And sometimes he makes me take stuff that I don't like..."

"Funny like...balloons. Did he make you swallow any balloons in the last few days?" Luffy looked at him like he had three heads. He took it as a good sign. "Ever?"

"Mmm, no? Can I go now? I kinda maybe might have snuck out while he was sleeping...I don't wanna get Ace in trouble so I gotta go, Mr. Shanks." The boy shifted nervously from foot to foot, anxious to leave, but obviously afraid to try without permission. He glanced at Shanks' face and then away, towards a shadow in the window. "Please?"

It was painful to watch. The boy was well on his way to being broken completely. Moving carefully so he didn't startle Luffy, he lifted his favorite hat and placed it on the much smaller head. He ignored the flinch, grinning as widely as he could at the shocked face.

"Well, now. We don't want to get you and your brother in trouble, now do we? If mean'ol' mr. Stinky Blackbeard says anything, just tell him 'Shanks says hi' alright? And take care of that hat, alright? It's a very special hat." Luffy stood there staring at him with wide eyes, still not moving. It dawned on Shanks belatedly when Rayleigh nudged him that he'd never told him he could leave. "Go on now. Scat."

The boy didn't need to be told twice, he was at the door turning the lock before either man could even blink. The door was yanked open, revealing a gangly teen warily standing there with lockpicks. He looked mildly annoyed at the interruption, but smiled in relief when the younger boy barreled into him.

"Luffy!"

"Ace! Look! I got a hat!"

"I was worried sick because you were screaming bloody murder and you got a fucking hat? You idiot!" The elder thumped his brother on the head, earning a laugh before dragging him down the
"Oh! Thanks for the food, Mr. Silvers!" The boys both stopped as Luffy waved to them while they stood in the doorway, "Ace was right! You're not scary at all!"

"They FED YOU, TOO?! You cheater! Hurry up! Teach'll be up soon."

"You sure you want to give that brat your hat?" Rayleigh asked, locking the door again.

Shanks shrugged, "Yeah. Don't like the idea of those boys with Teach...frankly, I don't like the idea of a hamster with Teach. Think of the hat as a little reminder to our gold old friend Blackbeard that I'm watching him... and I like those kids, dammit. Luffy especially." He reached back behind the bar and grabbed a bottle, opening it, "Damaged as he is, as afraid as he was of me, he bit me, Rayleigh. More than once. That takes guts. Mark my words, he's something special."

**Medical Law**

Law counted backwards from ten, waiting for the ketamine to take full effect before beginning the operation on the little girl that would save her life. She had been born with a hole in her heart. From what her father had been able to tell him, his wife's medical insurance had covered the needed medications for the first five years...but it wouldn't cover the procedure she needed in order to live. Something about it not being necessary at this point. Of course, by the time it was necessary, she'd need a new heart. Or be dead.

That's where he came in. Law had the medical know-how, the means, and most importantly, the **skills** to help her. For a fee, of course. A fee that went right back into the supplies he bought for communities like this one. Now, the **government** he'd charge an arm and a leg just to use his powers to open a bottle. A girl who needed her heart removed and a hole fixed? Five thousand.

"Bepo, everything ready?" He asked, eyes never leaving the sleeping girl.

"Y-yes!"

"Alright. Let's begin, ya." He held up a hand, "Room." There was a fait **pop** feeling as his power activated, encompassing almost the entirety of the room they were in.

"That always feels so weird!" Bepo muttered. He was once again thankful for his friends who were willing to work with him. Bepo for being his 'nurse' and Pen for making sure people stayed out. He didn't want people to know about this power, after all.

He smirked, "You think you'd get used to it. Heart." He walked carefully over to the operating table holding the still beating organ. There was no blood, and he knew for a fact that the girl felt no pain from this. Law was still a little unsure how the heart continued to beat blood to the rest of the body, or how a severed head could still talk when under his powers, but it worked. It let him **save lives**.

"Local anesthesia?"

"No. Don't want to risk stopping her heart by accident. Found the hole. Can you believe her insurance wanted to leave this, ya? I can stick my finger in there...sutures."

They worked quickly, a well oiled machine. It was a good thing, too. Trafalgar had to keep focused on his "operating room" for it to stay active. It was tiring. Before long Law was done. He sagged against the table for a moment as Bepo held the precious organ and looked it over before handing it back to the still smirking doctor. Both made their way over to the girl.
"So, she'll be all better, right?" Bepo asked.

"Ya. She'll feel a lot better after this. Now to put her heart back..."

"Um...are her eyes supposed to be open like that?"

"No. Ericka, you awake?" Law frowned when the girl nodded with a dopey smile on her face. "Well, shit."

Bepo immediately went into panic mode, "What are we going to do, Law? What are we going to DO?!"

She smiled up at him, "Your polar bear is funny. Can I pet it?"

"Polar bear?" Bepo paused, looking at him in confusion.

"It's the ketamine. Visual hallucinations. Though, if I look at you just right...yeah. I can see polar bear." He laughed, Bepo looked nothing like a polar bear, having dark hair and a deep tan. While his friend continued to stare at him he replaced the heart.

"She's tripping?"

"In a word, yes. It's why I use special K, you know. That way, if they wake up and see what they shouldn't, they just think it was the drug."

"Oh."

"Right. She's all set. If you're the polar bear, that makes Pen the Penguin, ya. I think it suits him."

**Before they were Brothers**

Ace eyed the lone man in the room with him. He wasn't sure who it was, and he didn't really care. New people came and went all the time. If this bozo was around for a few months, then Ace would bother to learn his name. For now, he was just some guy his dad had stuck him with almost as soon as he woke up. Something he did just about every day. This guy was boring, too. He'd just taken him into the nearest room with a TV, handed Ace a remote, and told him to 'amuse himself' while he did something with a bunch of papers. It looked boring as hell, almost as boring as the TV. Of course, when he'd tried to amuse himself by cracking the safe in the room the guy had gotten pissy and taken Ace's knife away.

He didn't like this guy. There was the sound of crying coming from the hall, and Ace cocked his head to the side, taking his eyes off the grunt. Apparently the man had heard it too, for he stood, hand reaching for his gun, only to quickly move it away when his Uncle Dragon came bursting into the room. He was holding a kid like the brat was a sack of potatoes. Very stinky potatoes. It was no wonder the kid was crying, he was probably afraid Dragon was going to drop him or something.

"C-Captain Dragon! Sir! I wasn't expecting you, sir! What can I do for you?" Yeah, he's not going to last long, Ace rolled his eyes as he stood and walked up directly behind the man.

He was shocked at how his Uncle looked. It was true that he hadn't seen the guy in a bit, and Uncle Dragon was always distant...but he looked like one of the men after a long party, eyes all red and face blotchy. He smelled bad, too...and Ace had never seen him his any beard before, either. Something's wrong.
Even Dragon's voice sounded different, weaker. Angry, too. "Here. I just...You deal with him. Where the fuck is Roger?"

"Captain Roger is in the command room...but sir. I already have Ace here, and are you sure it's a good idea for Luf..." Ace knew that look. He instinctively stepped back away from the idiot who'd incurred his uncle's wrath.

"I don't care, soldier. He's your problem right now. So Watch. My. Son. That's an order." With that, Dragon shoved a sniffing child at the soldier and stormed out of the room.

The soldier looked at the child in his arms, then down at Ace, question clear on his face. "Don't look at me. I didn't piss Uncle Dragon off. I was watching TV. See?" He turned up the volume.

"This...isn't good. Oh. Oh...Not good...Um. Luffy, right?" The grunt stuttered, putting the now silent boy down. Ace watched out of the corner of his eyes as the dark mop of hair bobbed in agreement to the name. "Right. Luffy. So. Listen. Why don't you just...stay here with Ace, and I'll go get Miss Makino? You know who she is?"

"M-m-mommy's f-f-friend..." Luffy sniffed sadly. "Does s-she k-know where m-my m-mommy is?"

The grunt shifted uncomfortably, "Crap, they don't pay me enough for this...Just, stay here, alright?"

It was the wrong thing to say. The kid started to cry thick tears, "I w-want my mommy!"

"Shit. Ace. Watch him. Please. I'll...buy you an ice cream or something. Just give me a few minutes."

Like Ace would be bought off with Ice Cream. Makino would give him some anyway. Still, he nodded, planning on getting into that safe while the guy was out. In seconds he was alone in the room with a crying brat. Ace frowned, rethinking his plan. The kid was annoying! "Hey, you! Shut up!"

He was shocked when it worked. The boy sucked on his lips, rubbing his eyes. They looked very red, like he'd been crying a lot...Like Uncle Dragon, too... he pushed away the uneasy feeling and snatched his knife off the table before turning his attention to the safe. It was a simple key-safe, and should be within his abilities. He felt more than heard the other come up behind him.

"I'm Luffy."

"Ace."

"Oh..."

Ace could feel the other staring intently at him, finally he growled out, "What?"

"Nothing..."

"Gesh. You're such a pain. Why's a baby like you doing away from your mother, huh?" he turned to glare at Luffy, instantly feeling regret as he saw the tears fill those brown eyes.

"D-Dad says tha-at she had to g-go away...a-and s-she wasn't c-coming back..." a single tear ran down a cheek, "but she would've told me... momma never lied. Momma said she would be right back...Why is Dad hiding Momma?"
He turned back to the safe, thinking fast. Ace remembered the adults talking a few days ago. Something about an accident, Uncle Dragon's wife...sighing he put the knife down. "I don't think Uncle Dragon's hiding her, Luffy."

"Then why hasn't she come home? Doesn't she love me anymore?" The child's voice got soft, and it hurt to hear the pain in it. He was beginning to understand why all the adults kept running away from Luffy.

Doesn't make it fair. Ace sighed, "I'm sure she'd come home if she could. I don't think she can anymore, though. I think...I think your mom might be dead." He looked over at the boy who was staring at him blankly, adding a belated, "Sorry."

He expected tears, shouting, denial. Ace hadn't expected Luffy to deflate, blinking duly. He looked down at his hands, "Oh. Then I'm alone?"

He thought about pointing out Luffy still had Uncle Dragon, but the guy seemed about as caring as his own father. "Yeah, well. Me too. My mom's gone. Just me and Dad. You know, Roger."

"Uncle Roger's your dad?"

"Yep."

Luffy made a face, "He smells funny."

"Yep." Ace smirked, just as the tumblers clicked and he tugged the handle, "Safe's open."

"Wow! Ace, you're amazing!"

"And just what do you two think you are doing?!" Makino's voice in the doorway caused them both to freeze, Ace with his hand half in the safe.

"We're breaking into Uncle Roger's treasure!" Luffy chirped before ducking behind Ace. It was kind of cute.

"Oh really?" She glared down at Ace.

He ran a hand through Luffy's soft hair before looking up at her. Swallowing, he tried his best innocent look, "What? That man told me to watch Luffy!"

"You call this watching Luffy?"

"Well...yes. Better job then his own dad did. Bet this was the first time in days the poor kid's even smiled, Ace actually felt proud. His eyes widened in wonder, I'm like...like a big brother or something, huh? He grinned, "Gesh, Makino! My lil'brother and I were just playing a game. We were gonna put everything back."

Everything froze, and for a second, Ace thought he had said something horribly wrong. But then Luffy was tackling him in a hug babbling something about always wanting a brother and Makino just had this wonderful smile. The one that told him that he'd done something just so incredibly perfectly right that he couldn't help but laugh and smile with Luffy. His little brother.

**Thatch's Prank**

"Why am I doing this again?" Marco grunted as he lifted his end of the couch.

Thatch just offered him his trademark cheeky grin, "because you love me. And because you know
I was just going to do this anyway."

"He's going to kill you, yoi."

"Nah," the cheap desk was flipped to face the wall, "I'm too cute to kill."

"In your dreams, maybe. Seriously, how did I let you talk me into this? Ace isn't going to to think this is funny at all."

"Well, probably not right away." Thatch finally turned, a serious expression on his face, "You can't keep treating them like the walking wounded Marco. It's not helping them at all."

"And this will?"

"Yeah, of course! Everyone needs a good laugh, right?"

"What in the ever-loving-fuck are you two doing in my apartment and more importantly how the hell did you get in?" Both spun to face the owner of the furniture they had been rearranging exactly opposite of the way it had been, matching guilty expressions at being caught red handed.

"THatch made me do it, yoi." Marco pointed to his friend, ignoring the stuttered protest as he looked at Ace. The young man looked exhausted as he dropped his green zebra striped duffel bag at his feet and stared blankly at them. Marco and Thatch took it to mean that his 'job' had ended poorly; which was good for them, but bad for Ace.

"Ace! Man...wasn't expecting you to be back so...soon!" Thatch chuckled nervously, "So, uh..We'll put it back, I guess."

Ace shook his head, a wicked grin lighting up his face. He went over to the book shelf and started to flip over every book, "Are you kidding? This is perfect! Luffy'll be back in an hour, so don't stop now!"

Thatch's jaw dropped, "Really?"

"Yes really. Did you guys do the bedroom yet? Not much you can do with the bathroom, I guess..."

Ace looked around as they worked, even going so far as to move the lone poster over so it hung upside down on the opposite wall. Finally they were done with a few moments to spare. "Quick! Here he comes! Act casual."

Thatch flopped on the couch next to a slightly sweaty Marco, handing him a magazine upside-down just as the door opened up. Luffy stood there for a second staring blankly at the three of them before shrugging and heading to the bedroom. He didn't seem to even notice as he had to skirt around the couch that was now directly in his way.

"Well...That was disappointing," Thatch mused, "Ten bucks says he didn't even notice."

"Fifteen says it's a 'mystery' to him," Ace replied, "because that's just how he is. You guys staying for dinner, right?"

**Law of the Cards**

Trafalgar looked down at the man laying prone on the table. His shoulder was still bleeding sluggishly, staining his shirt a dark red color. He wasn't too surprised that he hadn't gone to the hospital, really. What did surprise Law was that the bone-headed idiot had apparently chosen to bleed out on the street instead of seeing someone. "Granted, there does seem to be some sort of
rudimentary first aid..." He complained to the unconscious man, "If it wasn't for the money, I would have let you bleed out. You're a fool, ya."

"I dunno, Law. Those homeless guys seem to think he's a bit of a hero. Word has it he jumped right in front of that woman and kid in the middle of the shootout." Penguin put in as he helped cut the bloodied garment away.

"Word also has it he works for that slime Blackbeard, ya. And that he set the fire over at te new club last night...Room...I'm taking him for all that he's worth." It took both of them to roll the young man onto his side to get a good look at the billet wound. It looked bad; like someone had dug at it with a knife. Suspicious, Trafalgar carefully stuck a finger in the hole and felt around for the bullet he knew would still be lodged in the flesh. "You are a dumb fuck, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dug the bullet out himself," Law explained. "Half-butchered his arm in the process, ya. This'll take a while...Jumble: Arm."

He caught the arm deftly in one hand as he and Penguin let the criminal roll back onto his stomach. It really wasn't a horrible job, considering the idiot did it himself, likely without painkillers and a pocket knife. It just offended Law on a deeply personal level. Like the fool was saying doctors weren't good enough...or to be trusted. Not that I'd trust a doctor in his place, he smirked. Holding the arm wound-side up, he brought it closer to the light to get a better look. Fixable.

There was a groan, causing Law to pause in his work for just a second, his gaze drifting over to the drugged man just as his eyes opened. Their eyes locked in fact, and he couldn't help but smirk as he wondered what dream-like hallucinations the man was having. Dancing elephants, perhaps?

"AHHHHH!" The man started screaming, his body catching on fire.

"HOLY SHIT!" Law yelped tossing the now flaming arm at the body before his gloves completely melted. He struggled to stay in control of his power as more parts of the room caught on fire. He knew what was happening immediately, though it was the first time he'd ever worked on a fellow Devil-fruit user. Definitely the first time working on one who was rapidly losing control over his own powers in a drug fueled downward spiral of panic, shock and blood-loss. Things were getting dangerous fast, "Penguin!"

"On it!" The man called in a remarkably calm tone, considering. Law looked up to see him raising a fire extinguisher and bringing it down with a dull thud on the patient's head, causing the flames on his body to sputter just for a moment. It was all he needed, a needle was inserted into the remaining arm and the liquid within was injected. "Easy there...We've got you. Law'll patch you up as good as new. Just go to sleep for now."

Dark grey eyes blinked up at them, rapidly fogging over as the stronger drugs took effect, "Law...? Wha' hap'nd? Wher's Lu?"

"Apparently you passed out on the streets after digging a bullet out of your arm. One you somehow got hit with...the woman and child you were shielding are fine, though I don't think that I know the name 'Lu'." Law explained as he watched the flames putter out.

"Luffy. My l'brother. S'righ' z'home..." The eyes fluttered shut as he finally gave in to the medication, "tha' hurt... ge'n shot sucks."

Law waited a few moments before looking up at Penguin, "I feel the urge to poke him with
something sharp and pointy...just to check."

"Don't. He should stay out for a while now. I gave him enough Special-K to drop a baby elephant. Heart beat's steady, though..." Penguin's hands were shaking, Law noticed. Looking down, he was surprised his own weren't.

"So, we make this fast, and charge him double, ya?"
Gibbs snatched the extra large Caf-Pow from the poor clerk in the gift shop and dropped the money on the counter, "Keep the change."

He knew that he had scared the guy, and he couldn't bring himself to care. He was beyond pissed. The elevator was open when he got there, Vance casually preventing the doors from closing. The Director just looked at him, his expression grim. "You look like you're on a warpath. Heading down to Abby's?"

"Yes." He pounded the button with a little more force than necessary. Vance just nodded, and the two stood there in tense silence for a moment as the elevator descended. Finally Gibbs faced the man he nominally worked for, pushing the stop button, "Nine, Vance. You don't... Damnit, I knew they were young, but nine? A nine year-old doesn't just stumble across a drug like that."

Vance nodded, his voice calm despite the tension evident in his shoulders. "No, they don't. From what I understand, despite the sudden increase in Devil-fruit users in my life, it's not that common of a drug."

"It's not common. At all. I checked with Sengoku, and the going price for one dose alone is enough to put both of your kids through college. Twice."

"Then I guess my theory that Mr. Clay slipped some to his little friends is blown completely out of the water." The Director looked like being wrong was a bitter pill. Gibbs could understand that. Obviously Bon Clay cared for the boys, a feeling that was somewhat reciprocated. I could have brought myself to understand that, maybe.

"Thirteen year-olds don't just agree to take something like that, either. Even with the skewed information they had..." Gibbs took a deep breath, "He took it to try and protect his brother."

"From who?"

Gibbs hit the stop button again, starting the elevator, "The same person he's terrified of."

"This a 'Gut' thing, or do you actually have an idea on who it is?" Vance asked, staring at him. When he nodded tersely, the other sighed, "Are you going to share?"

"Explain in the lab." He replied with a grim expression as the doors dinged.

Abby spun around, knowing Gibbs was there with that uncanny ability she had. Her smile was bright as she bounced over to the two of them, "Gibbs, Director! You're just in time to go with me to watch Luffy. Tim just texted me, and apparently the kid's really amazing."

"Abby. Going to have to ask Luffy to show off for you some other time. Right now I got something I need you to do for me." Gibbs began, placing the Cherry Caf-Pow in her hands and gently turning her around.

"Does this have anything to do with who their fathers are?" She looked at him worriedly over her shoulder as he guided her to the keyboard.
"No, it's not about that," Gibbs began as he stood next to her, a frown on his face.

"Actually, about those results," Vance leaned against the table behind them, "They stay between us and your friend Law, got it?

"Oh, no problem!" She smiled, "Because, you know, I ran the search through a few different proxy servers and bisected the list. I was really careful, and the results are totally secure. So, really...its like it never even happened. Except that it did, because I have results. Traffy won't say anything. He doesn't really care, anyway. Honestly, he was more concerned with Luffy's calcium levels."

Gibbs nodded, not surprised. Law struck him as very driven and focused. "Good. Keep it that way."

"Will do, Gibbs! So, what can I do for you?"

"Have you managed to dig anything up on the name Auger?"

"Well, no." Abby shrugged helplessly, " It sort of looks like I might have hit a tiny snag with it. I'm sorry Gibbs! The name isn't exactly uncommon, you know, and I've got, like, hundreds of Augers with criminal records, first and last names. That's even narrowing it down to ones with gun experience."

"That's alright," He patted her shoulder, "I've got a feeling he's going to show up as someone connected to their 'Uncle.' Got anything new on him?"

She looked at him in confusion for a moment, "Teach Marshall? Not much, I'm afraid. Lots of trips out of the country, lifetime criminal... generally not a nice guy. Seriously, Gibbs, I can't figure out how they wound up with a bastard like him."

"Simple. He snatched them off the streets." Vance spat out, putting it together, "Bastard doesn't even begin to cover it."

"What do you mean?" Abby turned and looked at the two of them, surprised by the venom in the Director's tone.

"Your friend Law's revelation about their parents got Ace flustered enough to actually share some information." Gibbs could see her confusion, "How old were they when Marshall adopted them?"

Abby turned to her computer and pulled up the file, "Uh...looks like Ace was fourteen and Luffy was eleven. A real rush adoption, too...like, a month, tops."

He shared a look with Vance. The Director nodded, "Lines up."

"Move them to New York City where they won't know anyone else, and make it so if they try to run, they'll be brought right back. Hell, they were on their own for so long, it probably never even occurred to them to go to anyone for help." Gibbs shook his head, realizing that Teach must have known that they wouldn't go for help. "He hand picked them, Vance. That son-of-a-bitch hand picked them."

"Wait, are you suggesting he adopted them just so he could turn them into Devil-fruit users later?" Abby looked at the two of them, "Because that's just...stupid. I mean, from a non-personal level, with the odds of the drug killing you, that's a huge waste of time and money. It would take less effort to find existing Devil-fruit users, right? From a personal level...what an evil jerk!"

Gibbs looked her in the eye, "Abbs, he didn't wait to turn them. He adopted them after the fact..." He thought about the young man's wording. It had been familiar. "That's when he met Tony. When
"Marshall got a hold of his brother."

"But... that's horrible! Why would anyone do that to a kid?"

"To turn them into weapons, Abby." He sighed, "Look for anyone connected to Marshall with the name Auger. First name, last name, nickname, I don't care. Hell, it could be the name of their pet cat. Just find me that person, alright?"

Vance looked at him, "You mean to tell me that their dear old 'Uncle' had them shot at? Why?"

"My gut says it was a warning to keep their mouth shut."

"Oh I get it!" Abby's fingers flew across the keys, "You think Marshall had something to do with Gekkō's death, don't you?" He nodded.

Before he could answer, Vance's phone rang, "What is it? Right...Tell him I'll be right up." Vance shook his head, putting away his phone.

"Well?"

"It looks like the higher-ups in the CIA don't want to just take our word for anything these days. They sent someone to see if our guests know anything else about Crocodile. Turns out he's a bit of a big name player, and they think our boys might know something."

Gibbs rolled his eyes at Vance's back as he followed the man, "They don't."

"Yeah, I know. Of course I told them that. Repeatedly. At length. They sent someone anyway." Vance stared at the wall pensively as the elevator rose, "We'll keep the boys out of it as much as possible. In fact, I'd rather keep them out of sight. So, while I keep whoever they sent busy, you get the boys out of sight for a while."

Exiting the elevator and crossing the bullpen, he could see a man standing on the raised platform pacing back and forth. He figured it was whoever the CIA had sent over to interfere with their work. The man looked impatient, obviously not used to being kept waiting. The bullpen itself was almost empty still. Gibbs assumed that everyone was still outside watching the happy young man demonstrate his skills. Once again, he glanced at the CIA agent out of the corner of his eye as Vance head towards the stairs and almost stopped himself. He knew the man; in fact, he had worked for years with him. It was his old friend Garp, or someone very similar to him. He turned again and sped up.

"Bwahahahaha! Gibbs! You old dog, is that you?" He closed his eyes for a second and turned around, any chance of slipping away gone at those words. He faced the former marine specialist with a sigh as he came near, "It is you!"

"Yeah. It's me alright. How you been, Garp?" Gibbs looked his former comrade over. The years hadn't been unkind to the man; he was still built like a brick house.

"Ah, you know how it is. Bored." Garp grinned at him, it was a look that had usually meant trouble for someone, "Luckily, for me at least, heard you guys at NCIS got a possible lead on this damn Sand-Croc we've been after. Who'da thought you'd still be here though?"

Vance was looking between the two of them with mild amusement, "I take it you two know each other?"

"Know Gibbs? I'd say! Me and him used to be the only norms that'd hang around Senny... That
bastard, you're the guy who called about Devil-fruit users last week, right? Sengoku said you had a case where your suspect might have been a user, something about a fire-type. Any leads?"

Just what I don't want to talk about, he shared a look with the Director, getting his silent agreement to redirect the conversation if possible. Even if Garp might know a lot about Devil-fruit users from being partnered up with Sengoku for decades, neither wanted to bring up the two special cases. Not with the man right in front of me and one of the most dangerous Devil-fruit users I've ever heard of in the same building. Garp would take Ace into custody right then and there, and they wouldn't be able to stop him; he was one of the few people out there that had the clearance to do that... if Ace didn't force the man to kill him first. Somehow he doubted the fiery youth would go quietly.

"A few. Listen, Garp. Don't think our witness is going to be much use to you."

"Nonsense!" The man waved a hand, "Your guy was delivering a warning, right? That means he knows someone who knows Crocodile. Or he's covering his own ass and knows the monster himself."

"Not likely. I don't think he honestly knows how to cover his own ass." Gibbs smirked, mentally trying to picture Luffy trying to cover his ass. Somehow he could see the kid taking it literally and running around with a shield over his butt. "Really, he's an idiot. Just parroting what his friend told him to say. And he won't budge on giving his friend up."

"If you let me ta..."

"Bbbbbbrraaaaaaaaiiiiinnnnssssss s!"

"AH! Get off! Get him off, get him off!" Tony hobbled out of the elevator, Luffy hanging off him holding his head and grinning like an idiot.

"I don't think you have to worry, Tony." Tony grinned as he exited, leaning against Ace for support as the man himself clung to the wall laughing. "You have no brains to speak of."

"He's drooling on me!" Tony yelped, pretending to be terrified as he made his way over, "McGeek, get him off me! Boss, help!"

Law was the last one out of the elevator, "Don't you know how to take care of a zombie, ya?" He smiled creepily, holding a hand like a gun and pointing it at Luffy's head. "Double tap. Bang, bang."

Luffy's impression of a dead person was just as disturbing the second time around as it had been the first time. He snapped his head back, letting it lull to the side before sliding bonelessly off Tony's shoulder and landing on the floor facing up with a grin still plastered on his face. Gibbs just shook his head, resigned yet amused at the same time. It was just typical that they'd show up at the worst possible time.

"What's this? Bring your brat to work day?" Garp chuckled, looking down at Luffy, who stiffened under his gaze, "You were that little idiot hanging off the flagpole earlier, weren't you?"

As an answer, the dark haired child flipped to his feet, putting Gibbs between himself and Garp while looking at the man warily without saying a word. He was surprised, Luffy was anything but shy. Ace bristling with hostility, the smile gone from his face, was expected... though not the flash of betrayal he shot at the Director.

Garp either didn't notice the rising tension or didn't care. "Now, I know they aren't your brats, Gibbs. So what on Earth is the little one hiding behind you for? I don't bite, bwahahahahaha!"
Ace looked confused, "You...aren't here for us?"

"Why would I be here for a couple of brats? I'm here cause NCIS might have a lead on a nasty boy...why would you think I was here for you?"

"Well," the young man shrugged, scratching the back of his head, "You are Garp, right? I've been warned about you."

Garp looked pensive, "Ah! You're the witness with the friend! Tell me; what else do you know about Crocodile?"

"Hu-wh- Croc-a-wha-now?" He looked at the Director in confusion, "Is this about Bon Clay again? For the last time, we don't know anything about it. Guy's nuttier than a fruitcake, and I'm not the one who heard the message in the first place. For all I know he was talking about Florida crocodiles."

"Bon Clay?" Garp rubbed his chin, looking unhappy. "That's the source? That guy is trash." Gibbs felt Luffy's hands tighten on his arm as Garp eyed the elder brother speculatively, "I'm sure you know what I mean though, kid. He could be doing so much more with his skills. Only thing worse then that is a rotten Devil-fruit, eh, Gibbs?" He didn't reply, instead watching as Ace's shoulders tensed minutely, "Like that slime ball you're chasing. Probably some wannabe terrorist that thinks he's hit the big time showing it off. Bet you he did some pretty nasty things to get that damn drug, too. Garbage doesn't deserve that kind of power... sometimes the wrong ones beat the odds, though."

"You don't know us..." Luffy muttered glaring at the floor, drawing all eyes to him.

"Sorry, didn't hear you, kid. Speak up."

"Sh-" It happened instantly, Ace lunged for his brother, intercepting him as he shoved off of Gibbs and launched himself at the marine-turned-CIA agent

His face contorted in pure rage as he struggled against the restraining arms, Luffy snarled, "YOU DON'T KNOW US! DON'T TALK ABOUT MY BROTHER THAT WAY! I HATE YOU!"

"Some help here?!" Ace grunted, taking an elbow to the head, "Gesh, Lu! Calm down! It's fine! He didn't mean... Shit! Someone do something before he does something stup-" Luffy's arm stretched and if the elder brother hadn't tugged him off balance it would have connected with Garp's face. Instead, it went right through the partition behind the man like it was made of paper. "Too late. LU! STOP!"

"He threatened Bon!" The youth protested, still trying to reach Garp who just stood there looking stunned as Gibbs tried to help Ace wrestle Luffy away from him.

Law pulled out a syringe from his back pocket, Gibbs wasn't sure why he had it but he wasn't going to question it at the moment as he struggled to help rein in the boy. Luffy was a lot stronger than he had thought. "Hold him still for a second, ya!"

"Trying!" Gibbs grunted.

"Try harder!" Law darted in, "There. Give it a moment."

"Dammit, Law! That better not have been Special-K you gave him. "Ace growled out, still struggling to keep Luffy from ripping into Garp.
"With how you react to it? Don't be a fool. It's Etomidate." Law sniffed indignantly, pocketing the used syringe. "Speaking of fools, the man never threatened your friend."

"Yes he did!" Luffy whined as he started to sag against his brother, "He threatened Ace too...Nobody threatens my brother..."

Garp glared at all of them, "I never did."

"You're right. You wanted the drug to do the dirty work for you," Ace snapped back, "I believe your exact words were 'the wrong ones beat the odds weren't they?' The whole thing had only lasted for a few minutes, but it was obvious that the young man was exhausted. Gibbs was feeling the strain himself as he nodded to Tony to take the dark haired boy. Ace handed his now muttering limp brother to the agent in obvious relief before shooting a disgusted look at the CIA agent, "I'd apologize for his reaction, but, well. Wouldn't mean much since I was ready to deck you myself, would it? My brother beat those odds too, old man. Tell me; does he look like 'trash' or 'garbage' to you?"

Law stepped between them, physically putting a stop to Ace's growing rant and forcefully turning him around. "Back to the lab we go, ya? Your sweet little brother has a hell of a right hook. I want to look the both of you over. Then rest...yes, I mean you as well, don't give me that look. Doctor's orders," he followed it up with a shove. The young man complied readily enough, shoulders slumping. Thinking about it for a moment, Gibbs sent Tim after them. If Ace had a sleep fit brought on by all of this, Law wouldn't be able to move him on his own.

Vance waited until the elevator doors had shut before turning to Garp, "You alright?"

"Fine, fine," he had a pensive look on his face, "So, that was your fire-type, huh? Charming."

"Ace Marshall? He has his moments." The Director acknowledged.

"Why isn't he restrained? And that little one, his brother. He's dangerous."

"Only when you piss him off." Gibbs shrugged trying to act nonchalant. In reality, Luffy had scared him a little bit the way he had just snapped, "He's not a suspect, Garp. They're here as witnesses."

His old friend curled his lip, "Then you're more of a fool then I thought. They're playing you, Gibbs. You should hand them both over to me, I'll get the answers you need out of them."

Chapter End Notes

As for the questions I'm expecting, which are: "Wait, doesn't he recognize them?" and "Isn't he being harsh?" The first question will be answered next chapter, which is WHY it's being told from Garp's angle...

The second is related to the first, which should answer the question for you. I'll elaborate a bit because it might be a few days before the chapter goes up (Life, you know, gets in the way of typing) Garp's job in this world is a CIA investigator who specializes in people with Devil-fruit abilities committing acts of terror. He's well known among Devil-fruit users like Bon Clay (who HAS warned Ace about him). All he knows at this point is his old friend Gibbs had a case with a possible Devil-fruit
user involved that could have been terrorism and that suddenly and NCIS case has a lead on a known Devil-fruit user who's causing a lot of trouble...and he gets there to find the lead has got ties to Bon Clay (a guy he doesn't trust or like much, even if he sells them info)... AND Gibbs case has two Devil-fruit users that apparently have anger management issues. So...does that help explain it? Sorry, the meds are kicking in now and I'm about to go "WEEEEEE!" so...if not, let me know and I'll clarify as much as I can without spoiling the next few chapters.
"How?" Vance stood toe to toe with him, "I don't like what you're implying about my team, Special Agent Garp. I want you to know that those two saved the lives of two of my agents the other night."

Garp resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He'd seen the tactic before; a Devil-fruit user would arrange for something to happen to make an official trust them. It was a simple yet effective tactic, "Bet they were the reason your agents were in trouble in the first place." Vance narrowed his eyes, and Garp knew he was right, "Let me guess...they pushed your agents out of the way and took an attack that they just so happened to be immune to?"

"There were other..."

"They're playing you, Vance." He cut the other off, trying to make him understand the danger that he saw,"You guys at NCIS aren't used to dealing with their kind, or the crap they'll pull. I'm not saying every user is a bad apple. Hell, most are great people. I'll be the first to admit that! These guys though? Even you should be able to see how dangerous those two are. I mean, look at the damage the little one did! He had to be drugged. Loose cannons at best, can't you see that?"

"Before you go suggesting how I've allowed myself to be duped by a couple of dangerous criminal masterminds," Gibbs had that tone that told him his old friend thought he was being incredibly stupid, "think about the fact that they're kids, Garp."

"So what? Senny was in his twenties when he got his, you know."

Gibbs just rolled his eyes, "Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"To get you your damn answers, of course."

"So, you're finally seeing things my way? Good on you, Gibbs!" He laughed, feeling relieved as he followed the other onto the elevator, "I'll get them out of your hair right away."

"I think you misunderstood me, Garp." Gibbs didn't bother to look at him, "You're not taking them anywhere. They saved my life the other day, and before you go on about how it had to have been some plot on their part, it wasn't. Whoever was shooting at us meant to kill the boy. Took an arrow to the gut. Ducky said he was lucky it wasn't worse than it was. So, you're not taking them anywhere. They don't leave this building without one of my agents with them at all times until we get to the bottom of this."

When the doors opened the man who had sedated the younger boy was there with a gothic looking woman. She looked troubled, though he looked bored. "They're in the lab, ya. Lawyer's with them, kicked us out."

"Right. How'd they look?" Gibbs seemed ready to stand there and wait all day if he had to.

"Some muscle strain, nothing big. Didn't even damage the stitches." The girl answered, glaring at Garp like it was all his fault, "Guess being rubber is useful after all, even if some people think your trash. How could you call him that? He's the sweetest kid! It's not his fault that some wack-job snatched him and his brother off the streets for his own sick amusement you."
"Abby."

"Sorry, Gibbs." She didn't look sorry at all.

"I gave Ace a mild sedative. Guy was a bit worked up, ya? Might want to give his friends some time to talk him down. Looks like you hit a nerve there, agent." The young man said as he practically dragged the woman onto the elevator with him.

The door to the lab was closed, but voices could still be heard. Gibbs put a hand out before they reached the door, stopping him in his tracks. Garp snorted, annoyed that Gibbs thought he was stupid enough to just barge into the room. He was on a mission to collect as much information as possible, after all. Casually, the two old friends leaned against the wall on either side of the door and listened.

"...me to do? ...threatening to kill...! I had... alright?" Ace's voice shook with emotion.

He didn't recognize who it was that answered, "...know Marshall...bad news?"

"Well, he...money was good..." Typical criminal, he thought listening to Ace make excuses. He ignored the warning look Jethro shot him and pushed open the door a crack, "...want me to say? Lots of kids were running for him at the time, you know. Hot food was a good motivation to ignore how creepy he was, alright? Not like there was a lot of legitimate work for a twelve year old."

"TWELVE?! Are you hearing this Marco? Are you fucking hearing this? Because, I'm hearing that Teach went after a nine-year-old boy...that's it. I'm going to kill him."

"Thatch, you need to calm down and"

"Don't tell me to calm down Ace! Bad enough some government dog comes up here barking about you two being trash and how you should be dead...do you even realize how lucky you two are? DF doses are meant for adults, Ace. Not a goddamn kid, and your brother's a bit of a runt to boot...Marco, you're helping me do this, right?"

"You don't see me arguing, yoi."

"As much as I'd love to let you boys continue to plot murder, as Ace's lawyer, I'm going to have to ask you to stop. Not only is this not the place, if the man does in fact turn up dead by some stretch of the imagination, I'd like my charges to be able to claim no prior knowledge, thank you." A woman calmly interrupted, though you could hear anger in her voice.

"Sorry, yoi. Didn't mean to put you in a bad spot, Miss Nicco." There was the sounds of the people in the room settling, "Well, back to the problem at hand. What are you going to do now, Ace?"

"About what?" The young man sounded sullen.

It was the woman who answered, "About that CIA agent, for one. You do realize that with your status as a Devil-fruit users, unlicenced no less, and with criminal records, he has the legal grounds to take you in."

"It's complete bullshit that every Devil-fruit user is a potential terrorist, and you know it!" Personally, Garp agreed with Ace on that, but the people above him didn't want to take chances. He could easily see both sides of the argument, though to him it looked like it just drove potential allies underground faster than roaches when the lights came on, and he couldn't blame them in the slightest.
"Yes, well. Your brother's attack can be used as evidence, don't you think?" The voice coolly pointed out. He caught Gibbs glaring at him and nodded, accepting the blame for that now as the voice continued, "The only thing that would prevent this outcome would be your continued cooperation with NCIS. Cooperation which has been lacking, Ace."

Gibbs shot him a look and knocked on the door, "Coming in."

"Ah, agent Gibbs, we were just talking about how Ace was going to be more cooperative in the future." A dark haired woman with cool eyes stated as she looked Garp over, "I take it this is the man the CIA sent?"

"It is. Nice to see you two again."

"We wanted to see how the checkup went. Since Ace here is under a bit of house arrest, we'll pick up the new meds and drop them off later, yoi." The blond answered.

"Appreciate it." Gibbs acknowledged.

"Now that we have all the touchy feely crap out of the way, I need to talk to Ace." Garp ignored the blond man as he glared daggers at him. The warning was clear, even if it was unnecessary. He had no intention of trying to intimidate the young man sitting in the chair in front of him, or of taking him into custody. Ace continued to eye him cautiously, but there was a lax-feeling to the way he sat, making him think the the doctor had given him stronger sedative then he'd suggested.

"What do you want now?" Too bad whatever it was didn't work on his attitude.

"Calm down, brat. I just wanted to make sure you and your...brother was it?...were alright. I shouldn't have said that, and I'm sorry." He was, too, even if there was disbelief etched on the other person's face.

"Whatever. We're fine." The blond nudged him, and he glared at the offender for a moment before huffing, "I guess we're sorry, too? It's not like you could know our lives got screwed. But you still shouldn't have called Bon trash. He's still a friend, and he's a good friend."

"You're right. I was just annoyed to learn that he was the source of the information, is all. Crocodile's been a hard guy to pin down, and I was hoping for a lead. A location, maybe an ally of his..." He pulled out a picture and showed it to Ace, "You sure this guy isn't familiar?"

Ace rolled his eyes before looking at the photo. Garp as relieved that he was actually taking the time to study the slightly pixilated image of man with slicked back hair and a cigar in his mouth and a scar across his face. A large golden hook could be seen taking the place of a missing hand, the other covered in rings. At length, Ace shook his head, handing back the photo.

"Sorry, never seen the guy before, and he doesn't look like anyone my brother's talked about, either. Guy looks pirate-y enough that he'd go on for days about it if he had seen him."

Well, that explains why he took so long to study it, Garp sighed, putting away the photo. "Damn. Looks like Mr. One slips through the cracks again." He almost missed it. The dark grey eyes went wide in surprise just for a second before the lazy suspicious look returned. But it had been there. "What?"

"N-nothing." He sounded nervous.

He was about to press the issue before the lawyer shot him a look, "A moment please." She knelt in front of the now obviously skittish young man, "Ace, you need to cooperate. I know it's hard, but
he can't hurt you or your brother here and you can only stay here if you cooperate, remember? Please, if not for yourself, think of my bank accounts."

Ace's lips twitched slightly at that. He nodded, taking a deep breath, "I...that name, I've heard it. When, uh. The guy who, um. For dumping Moria's body." Garp wanted to hurry him along, but caught Jethro's head shake, so he settled.

Ace licked his lips, eyes darting around the room like some trapped animal before settling on his brother. He looked vulnerable for a moment, and Garp could easily see how young he really was. What was that they were talking about, he was given the drug when he was nine? No, wait, that was his brother...still, he can't be older than twenty right now. What kind of life is that for a kid? No wonder the runt got so worked up. "Take your time. Anything you can remember might help." He encouraged, though it didn't look like the youth heard him.

Ace finally continued, looking only at the sleeping boy, "It was late, and I wasn't really paying attention, because he was drunk as usual and he gets all...well, I had more important things to pay attention to. I remember thinking 'thank God Lu's not here'... He was going on the whole time about some stupid plan. He always has a plan, you know? It was weird, though. He said..." Ace looked confused, "He said, 'if I can pull this off Mr. One will owe me one.' It was weird... he says how he's 'Number One' when he's talking about his dumb plans, so at first I thought he was just really wasted. Which, you know, he was, because his aim sucked. But he kept making cracks about it. 'Who's going to be Mr. One now?' and 'What do you think, Ace? Two on One? Fire, sand, and smash it to bits!'...Like I said, he was seriously drunk. By the end of it, I was just so glad it was a body dump he'd called me for an not a murder, I just got Auger's new number and got the hell out of there."

Garp took a steadying breath; this was the lead he had been looking for, and the kid didn't even know it. It sounded like his employer was not only working with Crocodile, but was planning on double crossing him, too. "This guy you got the job from. Did he say anything else?"

"No. Just the usual crap. You know, about how I should do the job right and hurry home just in case something bad happens while I'm away." The youth sneered, "I hate him."

He was taken back by the pure venom in Ace's voice. He didn't doubt for a second that whoever it was who had put him up to this job was someone that the young man would gladly see dead if at all possible, and he wondered what kind of monster it was. The look on Gibbs face suggested that he knew, but he wasn't going to ask his old friend. It obviously had something to do with the case he was working on. Besides, it would give him something to do other than paperwork, which would make Sengoku happy.

"Right. Well, if you think of anything else, have Gibbs call me. He's got my number, alright?"

"Fine. Will you just go away now?" Ace glared at him as he left the room alone and headed for the elevator.

It would be a short drive back to his office, but the sooner he got the search started the better. With that in mind, Garp pulled out his cellphone and dialed Kizaru. The man was a freelance private eye with a clean record who owed him a few favors. He was reliable and fast, and better still, he knew how to keep his mouth shut when he had to.

"Hello?" A lazy voice answered after the fourth ring. Garp wasn't fooled for a moment, though. He knew the man on the other end a long time, long enough to see though his lazy act.

"Borsalino, it's me."
"Garp. Why, it's been so long." Came the sing-song reply, "What can I do for you today?"

"I have a small job for you. I want you to look into an Ace Marshall that's currently in NCIS custody, and his brother Lu... See what you can dig up on them. Anything at all."

The sleepy tone was gone, "It have to do with a case?"

"It might. Just send me what you find, and try not to send up any red flags over at NCIS."

"On it." The other replied, "I'll send you what I find to the usual account."

The desk across from his was empty when he returned to the office, and he wasn't surprised. Senny had been very busy recently trying to get ahead of some of the recent cases. *Hell, we've both been busy...* he mused as he booted up his computer and sat at his overly cluttered desk. There was a box of half-eaten donuts on the corner, and idly he pulled them over and started to eat them. They weren't even that stale. Garp couldn't even remember the last time he'd had a good meal, or been home for longer than a few hours. It wasn't like it mattered anyway; there wasn't anyone waiting for him.

His desktop background stared at him, a happier time. A younger Garp sat between two boys, fishing. He remembered that day well, just a week before he'd gotten annoyed with the two of them and left them on an island for survival training. It had been the worst decision of his life. Ace was looking at the bait bucket with an annoyed expression while his other grandson was happily feeding the fish. Luffy really hadn't been too interested in catching anything that day. It was the last picture he had of the the boys. Warily he clicked open the email Borsalino had sent. The man worked fast, at least.

There was a picture attached, but first he started to read.

*There is no record of a 'Lu' Marshall. NCIS took into custody an Ace and Luffy Marshall, adopted by one Teach Marshall almost a decade ago. Hey, didn't you used to have a grandson named Luffy? Whatever happened to him?*

"He died...both he and his elder brother died." He muttered, hating his friend for bringing that up, even if he didn't know. No one knew except for the organization run by the boys' fathers and Sengoku. The man had been with him when he'd returned to that small reef-island only to find that a hurricane had hit it the week before. He'd been the one to search through the wrecked forest for any signs of the boys... and he'd help Garp over the next few years to find them. Even knowing that there was no way they could have survived that storm when the island had been decimated, they had still looked. He'd even gone so far as to check the nearest port with no luck. There hadn't even been any bodies to bury. Dragon and Roger hadn't spoken to him since. Both claimed they didn't blame him, but he was the one who'd sworn that they'd be safer with him then with the Rebel Army. It was his fault, plain and simple.

*Attached is the only photo of the three of them together. You're files probably have more of Teach then I could find...check under the name 'Blackbeard'. Looks like the rumors of him using Devil-fruit users are true, eh?"

~ Borsalino

"Blackbeard? That bastard?!!" Garp snarled, clicking on the attachment, "I need to warn Gibbs! Those two are a lot more trou-"

He stared at the picture blankly. The elder boy in the photo was glaring at the camera like the
photographer had personally arranged for everything bad that had ever happened. The younger boy just had this horribly hurt expression, like he wanted to be anywhere else. Fear was evident in every line of their bodies, fear of the man who stood next to the smaller boy with his large hand resting possessively on his shoulder. Despite that, he knew the boys. He'd know them anywhere. Hell, Garp stared at their picture often enough. In a rage he picked up his phone and called Borsalino, wanting to know if this was his sick idea of a joke.

"Garp? Did you get the email?"

"What the hell is the meaning of this, Kizaru?" He snapped back.

"Meaning of what? I found what you wanted me to on the two Marshall boys at NCIS..."

"WHY THE HELL DID YOU SEND ME A PICTURE OF MY DEAD GRANDSONS?!" The phone creaked in his hand, "IS THIS YOUR IDEA OF A JOKE?"

"...I didn't, Garp." Borsalino sounded concerned, "I sent you a picture of the Marshall boys taken the day they were adopted."

Garp looked at his desktop again, staring hard at Ace's image. His heart was pounding, and he wasn't sure if it was in excitement or dread. He used to think he knew every freckle...that he'd always recognize his grandsons...he pulled back up the image of the two boys Marshall had just adopted and felt his heart clench. It is...but it can't be... There was no denying it was definitely Ace, his grandson, but older by a few years. Quickly he compared the younger boy to his Luffy. Again, now that he looked carefully, the boy in the photo was older by a few years, but it was still most definitely his grandchild.

Alive! They're alive... Garp was elated. He almost didn't hear Borsalino's worried voice on the phone still clutched to his ear, "Garp? Garp? You still there? Is everything alright?"

"mm? Fine, fine. Sorry...the image...just brought back some memories is all." He covered, thinking fast. I can't believe it...after all this time! Why, when I get my hands on those two... "Listen, I've got to run. Send anything else you find my way, alright?"

"No problem. You sure you're alright?"

"Better than alright. Looks like I just got a big lead." He hung up, still staring at the images side by side. Garp grinned down at the screen, "I'll go there and... and what? They're Devil-fruit users, Garp. Criminals connected with terrorists. He remembered the fearful look as Ace shared what he knew, the scar on Luffy's face...the boy's reaction to his own harsh words that he regretted now more than ever. Oh my boys... "What did that man do to you? Do you even remember your Grandpa anymore?"
Abby tapped away at the keyboard, continuing the search for the mysterious Auger while Luffy took up all her workspace. Everyone else including his brother had left the room in order to find answers in their own ways, though Abby thought Ace mostly left in search of food. The boy sleeping on the table stirred sluggishly, starting to wake. Rolling his head to the side he blinked sleep-dulled brown eyes at her, "Wa' happ'd?"

"Hey, Luffy! How do you feel?"

"Sleepy...is Narcolepsy contagious?"

"No...Why?"

"'Cause I'm asleep on your table. Duh."

"Oh. I had Tony put you there after Traffy drugged you. It was that or the floor, really. Sorry if it's not too comfortable."

"Ok then." He swung his legs over the side and stood, wobbly at first, though he was quick to wave her away when she rushed to offer him a hand.

Abby was a bit worried, the boy looked honestly confused. "You alright Luffy?"

"No..." The boy pouted, "I'm confused. Why did Law drug me?"

"Because you attacked Garp."

"WHAT?!" He gaped at her, obviously shocked before blinking, "Good reason. Ace musta been really pissed at me..."

"You honestly don't remember at all?" The goth woman turned to look at him fully, brow crunching in concern, "Because Tony and Law said you were ready to kill him."

Luffy pouted, obviously sulking. "I remember seeing him...and then nothing." The boy gave a half-shrug, "Sorry...I didn't hurt anyone, did I?"

"No..." She could see the relief on him, and decided to change the subject. "So, I missed your show! Something came up, sorry. Tim said it was amazing, though."

"Really? That's alright. It was kind of nice to be able to show off, but it felt a little weird to, you know, use my abilities. Too many people..." Luffy made a face, "Ace always says we have to be careful."
"I can understand that. I was meaning to ask you earlier, is it just your skin that's rubber, or is it your bones and muscles, too?" For an answer, the teen held out his hand, pointer finger extended with a smile. "Let me guess. Pull your finger?" When he nodded, she did so, and the digit stretched with her pull. "Oh! Doesn't that hurt?"

He looked at her, brown eyes blinking in obvious confusion, "It feels like you're pulling it."

When Abby let go, Luffy took ahold of the same phalange. He roughly twisted it so that the nail bed was on the palm side, and looked up at her. Oh my GOD why did he do that? I need to get Ducky... Where's Law when I... Abby watched as he let go and the finger spun back into the right direction with a twang sound. Oh... OH! Next, Luffy grabbed his arm and bent it just before the elbow, before letting it go. Once again it rebounded.

"So... it doesn't hurt at all then." She stated to Luffy's half nod and shrug. She could tell he was nervous about her reaction, and it was understandable why. She could easily see his so-called 'Uncle' telling him he was a monster or the like. Abby knew monsters; Luffy wasn't one in any way. "That's so cool! Hey, before, you stretch your arm on your own. You know, to get your phone? How hard is that?"

"That? Oh, that's easy now. Wasn't when I was a kid, though... Ace helped me, and I helped him. I think. He says I did, at least." Luffy laughed, "Hey, where is Ace?"

"Oh, I think he's with Gibbs right now. I've got an idea, let's go see if we can find them." She'd barely finished suggesting the search and Luffy was already dragging her out the door towards the elevators. When the two of them reached the bullpen, he deflated slightly. His brother was nowhere in sight. Abby wasn't one to be deterred, and quickly marched over to the rest of the team. "Where's Ace?"

Tim didn't bother to look up as he answered, "Ace? Oh yeah. I think he's out in the courtyard with Gibbs."

"If I were you, I would leave the two of them alone, Abby. He looked really upset." Ziva watched Luffy, concern evident.

Abby frowned, also looking at Luffy. "Maybe we should wait then..."

"No. I'm going to find him." He looked at her, completely determined, "and when I do... I'm gonna throw a water balloon at him."

"You're going to throw a what at him?" She couldn't help but ask.

Luffy answered like it was the most logical thing in the world, "A water balloon."

"I knew there was something I liked about you, kid!" Tony spoke up from where he had been sitting, grinning at Luffy, "Come're a sec. I have extra large balloons in my desk. Perfect, right?"

"...Tony, why do you have water balloons in your desk?" Ziva's expression said she probably didn't want to know, and Abby had to agree with her.

"Probee pranks," was the reply, and she wasn't surprised at all. "Come on, let's get these filled up. How's your arm? I know a small deck that offers a great view..."

"Shiihihihi... a sneak attack! This'll be so much fun!" Luffy chuckled as he quickly filled up the balloons and followed Tony. Wordlessly the other three followed them out the door.
Abby warily looked at Luffy, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Yep! Ace is way too tense! This'll totally help get him to relax! Trust me!" The teen grinned as he hooked two fingers around a back of a chair and stretched his hand back like a slingshot.

"Wait!" Tony pulled out his cellphone, "I wanna get some pictures of this. Let me get into a good spot first."

"Awww..."

"Hey, it's my balloons you're using, kiddo." The agent reminded the antsy boy as he ran inside. She assumed Tony planned to get some ground shots and hoped he'd hurry before they were spotted.

While they waited, Abby again eyed the distance. It was well over two hundred feet at least, and at an angle too. She wondered if Luffy really could make such a shot. Looking at him, the boy didn't seem concerned at all. His one hand was still stretched out a bit and he held one balloon in his other hand. He wasn't even looking at his brother, instead he was looking up, watching the clouds.

Tim finally spoke up for the first time, "You really think you can make this shot?"

"Betcha dinner I can." Luffy nodded, "Its physics. I'm good at this stuff. Ace is gonna be so surprised!"

Ziva looked like she was going to withhold judgement for now, but she did move closer to the banister. "Well, if you're sure about this...there's Tony. Looks like he's ready."

"Oooo I can't watch. But I can't look away. Just do it already!" Abby hopped up and down excitedly as she watched the dark haired youth place the watery projectile in his stretched palm carefully and use his now free hand to pull it back. He paused, looking at his brother with a blank expression and pulled it back even further before smirking wickedly and letting it fly just as Ace turned away from Gibbs, a vicious frown on his face.

*&&*GIBBS POV*&&*

Getting answers out of Ace was proving difficult. After the chat in Abby's lab, the man had been surly, barely speaking more than five words at a time. Gibbs could understand, though. So far Ace had probably revealed a lot more today than he'd ever told anyone before, and it was sure to be upsetting him. More than likely he was worrying about his brother, and what was going to happen to him more than himself. He'd hoped the fresh air would have helped calm Ace, but apparently it wasn't helping at all. They'd just been standing there for a good long while while he glared a hole into the concrete.

"I'm here if you wanna talk about it." He offered.

"I don't want to talk about it!" Ace snapped, turning away from him. Gibbs was sure he was going to head back down to Abby's lab and seek out his brother when something slammed into the young man. Before he'd even recognized that the liquid on his sleeve was water and not blood, Gibbs had his hand on his gun as Ace just stood there, frozen in shock. "What...the fuck...?"

A lone figure dropped down from the small deck two stories above, and he immediately recognized it as Luffy. He assumed by the laughter that the younger brother was also the culprit. "Oh man! The look on your face! Shihiihiihi! I got you!"

"Luffy, what the hell?" Ace ran a hand through his dripping wet hair before pulling off his equally soaked shirt, "What was that?"
"Water balloon. Shi-hihihi...You're soaked! That worked great!"

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up..." Despite the grumble, Gibbs could tell that the other was trying hard not to grin as he wrung out his shirt. The grin finally won out, morphing into a wicked smirk as Ace flicked a wrist, pulling a fireball into existence, "I'm gonna get you...!"

""AHHHH!" Luffy screeched, arm stretching to the nearest lamp and retracting, pulling him in that direction rapidly and out of his brother's reach. "Ziva! Toss me the other one!"

"No you don't! Fireball!" Unexpectedly, the target was the lamp, right above Luffy's hand. The boy let out a yelp as the metal heated and let go, spinning to face his brother and missing the tossed balloon which hit him almost directly on the top of the head, soaking him as well. Luffy pouted, "No fair, Ace!"

"You started it!" Ace pointed out over his laughter.

"Yeah, well...Rubber barrage!"

Gibbs watched in amazement as Luffy repeatedly punched at his brother who still stood a good distance away. Despite this, every blow went past him at least, and as he gained momentum it began to look like there were multiple arms. Still, Ace didn't seem deterred in the slightest and slowly made his way towards his younger brother, carefully dodging blows with what Gibbs could only assume were reflexes honed from similar fights between the two. When dodging wasn't an option, he blocked until he had halved the distance. Suddenly the assault stopped, and Luffy's arms stretched out at least twenty feet behind him as the boy stood well braced.

"Uh-" Ace quickly brought up his own arms in a guard position and crouched low, bracing as well, and Gibbs knew something big was about to happen.

"Rubber bazooka!"

Luffy threw his shoulders forward, his stretched out arms following the move as they rebounded past his body, slamming into his brother with enough force to send the larger man flying straight back clear to the other end of the courtyard. Gibbs was less shocked to see Ace twist and use his flames to slow his impact, but it still looked like it smarted a bit as the man stood there for a second panting. Just as he was about to step forward and check on the two combatants, Ace whistled getting his brother's attention, and lit his fist on fire as he stepped away from the wall and cocked the arm back.

"Fire fist!" A torrent of flame went rushing past and steamrolled right over Luffy. When it faded, the boy was flat on his back, arms spread wide and steaming.

Worried, Gibbs ran over, ignoring the shouts from the gathered onlookers. "Hey! Hey, kid! Luffy! You alright?"

"Mmmm?" The boy blinked at him, puffing out some more steam, "I'm fine. Let me j-gerk!"

"So, Agent Gibbs, where were we?" Ace jovially asked him, standing on his brother, one foot on his stomach, the other on his head.

He stared at the young man, "Don't you think you should move?"

"Why? Am I standing on something?" There was a mischievous glint in Ace's eyes, and Gibbs had the feeling his was missing something.
"Ace! Get off, I can't move!" Luffy thrashed under his brother, kicking and flailing his arms while his brother just shifted his weight expertly. It was obvious Luffy wasn't actually hurt in the slightest.

"Hmm, do you hear something?" Ace pretended to look around, "It almost sounded like something...Oh well..." he flipped the shoe off the foot holding his brother's head down, and proceeded to run up and down Luffy's sides with his toes, "Excuse me, my foot itched."

"SHISHISHISHIISIIIIIIIIIIII! S-stoop it! That t-tickles! A-ace!"

"Wow, Gibbs! I never thought the DC area was prone to earthquakes!"

"A-Alright! You w-win!" Luffy huffed out between laughs.

Ace grinned down at him now, "Knew you would see it my way, twerp. Here, let me give you a hand."

"I thought I had you with the bazooka, too..." Luffy pouted as his brother stepped off his middle and reached down.

"It was a good try. Let me dry off too much, though."

Gibbs finally interrupted, "Am I missing something, or were you two not just trying to kill each other?"

Both brothers just stared at him blankly before Luffy answered, "We were just sparring...Ace started using his powers first, though."

"You two do this often?"

"Least once a day without powers, once a week with'um if we can." Ace admitted, "We, uh...have to train with, um, that guy. But, since we're kinda stuck like this, Me'n'Lu thought we'd, you know, try and have some fun sometimes. Sparring is fun."

"Lots of fun!" Luffy agreed nodding happily, and Gibbs was once again amazed by both of them. He had no doubt that the idea to spar had originally been Ace's, but he also was just as sure that Luffy was the one that kept the tradition going at times.

He didn't say this though, instead looking at the gathered crowd, "Right. Fun." He spotted Tony with his cellphone out with a grin on his face and raised his voice, "Well, show's over, everyone! Back to work!" There were groans all around.

"Oh, hey, Ace! Tim owes us dinner."

"Why?"

"Well, because he bet I couldn't hit you with the balloon."

"And he's an idiot. Cool. Free food." Ace threw an arm around his brother and steered him towards the door, probably to hunt down McGee.

Gibbs turned to Tony as he attempted to slip past, "Get any good shots?"

"Who, me? What makes you think I had anything to do with this?" He just stared at him until Tony laughed nervously, "Yeah, Boss. Got a bunch of nice ones. Want me to send them to you?"
"Do that." He nodded, remembering the strange request Garp had called with shortly after he had left. The man had wanted pictures of the Marshall boys, and not mugshots. When Gibbs had asked, all his old friend had said was that he needed to confirm something and he'd get back to him. His gut was saying Garp was hiding something from him, but it also told him to trust the man. So he would. For now.

Chapter End Notes

And a few quick notes! Rubber Barrage is obviously Gatling Gun. I warned you all many MANY chapters ago that some attacks would be getting name changes because of the world they're in. This is one of the first I'd thought about when I came to that decision. Next note is on Luffy not remembering. That'll be covered next chapter...there's a reason, though I'm sure most of you can figure out why. As for Ace standing on Luffy...I just want to say, I have this mental image of them wrestling, Ace winning, but when Luffy doesn't admit he's lost, Ace uses him as a chair and ignores him until he gives up. I bet he's even done it in front of their friends, too.
"Tell our man to be careful. Eustass Kidd isn't someone to take lightly. If he thinks for any reason his unplanned visit to a jail cell was part of a plot of some sort, he'll kill him." Roger calmly explained to Makino as he felt his phone go off in his pocket. Again. For the third time in an hour. He didn't even need to look to know it would be Garp. It must have shown on his face, too.

Makino offered him one of her trademark smiles, "The Old Man again?"

"Yes. Did Scales forget Father's day or something and you forget to tell me? Honestly, I don't have time to get stuck in the middle of this bullshit right now."

"No, I made sure Dragon sent something out myself...unless you forgot?" He shook his head emphatically at her accusation. He'd sent a nice tie. "Then it might actually be something important, Roger. I don't even remember the last time he called."

"I was afraid you were going to say that..." He groaned, flopping into his chair dramatically in an attempt to vie for pity. It didn't work of course, Makino instead just rolled her eyes as she casually strolled out the door, going to close it behind her, "Tell Dragon to get his sorry ass in here! I'm not dealing with the old nut bag on my own if he's around."

The woman actually had the audacity to roll her eyes again at him before shutting the door to the reasonably sized cabin. He, Dragon, and a few of their more trusted members had set out to sea on what Scales called training exercises. Which meant the two of them tried to get the others to actually train while everyone goofed off until it turned into a party cruise for two weeks. Basically a yearly vacation of sorts. Tradition, as it were...not that we'll be telling the 'rubes back at base anything about it... Roger mused, fingering his brightly colored t-shirt. That left him no excuse to not answer when the phone in his pocket rang for the fourth time, though.

"What the hell is so important you couldn't just leave a text message, Old Man?" He pretended to gripe as he answered the phone. Truth was it had been too long, and he did miss Garp's voice a bit.

"Shiny, my boy! I was starting to get worried when you and that idiot son of mine wouldn't pick up. Is this a bad time?"

He wasn't surprised that Garp had been ringing his son as well, "Not a bad time at all. In fact, I just finished up for the day...it's party boat time; so knowing you're son, Scales's probably left his phone in his room or something is all."

"Ah." There was a moment's hesitation on the line, and Roger felt himself tense up. Garp was nothing if not direct in all things. Hesitation was never a good sign. "Actually...I, uh. I need to talk to both of you."

"Why? What's wrong, Garp?" He leaned in, suddenly worried for the man who'd practically raised him like his own son. The man who'd he'd drifted apart from after that day but loved all the same. "You're not in trouble, are you?"

The other sounded surprised, "What? No, no no! Nothing like that! It's...well...complicated. I think. I don't exactly have the whole picture, but I...maybe I should call once I figure out what's going on..." he sounded confused, frustrated even.
That was more like the Garp Roger knew, which was a bit of a relief as he waved Dragon into the room and put the phone on speaker. Dragon gave him a look that spoke volumes, telling him the tattooed man had heard his worry at least and he could only shrug, "Dragon's here now, so you damn well better not hang up, Old Man. What's going on?"

"Dragon?"

"Dad. Nice to hear from you," A smile played on his lips as he sat on the desk for lack of another chair.

"You too, boy! It's been too long...Far too long..." and there he goes getting all weird on us again.

The two in the room shared another look, "Have you been drinking, Dad?"

"No!" There was a pause, "Well, maybe. A little. To calm my nerves."

"It's what time there? Four in the afternoon? A bit early, don't you think?" Roger was worried all over again if Garp was rattled enough by something to need to drink to calm his nerves. "What the hell is going on?"

It was like Garp didn't even hear him, "I should never have left them there you know...just wanted to make them tough...God, I should have looked harder!"

He grimaced, looking at the phone sitting between him and his longtime friend and debated hanging it up. Immediately Roger felt horrible for even thinking about it, because he knew Garp still blamed himself after all these years. At the same time, it hurt to think about the fate of his own son...and he knew it killed Dragon. After the accident, Luffy had been all Dragon had left of his wife. The man had been completely devastated by the loss, and for the first time he was thrust into the role of caregiver for a child he'd never wanted but agreed to for his wife. Luffy might not have been Lily's biological child, but no one could deny that he was his mother's son. Sweet, honest to a fault, and nothing like Rouge in any way. Something all three of them were thankful for, even as they'd argued over the care of the boys. After all, how do you explain to a three year-old that your dead mom had another son after she died? Though, Ace had been a smart boy. Looking back, Roger was sure he'd have taken it well...at least when the boys had finally met. God, I miss them.

"Dad! Enough! We get it already." Dragon pulled a face, that tribal tattoos on across his cheek adding severity to the look. He sighed, sounding tired, "Just...enough. Please. Why did you really call?"

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"Dad! Enough! We get it already." Dragon pulled a face, that tribal tattoos on across his cheek adding severity to the look. He sighed, sounding tired, "Just...enough. Please. Why did you really call?"

The laptop sitting open on the desk binged with an incoming Skype call. Both men looked curiously at it, hoping for an excuse to cut the phone call short only to see it was from Fistolovegarp.

Alright. Now I'm officially pissed off, Roger glared at the phone, "Really? Really? Enough of the bullshit, Garp, you're drunk! I am not signing on with you so we can watch your sorry ass sob over something that's long since done!"

"Don't sass me, Shiny! Sign on to the damn video call right now. And don't hang up, I don't have a God damn microphone on this piece of junk. Crap. Almost dropped the camera. There we go. Just do it. It's important." Garp sounded sober at least, if still a little watery.

Roger looked over at his friend who slid off the desk to get a better look at the screen with a shrug. He took that as an alright and clicked to confirm the call. The sight that greeted them wasn't exactly pleasant. He'd never wanted to see up Garp's nose again since he'd hit that growth spurt in his
"Camera down a bit, please."

"Huh? Oh...there. That better?"

"Much." Dragon chuckled, "Like a jungle in there, Dad."

"Shuddup, brat."

"Alright, so we're on. What's so damn important you had to show us?"

There was that hesitation again. More obvious now that they could see him. The old man finally sighed, turning slightly to the side and fiddling with a stack of papers. "What do you guys know about a fella that goes by the name of 'Blackbeard'?"

"Mmmm, Blackbeard? He's a real pain in the ass, Dad."

"Yeah. Been mucking about, making a name for himself in our business. Nasty piece of work, too."

"Word has it he's got some Devil-fruit users or something in his inner ranks." Dragon added.

Catching the almost controlled flinch at his son's words and the way his hand tightened on the paper in his hand, Roger narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"This is why," Garp held up a large computer printout photo. A dripping wet young man with black hair stood looking completely shocked. Next Garp held up a photo where the same man was now topless as he wrung out his shirt. He was glaring at a laughing teen who looked like it could possibly be his brother they were so similar, but there was a hint of a smile on his face. "These were taken an hour ago, outside of NCIS headquarters."

"Why are you showing us pictures again, and what's it got to do with you being all weird?"

Garp continued on like he didn't hear his son, "And this was taken right afterwards." The next shot was from further away. The laughing teen, still laughing, had stretched an arm to the top of a lamp and looked about ready to flee. He couldn't blame him since the other's smile had turned into a wicked looking grin and he was holding a fireball in his hand. He looked at the old man's eyes over the top of the picture and saw the seriousness in them. "Meet Teach Marshall's boys again."

"Well I'll be damned...that rotten bastard's using kids? Where the hell did he find users so young?"

Roger mused out loud. "Better question. What did you mean by 'again' Dad? We supposed to know these punks?"

"That's why I contacted you boys..." There was the hesitation again. The old marine reached for a third picture, guilt heavy in his eyes as he looked at it first. "I...I just found out myself. The boys...their names are right now legally Ace and Luffy Marshall."

Roger felt like the world was bottoming out on him, "Don't fuck around like that Old Man! They can't be, they're..." Garp turned the picture around. Flinching under the ham-hand of Blackbeard was sweet, silly little Luffy...And next to him, there was Ace...a little older, much much more wary than he remembered the boy ever being. Even after that time he'd caught him stealing his wine. But it was unmistakably his son. "in a crap load of trouble, aren't they?"
"Luffy? Ace...?" Dragon sounded stunned for a moment. It quickly turned to rage. Dragon had always been able to think things out quickly and process new information faster than Roger, though. "That...that sonovabitch! You realize what photo means, Roger?"

"That they're alive and they need us?"

"No!" He paused, "Well, that, too. But look at what we know. When the rumors started. How old they've gotta be in that picture...see what I'm saying? And that's assuming it's not an attempt to cuckold us by turning our boys into his own personal army."

"You're not suggesting they're loyal to that rotten whoremonger, are you?" He gaped at his friend before looking at the screen. It would break his heart if that was the case.

Garp was shaking his head though, "Hardly. I only spent a few minutes with them, mind you. It was before I realized...but no. I could tell Ace loathes Blackbeard."

Roger was relieved, but that still didn't answer the question of why his son was still with the man then. "If he hates him so much, why hasn't he killed him? He's obviously a Devil-fruit user, Old Man." He leaned in, "What aren't you telling us?"

"He can't." Garp sighed, looking years older, "They're terrified of the man, Shiney. They're not his soldiers, they're his damn playthings. Worse, they know they're disposable. You could see it in Ace's eyes."

There was silence for a moment as he and Dragon digested the news that their sons were alive...as veritable slaves to a madman. He'd felt a rage building in him at the very idea of it, and had Teach been standing in front of him, he'd shoot him dead. Unfortunately, the cool, detached part of his mind reminded him of all the alliances the man had built up over the years. If he or Dragon made a move against Blackbeard, even over family, many of their own allies would turn against them. Some would inevitably target their sons as well. He couldn't risk it, no matter how much he really, REALLY wanted to. One look at Dragon told him his thoughts had been running parallel.

Instead Dragon bit out a curse before continuing louder, "How'd they end up at NCIS?"

"Body dump. Moria Gekkō, in fact. Ace 'accidentally' blew up a building."

"Huh. Well, since Blackbeard's been taking credit for off'ing him, I take it the 'accident' was planned?" Scales offered, seemingly calm again.

"Not by Ace, that's for sure. My contact says they've also been shot at. I'm planning on getting more answers if I can..." Garp's eyes asked a question he couldn't actually voice.

Roger thought quickly. Currently, they were off the coast of California...if we take the canal, we'd halve our time. Everyone on board remembers the boys, so secrecy isn't a problem... "We'll be there in three days."

**GARP POV**

Somehow, he wasn't surprised to find himself at an all you can eat buffet. Garp barely had time to look around inside before Gibbs was on him, steering him out of sight of the dining area with a determined stride. He just went along with the man, knowing that he owed the other for being willing to trust him, and for allowing him an unofficial meeting with the boys when he still hadn't explained why. Finally Gibbs looked at him. He didn't say anything, he didn't have to, really.

"I ever tell you about my son, Gibbs?"
"No, can't say that you have."

"Ah. Well, I never did approve of his choices, you know. Not all of them. That wife of his, though...she was a pisser."

Gibbs rolled a shoulder, "You going point in there, Garp?"

"The point, Gibbs, is family is important...and those boys have people out there that thought they were dead. Dead, Gibbs. I know you know what that's like, losing someone close to you like that." He had to look away from the understanding in those blue eyes as his old friend easily read between the lines.

"Boys know?" Gibbs asked, direct and to the point as always.

"Did it look like it to you?" He offered a half smile, "Gah, I doubt they remember...and it doesn't matter anyway. What matters is helping them. So, what I'm trying to say..."

"You want some time alone with them, see if you can get any more leads? I noticed you seemed interested in 'that man' Ace was talking about."

Garp ran a hand over his head, glancing around, "Yeah. Doesn't take a genius to tell it's Teach Marshall, also known in some nefarious circles as 'Blackbeard'."

"Blackbeard? That some kind of nickname?" Gibbs frowned for a moment. He shrugged, "I'll keep Tim away from the table for a while. Need to settle the bill, anyway. Boys are black holes when it comes to food. Table's in the back."

"Thanks. I owe you." Garp just received a nod as he headed towards the table where he could make out a lone figure eating.

He couldn't help but smile as he stood for a moment looking down at Luffy. The goofball had yet to even notice him, instead focused on the heaping plate of food. It didn't look like it was his first plate, either, judging by the small stack on the side of the table. Even assuming Gibbs and his agent were going back for seconds, his grandchildren accounted for four plates already. Garp was impressed as he slid into a seat.

"Hey Ace! Did you bring back..." Brown eyes stared at him blankly as the smile fell from his face. He kept his voice as friendly as he could as he spoke with his grandson for the second time in over a decade, "Mind if I sit here?" The boy still just stared blankly at him, "So, Luffy...We got off on the wrong foot before."

Again, there was no answer. Luffy just sat there, his body hunched as his eyes followed every move Garp made. He thought he caught a flash of fear in those brown eyes when he raised a hand to smooth his beard and Garp's heart broke a little more. "I'm sorry about what I said. It was cruel and thoughtless of me." Luffy frowned at him, probably still mad, "I can understand why you wanted to defend your brother. That was very brave, Luffy. I'm not upset about it at all."

"Would you stop talking about it? You're just going to confuse him," Ace slammed his plate down next to his brother and shoved his chair back so hard it screeched on the floor before he sat. He didn't bother to look up at Garp, instead apparently fixing his attention on his food. "Eat up, Lu. I'm a plate ahead." The boy nodded, still mute, and began to eat again. After a moment, Ace's grey eyes glanced up at him, full of distrust.

Garp held up a placating hand, "I'm not here to do anything. I just want to talk. What did you mean,
it would confuse him?"

"Lu doesn't remember attacking you." Ace shrugged, "It happens sometimes; last time he destroyed a police car. Turned out the guy arresting his friend made a comment about what he'd like to do to her, and well. Can't take her away without a car." Ace paused his eating, looking at his brother with something between exasperation and worry before looking at Garp again.

This time, he could see the fear clearly, and the pain. The Luffy he remembered hadn't been prone to berserker blackout rages. It was easy for him to guess what had changed, given everything. He shook his head in disgust. It was like trying to train a sweet dog to be mean; he figured Teach had tormented Luffy until he'd finally snapped... "How badly did he hurt Te...that man the first time he snapped?"

"Bad. Real bad. He...I thought I was gonna lose Lu, and I couldn't move...so much blood..." Luffy paused his eating and looked at his brother, obviously worried until Ace ruffled his hair, "Only had that one shot...he's careful now. Thinks he can 'train' Lu or something still."

He snorted thinking back to all the trouble they'd caused as young children, "Not damn likely. You two're the kind to do what you will, no matter what the consequences."

"Yeah, but you never tried to electrocute me for pouring out your beer, Gramps...Teach is way more scary." Luffy muttered into his plate. Garp just stared as Ace dropped the chicken leg he was working on and slapped his face. Luffy froze at the sound and looked up sheepishly at his brother, "Oops. I shouldn't have said that..."

Garp couldn't believe it. He remembered Luffy pouring all his beer out the window when he was a child...He remembers me? Then why? Not wanting to jump to conclusions, he asked, "Luffy, do you know who I am?"

"Gee, you think?" Ace groused ignoring him,"Really, Luffy? 'Hey, the guy who adopted us also abuses us! Good times, right Gramps?' I told you if you can't lie about something just shut the hell up and let me do all the talking. Fuck."

"ACE!"

"WHAT, Old Man?" The young man glared at him, and Luffy watched the both of them.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Duh, Garp. You're the big scary Devil-fruit hunter. I told you I was warned about you." He felt unreasonably disappointed for a moment until the freckled man continued, "Weird as hell to be warned about your own grandpa, though." Ace glared at him, "I should be asking you the same question."

Both were now staring intently at him, grey eyes full of accusation and brown hurt. He realized that they must have known the moment they'd seen him who he was...and how much it must have hurt to hear him say those heartless cruel things. No wonder Luffy had snapped. You don't know us, indeed... "I...I didn't at first. I'll admit it, boys. And I'm sorry. You have to understand, though...we looked. God, how we looked. I thought...I thought you two were dead, Ace. If...if I had known...had even an inkling...oh God, I'm so sorry..."

"Told you he didn't find the message." Luffy poked his brother, grinning.

"Yeah, yeah. So you were right for a change." Ace rolled his eyes, hostility gone, "We uh, did leave a note. Carved into a tree...kinda a running away from home deal."
Garp thought for a moment of giving the two of them a good rap on the head for the foolish idea of running away from home. He caught himself leaning forward to do just that when the sudden flash of pure terror in both stopped him. He knew that they weren't afraid of him, not really, anyway. It was just another reminder of how damaged they really were, given that to them, he was 'just' a normal man; one who'd never hurt them. He sighed, sitting back and silently vowing to make Blackbeard pay.

"A note, huh? Stupid boy. No, never saw a note. God, it is so good to see you two again..."

Luffy's voice interrupted him before he got too sentimental, "Hey! There's Gibbs and Tim. What took them so long?"

"I asked Gibbs for some time alone with you two." Garp snagged some food off of Ace's plate, "Gibbs is a good man; you can trust him."

The smile his eldest grandson offered him was still a bit guarded but genuine. What he said next warmed his heart more though. "Yeah. We know. We trust you guys."

Chapter End Notes

*a 'rube is slang for a country bumpkin or hick...if you called someone new to your group a 'rube way back in the day, it was saying they didn't know anything, easily fooled, dumb, you know? (Because, them-there city folk be ed-U-cated...yes, I'm poking fun at both sides) Sometimes insulting, but basically it could be seen as a VERY old-fashioned version of N00b, or Probie, rookie...at least for the sake of this story.
Gibbs woke at his usual time to muted sounds coming from the house. He dressed quickly before leaving the small bedroom Ducky had insisted he use while the boys took over the couch. They had come back last night with the boys around ten, and the two brothers had promptly taken over the living room where they'd fallen asleep on the couch in a tangle of limbs that neither he nor Ducky had had the heart to re-locate. The elderly doctor had been quick to remind him of their clandestine guardians and the unlikeliness of anyone getting past them. Gibbs had to ruefully admit as he finished making the bed that the man had a point, especially given that not long after they'd returned to the house Marco had shown up on Ducky's doorstep with the new medication for the two brothers and food for the now very empty pantry. It seemed the two had more allies than they realized.

As Gibbs made his way to check on his charges, he wondered if they'd managed to stay on the couch, or even under the blankets. Last time he'd checked on them at around three, he'd had to replace the pillows that had somehow been tossed across the room. Oddly, the living room was completely empty, though there were sounds coming from the kitchen, and it didn't sound like his friend. Gibbs leaned on the door frame, wondering what the two boys could be up to so early in the morning. He was surprised to see Luffy setting the table while Ace stood over the stove. Both worked in relative silence, the sound coming from the radio.

After a while Luffy started to hum along with the music before throwing himself on his brother. "Hey! Lu, come on, I'm cooking here!"

"Ace, dance with me!" Luffy whined, grabbing his hips and forcing his brother to rock to the beat. Gibbs just rolled his eyes as he walked past the two and poured himself some coffee.

"Sorry, bro, not happening," Ace said with an indulgent smile, offering a piece of bacon over his shoulder, "Apoo's on, right? Why not call in and tell him you won't make it tonight?"

"Awww...but I was looking forward to the club!"

"Little hard when you're thousands of miles away." Ace pointed out.

"...Stupid mean ol' smelly Teach takes all my fun." The teen huffed as he up the phone and dialed.

"Well?"

Luffy pouted at his brother's back, "It's ringing...Ah! Hey Conis!...Yep, uh-huh. What? No way! Fire-fist wouldn't do that, you know him...Sure."

"So I take it she's patching you in?" Ace said over the radio as he expertly flipped a pancake.

"Of course!" Luffy dragged his chair closer, putting the phone on speaker, "They're saying you sunk a ship or something back home."

Ace snorted, "Idiots."

"Strawhat, that you?"

"Apoo! Shihihi, it feels like it's been forever! Hey, can you play something with a better beat or something? I'm bored!"
"Man, where have you been? Word at Rip-off is you two are neck deep in some bad shit, and Baratie's is doing a fundraiser or some crap. What is up? You in some kind of trouble?"

The brothers shared a look and Ace answered, "You...could say that. Mostly it's a misunderstanding. We're out of town while we get this all straightened out, though."

There was a sigh, "So I take it you won't be at the club this tonight?"

"Sorry, Scratchmen."

"Hold that thought..." Luffy quickly took the phone off speaker while his brother eyed the bacon still on the skillet before leaning over the back of the chair, "You're listening to Supernova this morning, I'm your host, Scratchmen Apoo. My partner in crime Bonney got a touch of food poisoning last night. What do I keep telling her about those crap-holes she keeps eating in, people? But, I do have a treat for you all this Friday morning. Some of you; alright, a lot of you, are probably familiar with my crazy friend Strawhat. I know I've talked about him before, and he and his brother have both been on the show. For those of you who don't know, Strawhat is one of the best young dancers I have ever laid eyes on, and Fire-fist has some moves, too."

"Hey, what's that mean?" Ace grumbled.

"I was complimenting you!"

"Didn't sound like it."

"Shiihihihi, I'm better then you are!"

The elder brother mimed punching him, "Shut-it, wiggle-boy."

"Well, now that they've spoiled the surprise..."

"Sorry."

"No you're not."

"Nope. Not at all." Luffy laughed, "Hi everyone!"

"Strawhat, you know they can't answer you, right? Anyway, what have you two been up too recently? Learn any good moves?"

"I know how to belly dance now!" Luffy cheered, "Does that count?"

"No! No belly dancing!" Ace hissed, turning red.

"Spoilsport," Scatchmen chuckled. "Really, though. We've missed you two at the clubs, and now you're telling me you won't make it this week either."

"Yeah," Ace plucked the phone out of his brother's hand, "Some stuff came up, so we had to leave town for a bit. I did catch Strawhat busting some new moves yesterday though, so all is not lost."

"Good to hear it! We have an ETA on when we can expect to see you two back?"

"Psh, no clue. Shit keeps coming up. I'm expecting an alien invasion next."

"ALIENS?! SO COOL!"
"Keep it down! People are sleeping!" Ace snapped back, "On that note, we've got to run before loudmouth here wakes up the whole neighborhood. Can you play something with a good beat to get him out of my hair for a bit?"

"He hung up on me! Oh well. You heard the man. This one's for Strawhat, wherever the crazy bastard is. Let your neighbors sleep in for once, and see you soon."

"Yay! Dance music! Dance with me Ace!"

"For the last time, no! Now be quiet before you wake up Gibbs and Ducky, you moron." Ace snapped, turning around holding four plates piled high with pancakes, eggs, sausage and bacon. His eyes immediately fell on Gibbs and he blinked, "Morning? How long have you been sitting there?"

Taking a sip of his coffee he hid a smile, "A while. Morning Ducky."

"Good morning, Jethro. My, look at this wonderful meal! Ace my boy, did you cook all of this yourself?"

"Luffy helped a little. Sorry, did we wake you?" Ace sat, ignoring his brother as he continued to cavort around the room to the music.

"Not at all. Have you been up long?"

"It's what, seven? I think we woke up around five. Watched some TV, got hungry, came in here. Hope you don't mind."

Luffy hopped over the back of a chair and landed in the seat, quickly loading a plate, "Cool, breakfast!"

"Where does it all go, I wonder?" Ducky hummed watching the boy before returning his attention to his own plate.

"Hell if I know, Doc. After we eat, we'll head out. Got some stuff I want to look into. Garp gave me a new angle to look into." He pointed at the brothers, "No water balloon fights today, and no sparring in the building. Got it?"

"Yeah yeah." Ace snorted. He took that as the closest he was going to get to a yes that he was going to get.

Gibbs was getting tired of having to chase people away from the conference room that the brothers had taken over. People kept knocking on the door and peeking in only to claim they were 'lost' or 'looking for the Director' or, even more amusing, looking for him. No one ever came looking for Gibbs except for his own team. Normally the fact that Ace and Luffy had made a positive impression on a large number of NCIS agents would make him happy, but he wasn't here to be the bouncer for their ever-growing fanclub, dammit. Abby was the worst offender, too. She'd already stopped by no less than six times that morning for all sorts of Abby-reasons. Luckily both boys seemed to like her, or at least Luffy liked her a lot.

There was another knock on the door, and Gibbs sighed, "I got it."

"Mmmm..." Ace acknowledged, hands hovering just above his brother's as they played slap. I really should see about getting a television in here or something, he thought, shaking his head at their antics.
He wasn't too terribly shocked to see Garp on the other side of the door as he pulled it shut behind him. However, he hadn't expected to see Sengoku at all. Silently he raised an eyebrow at the two men, asking without words why they were there.

Garp grinned back at him, "Hey Gibbs! We're here to see the boys! Senny's got some stuff he's got to ask them, you know, about Blackbeard. Shouldn't take too long."

"Director Vance is busy at the moment. You're gonna have to wait before you can talk to the boys." Gibbs moved, blocking their way to the door. He and Vance had agreed before that any access other agencies had to Ace and Luffy was going to be limited, and he wasn't going to let them just walk right in there.

"I don't see why we should have to wait," Garp huffed out, crossing his arms. "I told you already; I'm the boys' grandfather!"

"Yeah, well. That may be the case, but they don't trust you." Garp's face fell, and Gibbs instantly felt guilty. "Garp, it's been years, and they've been through hell. They've just started talking to us. If you go in there now and start demanding answers, they're not going to thank you."

Sengoku raised an eyebrow, "I think we have more important things to worry about then that right now, Jethro. Unless you're suggesting we don't know how to deal with uncooperative Devil-fruit users." He went to open the door.

"Never said that at all." Gibbs stared hard at the man. On the one hand, he could understand the drive for answers all too well. He himself had questions for Ace, ones that had potentially worrying answers, no matter how he looked at it. Still, his gut told him that forcing the young man to answer before he was ready wasn't a good idea. "Fine, I am going in there with you. Someone has to think about them in there."

Garp shoved past him, "We're doing this for them, Gibbs!"

Luffy didn't even lift his head off the table as the group entered. The teen was rolling a pen back and forth across the table in complete boredom while his brother leaned against his back, snoring. It looked like the new medication hadn't fully taken effect yet. His dark brown eyes flicked over each of them before settling back on Gibbs, the question evident in his gaze. He just offered a minute nod, letting the boy know that it was alright before he could even begin to panic. Luffy let out a huff before elbowing his brother in the side.

"Nff! -ffy...'ive m're." Ace groaned, hugging his brother's chest and burying his face into the rubbery back.

Luffy rolled his shoulders, watching them carefully. "Company, Ace."

The elder brother sighed, "Can't it wait, Gibbs? I'm bonding here."

Sengoku's frown deepened, "Looks more like molesting."

The new voice had an instant reaction. Ace changed positions so fast, both of the chairs the two were seated in rattled against the floor. Grey eyes scanned the room in shock before settling on the one man the young man didn't know. Ace sneered, leaning back and draping an arm casually over his brother's chair while Luffy continued to lean forward on the table, resting his chin on his hand, the picture of an unconcerned youth. Gibbs got the feeling they'd sat this way many times before; projecting confidence when feeling threatened.

"Bro, you woke me up for this?"
Luffy dug a finger in his ear, "Thought you'd wanna see his beard. It's like his chin is growing a ponytail."

"Boys, you remember Special Agent Garp from the CIA..."

"Hey, Old Man." Ace shifted his glare over to his grandfather, still being difficult.

"Yo." Luffy offered, finishing up with his ear and offering a lazy wave.

"This is his partner, Sengoku."

"Ah. Pony-chin has a name!"

Sengoku apparently had had enough, "Do you boys understand why I'm here?"

Ace shrugged, "Too old for the petting zoo, so you settled for the next best thing?" Silence answered his statement, "What? You think I haven't noticed people peaking at us every chance they get? Luffy's got his own damn fanclub. I feel like a dancing bear or something."

"Well, I heard you two put on quite the performance yesterday, Ace." Garp grinned, sitting down across from the two. The former marine glared at his partner until he reluctantly took a seat as well. Gibbs took it as a good sign that neither boy shifted at all and sat at the end of the table, between the two groups.

"That? That was nothing." The young man shrugged, "So, why are you here?"

Sengoku leaned forward, pushing his small glasses up, "We are here to talk to you about your relationship with Blackbeard."

Ace visibly paled at the name, his freckles standing out starkly as he stared at the man in horror. For a moment the two stared at each other in silence before the young man broke eye contact. Gibbs knew before he ever opened his mouth that he was going to lie, "Never heard of the man."

"I find that difficult to believe, boy." Sengoku snorted, "After all, Teach Marshall adopted you two."

"Well, what do you know? He did! How did you ever figure that out?" Ace sneered, once more the uncooperative young man from his first interrogation.

Sengoku was not amused in the slightest, "Cut the bull! I know you work for the man you cocky little shit. The only reason I'm not hauling your ass off and throwing you and your brother in jail is because both of these men are willing to vouch for you. But let me tell you something, kid. Until I decide otherwise, you two are a threat to national security. Push me, and I will throw your ass in a cell. We have special ones just for people like you."

"I thought that Lion-pants," Luffy looked at Gibbs in confusion, "said if we uh, cooperated we didn't hafta go to jail?"

"Yep."

The boy grinned ridiculously wide back at him, "Then we're good! We shared lots of stuff yesterday, right Ace? Nobody said anything about talking to Gramps and Pony-chin."

"That," Sengoku cut in, "was your deal with Vance. Not with me."

Garp held up a hand, giving the man a dirty look, "What Senny is trying to say is Vance shouldn't
really have made that call...don't give me that look, boys! I know it doesn't seem like it, but we're trying to help you!"

"bullshit," Ace coughed. "Sorry, I'm allergic to self-serving lies."

"Ace, please. Anything you could tell us about Blackbeard," Garp began. From where Gibbs was sitting, he saw Luffy ball his hand into a fist at the sound of the name, "anything at all, it would go a long way."

"Fine. You want to know about Blackbeard? Stay the fuck out of his way." Ace snapped back as Luffy nodded. "End of story."

Sengoku crossed his arms, "How about starting with why you know this. Both of you have a record for assault. You 'encourage' people to stay out of his way?" Both boys glared at the table in silence, not answering. "Ever kill someone for him?"

"What? No!" Ace sputtered in shock. "How could you even...?"

"Or maybe the relationship between you three goes deeper than just the help? More personal?"

Luffy's brow scrunched in confusion, "Ace, what's he mean by that?"

"You bastard!" Ace snarled, grabbing the back of Luffy's shirt and bodily tossing boy backwards as he launched himself across the table to get at the man. Before he was even halfway across the sleek surface flames were dancing across his arms and spine, a true testament to his rage. There was no fear left in his gaze, just pent up rage, and the need to hurt. It was a terrifying sight to behold.

Sengoku calmly sat there, though it happened so fast it was unlikely he would have had time to move out of the way if he had wanted to. When a fiery fist made to connect with his jaw, Sengoku snatched it out of the air with a speed that even Ziva would envy while getting to his feet. Gibbs stared in shock, Wait, that should be impossible! The man used Ace's own momentum against him and spun him around, twisting his arm back and up, pinning the wrist up behind the shoulder blades and slamming the fire-man into the table in an efficient pin. Still, Ace bucked and cursed, flames flaring to life across his back in an attempt to make the man let go. Sengoku continued to hold tight, a look of concentration etched between his brow as he shifted with the enraged Devil-fruit user until the young man finally resorted to just pounding the table with his free hand.

"Are you done?"

"Fuck! Let GO! How the HELL are you doing this?" Ace growled back.

Gibbs seconded that, "Good question. Didn't know you could do that, Sen."

"It's called 'Haki'. A form of mind over matter. Difficult to master, but useful in dealing with rogue Devil-fruit users. Sometimes more so than Prism Coral." Sengoku supplied before turning his attention back to his captive, "I am not letting go until you calm down. Garp, you good?"

"I got him," came the grunted response.

Gibbs turned to look at what had the mighty Garp short on air. The former marine had pinned Luffy up against the wall in a bear hug while the boy continued to struggle. Knowing first hand how strong and slippery Luffy was when he wanted to be, he suspected Garp was using whatever this 'Haki' thing was to hold him. When the mop of black hair stopped whipping back and forth and dropped forward with a muffled keening whimper, he seriously hoped his old friend knew
what he was doing.

"Lu? Hey, Lu? Luffy!" Ace's voice took on a panicked note when his brother didn't respond and he started to thrash all over again, "Dammit, what are you doing to my brother?! Don't you dare hurt him!" He shoved to no effect, "LET. ME. GO!"

Sen huffed, reaching for his back pocket where Gibbs knew he probably had a pair of coral-lined cuffs. Loudly, he cleared his throat and got the CIA Special Agent's attention before raising an eyebrow. Sengoku stared at him for a second, a look of 'You're kidding, right?' clear on his face. Gibbs just narrowed his eyes, his message equally clear. His witnesses, his rules. Finally the other caved and instead of getting out the handcuffs he grabbed the back of Ace's shirt, hauled him to his feet and let him get a look at Garp and Luffy.

"He's fine, see?" Sengoku gave the smaller man a slight shake, "So knock it off. Now. You going to sit down and co-operate or am I going to have to handcuff your ass to the chair?"

Ace seemed to consider that for a moment watching his brother shiver in his grandfather's embrace, "Next time I'll beat you."

"Bwahahahaha! That's my boy!" Garp snorted, dropping Luffy into his seat, a fist right above the boy's head. A fist Luffy collided with as he attempted to shoot back to his feet. The boy yelped, holding his crown as he sat pouting. "You, stay. Senny would wipe the floor with the two of you."

Gibbs held out the chair for Sen when he frog-marched Ace around the table and sat him down. He reached out and squeezed the elder brother on the shoulder, earning a ghost of a smile before the dark grey eyes looked over his brother for any injuries while everyone else returned to their seats. A moment passed in silence before something seemed to pass between both brothers and both sighed like a great weight had been taken off their shoulders.

Surprisingly, Luffy broke the silence first, "We're only gonna tell you cause Ace promised to play nice with Gibbs...it's not like we're scared of you or nothin'." The boy sulked, glaring at Sengoku without quite looking at him. It was painfully obvious that despite his bluster he was more than a little afraid of the man, and Gibbs found himself questioning the man's methods again, though it seemed to have worked. His gut still told him that Ace would have answered his questions, even if it had taken time he had to admit they might not have. "That ma...I mean, Teach...we don't really got a choice doing what he says. 'Cause, you know..." The teen shrugged helplessly.

Ace took over, pulling his brother into a half hug. His voice sounded hollow, broken almost. "Teach owns us. We don't think about what he makes us do. Don't fucking talk about it. Saw him gut a man once for talking...made us watch. It...wasn't pleasant. Do what he says, keep your mouth shut and he doesn't usually hurt you too bad. Gotta lie, you know? Don't draw unwanted attention...Except Lu can't lie well, and...Teach...Blackbeard...likes to hurt him. He likes to be in control. Make it so you can't fight back. Gives the fucker a real rush..." Ace shuddered, "Good thing he didn't know this 'haki' shit."

Garp leaned in, "And you never thought to go to the cops?"

"Are you kidding me? Bunch of cops are on the take, Old Man. Word has it he's got some warden in his back pocket, too. I'm not that fucking stupid; talk to any cop and someone ends up dead." Ace sighed, "Sides, why would the believe us? We're nothing but street trash, right? I mean, most of the good ones wrote us off anyway when we started beating the crap out of people who owed Blackbeard money. Hell, almost everyone wouldn't come near a couple of kids who could -and would- drop a full grown man."
"You just did what he said?" Sengoku frowned, "Beat people up on his orders? Maybe kill on his orders?"

Luffy cocked his head to the side, "Why would I do that? It's not fun if the other person dies! I'm careful to beat people up only a little bit, anyway...unless they're mean people. Then Ace says it's ok to pretend they're *almost* as tough as Zoro, but they make funny noises. All 'WAHHH! Don't hit me there! arrrgaaa! hegep'!-"

Ace slapped a hand over his brother's mouth to stop him when it became obvious he was carried away and took over, "At least when Luffy beat the crap out of some guy, the only thing permanently damaged was his pride. Send someone like Burgess, poor fool it'll end up dead. No good to Teach that way, either. So yeah, a chance to not get the crap beaten out of us and maybe do some damage control? You bet we jumped on it." He removed the hand over Luffy's mouth and casually wiped it on his brother's shirt, "Vandalism was easy, get Lu hyped on enough sugar and he was a one man wrecking crew. And the arson was seriously an accident the first time. I *sneezed* and a building caught fire."

"...Teach is scary. Really scary." Luffy shrunk into himself, looking small, "I don't feel good, Ace...I don't wanna talk about it anymore."

"Just one last question," Gibbs spoke up, earning a dark look from Sen, "Do you know where he is right now?" Both boys mutely shook their heads and he sighed, having expected that, "Thought so. You two going to be alright on your own for a bit while I see Sengoku and Garp out? I think Abby was planning on stopping by with some lunch for you soon."

Ace pulled his brother into his lap and nodded, holding the small teen close. Both looked very pale and worried as the three of them left the room and closed the door behind them. Gibbs nodded for the other two to follow him a ways down the hall towards the elevator before he stopped and turned towards his old friends, finally letting his anger show on his face.

"What the hell was that about, Sengoku? What happened about being here for them?"

"I don't have to justify my actions to you, Gibbs." The man shot back, "It worked, didn't it? *You* spend too much time pussyfooting around their feelings to actually get anywhere!"

"You think I'm pussyfooting? The guy had them *shot* at on my watch! They're convinced he's going to kill them for talking; can't you see that?" He turned his glare on Garp, "You didn't even try and stop him. I thought you cared about them."

Garp shifted uneasily, looking away before admitting, "I asked Senny to do it."

"You *what*?"

"I asked him..." He held up a hand, "The agency contacted Senny this morning about them, Gibbs. Wanted to know what side they were on. He and I talked, and I explained the situation."

"Now I'll go back to them and tell them that the two brothers have committed various crimes under the direct orders of Teach Marshall from a young age and show little remorse for what they've done." Sengoku adjusted his glasses and ignored the patented Gibbs glare, "Which I'd expect from two half trained users who were in fear of their lives. I don't *enjoy* playing the bad guy, Gibbs; but sometimes it's necessary. The fact that they both fear Haki and me in particular, despite Garp using it as well is very telling." The man got on the elevator, "Come on, Garp, we have work to do. Tell Vance we'll do what we can for you at our end. If the brothers start acting out though, give me a call, Gibbs."
As he watched the doors slide shut, he wondered if the boys realized just how lucky they were to have so many people pulling for them. The real question is, Gibbs mused, thinking back to the controlled anger his friend had held himself with, if Sengoku's going to 'sneeze' and squash Blackbeard flat if they find him first... He smirked at the thought, turning to find Vance and tell him about the newest development.
Teach always thought of himself as a reasonable man. His men did what he told them, or he’d reasonably punish them for their disobedience. He didn't pay them to think or balk, after all. His boys though...his boys required a different approach. He’d known that the first time he’d laid eyes on the two street rats working a mark with efficiency you just didn't see in young criminals. It was easy enough to figure out there wasn't much going on behind the dark brown eyes of the younger one, but the kid had good instincts. Ones that had taken a month of steady work and handouts for the elder brother to ignore just long enough...and Luffy was his. It was a little disappointing when the boy's Devil-fruit ability wasn't quite as useful has he had hoped for at first. Later, as the boy had grown into his ability, it had proven much more useful in it's flexibility.

The only true annoyance had been how attached the boy was to his elder brother. True, Teach had gained a second Devil-fruit user in the end, but Ace was rebellious. The only way to insure his complete cooperation had been the looming threat to his brother. A threat that would all but evaporate in a year when his rubbery toy turned eighteen. He was no fool; he'd known since Ace had moved out on his own that the young man was planning on running. So he'd let the little hot head plot and plan. It would be that much more enjoyable when he finally extinguished that final spark of resistance.

It was convenient for him that Crocodile had suggested he prove himself not long ago by taking out Gekko. Blackbeard had seen it as a sign and acted accordingly, contacting Shiliew and seeing if the man was still interested in some playtime with Luffy... without his older brother there to protect him, it would be easy for his associate to finally break the boy with no physical risk to Teach himself. Of course, once he retrieved his little pet, his brother would come to heel if he hadn't already. Two years, tops. That's how long he thought the freckled young man could go without the steadily influence of his brother before he finally caved. Half that time for Shiliew's unique brand of play to mold Luffy into an obedient puppet.

The plan was perfect; have Van kill Gekko, cementing his alliance with Crocodile, and frame Luffy for the murder. Getting Ace out of the way by rigging the dump site with accelerant's had been a walk in the park for a man with his connections. But then that vacant-eyed idiot child had to pull a stupid stunt and get himself picked up by NCIS as well. By the time word had reached Teach, Robin Nico refused to take his calls, later claiming she was on a big case. It was easy enough to figure out that that bitch was double crossing him. No matter. There were other ways to deal with this mess, and as much as he enjoyed toying with the younger brother, he really only needed Ace for his plans after all.

If only I wasn't surrounded by incompetent fools. Blackbeard's face gave away nothing of his thoughts as he impassively listened to Augur explain how he'd somehow failed to even seriously injure Luffy. He had eyewitness reports of both of his pets cozying up to NCIS as a direct result of the failure no less! The gods of fate mocked him, he was sure of it.

Finally, he cut the man before him off, "Van, you failed me." He began with a deceptively cheerful voice, "I've got more than half a mind to kill you where you stand, history between us be damned." The sniper paled, but nodded anyway, "Yes, Boss."

Teach liked that; Augur knew his place, knew better than to beg or argue. That's the way it should be. The way those brats should be. I'M the Boss. He grinned widely, slapping his knee. "Tell ya what. I'll flip a coin and you call it. If you're right, you get to live; won't do nothin' to ya. Take it out of those little shit's hides instead. Sound good?"
Van nodded, a weird little grin crossing his face for a moment. Not matter though, Marshall always thought the man was a little cracked. He tossed a coin high before catching it. "Tails, Boss."

A quick glance told him the man was right. Once again fate was smiling at his crew. "Whaddya know, it is! Zahahahaha!"

With the issue of how he was going to deal with the failure out of the way, Teach motioned for his underling to sit. The room they were currently in was modest and decorated in a minimalist style. Still, the furniture was comfortable. He thought briefly of having it sent back to New York to replace his own shoddy pieces of crap. It wasn't like the owners were going to need them anymore. What with them being dead and all. Nice couple, too. Had opened the door readily enough when he'd said he had car trouble. From there it had been a simple matter of overpowering them, having a little fun before killing them, and he had a place to lay low without having to spend a dime. Course, the bodies were going to be found eventually and he'd have to move on...but by then he and his crew would be more than ready to. Either towards the next contact to be made, or to deal with the current problem.

Speaking of which..."This NCIS guy that my pets are hiding behind, who is it again?"

"Special Agent Jethro Gibbs, Boss." Van adjusted his glasses, "He used to be a marine sniper."

Teach smirked, "Oh?"

"I'm better." His man replied to the implied question, "This Gibbs has some connections, a behind-the-powers type."

"I see..." His grin widened and he took a swig of his beer before slamming it onto the table. The new plan that came to him was even better for accomplishing his goals. Oh, how could I think fate had turned on me? This, this will make me a legend. He started to laugh, motioning for Augur to help himself to some beer. "Drink with me! Drink to my success! Zahahahaha! My little disobedient pups have handed me the key to cementing my position, Van!"

"Boss?"

He leaned in, a manic glint in his eyes, "Whaddya think of getting' the crew together and wiping out this Gibbs and his goons? Make an example of them, show the world what happens when you fuck with Blackbeard's shit."

"I think..." Augur paused, obviously musing it over. He let the man, the blond was one of the smartest members of the gang. Finally, Augur smiled, much like a cat who'd gotten into the cream, "I think fate has truly smiled upon you, Blackbeard. If I might ask, what of your problematic pets? Are we to eliminate them as well?"

He shook his massive head, gesturing with his beer bottle, "Nah! Think about it; the idiot is a bleeding heart. It'll destroy him to see his new friends horrifically killed in front of him. Break him, and his brother'll cave if this foolish escape attempt's failure doesn't do it." Blackbeard flexed a fist, eyeing the coral rings on every finger, "Course, you still get ta rough them up a bit. Gonna have to make sure they learn their lesson."

Van stood, finishing his beer and pulling out his phone. "I'll call the crew."

"You do that. Tell them to meet us there in two days." Blackbeard grinned. Two days...and he'd become a legend in the underground.
Battlefield burns

He stared up in shock into the vivid blue eyes that weren't half closed for a change. He wouldn't have...couldn't have! Donald's mind screamed at him, trying to convince the rest of his body that he was just trapped in a horrible nightmare. It had to be a nightmare, he couldn't hear anything... if a grenade really had gone off, people would be screaming. There would be blood. No blood...I'm dreaming. I must be dreaming. Something wet hit his cheek. He wasn't even aware of wiping it off, but when he looked at his fingers, they were smeared with red. His worried eyes looked up to the blonde, noticing his lips were moving. As he focused on them, sound came back to him in a rush.

"Are you hurt? Mallard, answer me, dammit. Are you hurt?"

"No." The blood was freely flowing from under Marco's helmet, as well as down his arm at an alarming rate. "Oh my, you're hurt! Of course! How foolish...Don't...Don't move...let me see what I can do."

He shimmied out from under the man turning away quickly from those who had been much less fortunate in the blast. He could tell at just a glance they were already gone. It was so fast... One moment the unit had been returning to base, not exactly relaxed, but in high spirits as they fanned out a bit on the field. The next someone shouted, and The blond was turning, throwing 'Ducky' underneath his body as the world seemed to explode around them. His eyes found Marco again.

The man hadn't moved from his live-saving push-up position. His fatigues were soaked in blood, shrapnel stuck out of his back in a few spots. Donald had seen some horrific wounds before. He'd seen soldiers pull through despite all odds, too. But he was a doctor, and they were still far away from base camp with no supplies. The cool clinical part of his mind that knew this saw the damage and said he is not going to survive. The Scotsman squashed it.

"It doesn't look too bad..."

A wet chuckle, "What's the line again? It's but a flesh wound?" Come on, Doc, I can't feel my legs right now. Bet I look like shit, yoi."

"You're rather calm about this," Donald knelt in front of his personal hero, not wanting him to have to strain to look at him. "You saved my life, Marco. I'm sorry, but I can't return the favor." His voice was heavy with regret and self loathing. If only I was a better doctor. If only we were closer...If only... "Is...is there anything I can do for you, friend? Anything at all?"

"Yeah, actually..." Marco nodded his head with a grin that was amazingly cocky despite the situation, "You can keep quiet about what you're about to see."

He was confused for all of three seconds before blue and gold flames raced across the soldier's body. Then he completely freaked out as he pushed himself as far away from the now burning man as fast as he could. Marco saw this and started to laugh as he sat up, apparently unharmed by the fire. In fact, as Donald watched, it seemed like the fire was somehow healing the wounds. The blood dried and flaked off his skin and lacerations closed before his very eyes. He even heard the distinct sound of metal hitting metal; the shrapnel, he assumed. In moments Marco was standing before him whole and healthy as the flames receded.
"H-how? You were...but then? That's impossible!"

"Ever hear of this nasty little experiment during world war two? Lead to the creation of this drug called Devil-fruit. If you take it you kinda become a superhuman. That's if you don't die, yoi. I'll explain later, when we're not in the middle of the jungle."

"So, you took this drug? How does it work?"

"Later, yoi."

"Marco, this is fascinating!"

"Yeah yeah... Why'd I save your life again?" The blond smiled at him, taking the bite out of the words, "Seriously yoi. You can't tell anyone."

Donald Mallard offered a weak smile of his own, "Who would believe me anyway?"

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**Birthday Dates**

Makino had to fight down the nervous fluttery feeling in her belly when her date offered his assistance when she got out of the taxi. It was to be expected, she guessed. Shanks was attractive, the scars on his face actually giving him a roguish look she found appealing. Other ladies did, too, if the envious looks were anything to judge by. She'd first met Shanks in London, years ago. He'd already been a big name in his own rights, making a move into the big league as it were, and Roger had sent her to get a feel for him, see if he could be useful. Dragon had just told her to have a good time. So, she had gone, full of determination for her cause...and have found a man who was happily carefree in everything he did. She'd been so annoyed at first, especially when he had the nerve to hit on her of all things. He'd seen it, of course. Shanks saw it and laughed. Told her if she was going to try and play him for her bosses, she'd have to work harder than that, but if she wanted to play with him on her own now, well...

She had to admit, she was intrigued. No one had ever seen through her ruse before or since. Over drinks that first night the truth of the matter had come out, and an uneasy truce was made. He'd stay out of the Revolution's affairs if at all possible, but he wouldn't team up with them. Shanks would only deal through her, of course, but she saw no problem in meeting him for clandestine 'chats' every now and again. Like this evening at Baratie ostentatiously for Shanks' birthday. True, there was the high class side of the restaurant, but Shanks had chosen the homelier bar-side for their little date. She was in disguise of course, her black hair stuffed under a emerald-green wig that matched her eyes and more makeup than she usually wore.

Shanks leaned in and whispered, "You look beautiful," as they were guided to a small table for two, his eyes twinkled, "Bit early for St. Patrick's day, though. We should go out again."

"Flirt."

"Horribly." He acknowledged.

The meal was fantastic. Baratie lived up to reputation, no matter what side you ate on. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the food. From what she knew of the city and it's underground war, the restaurant was not technically part of anyone's territory, though strictly speaking it fell under Jinbe's protection. Still, most of the patron would hardly be aware of the fact. The staff themselves didn't seem to mind the boss from a rival mafia sitting calmly at a table, either. Many waved in fact, mouthing 'happy birthday' to the grinning man. She smiled, turning her attention back to her date.
"So, how goes the plot for world domination?" He quipped, pouring her a glass of wine.

Taking a sip she shook her head, "You know very well we're not trying to take over the world. We're trying to help it along the right path...just using unorthodox methods. It goes...well, it goes. There are some new elements that may prove problematic later. And you? I hear you're in negotiations with Whitebeard, is it true?"

"Where did a pretty little lass hear that, I wonder?" He laughed, a little red in the face, "No, really, who told you? I just had word from Juzo today that the man wanted to discuss a possible treaty."

"Oh, a lady has her ways..." It was no secret that Whitebeard was having some trouble with his shipments, and word was he'd just lost another one. A few of their contacts hinted that the culprit was a common enemy to the two men, so it seemed a logical conclusion to her.

"Right... Well. First I have to see what the old man wants, really. We've done a good job of staying out of each other's way, but I'd rather not make him an enemy. Already got one of those in town." He glanced around the room, mood soured momentarily and Makino felt a twinge of guilt. She hadn't meant to spoil the evening.

She was quite surprised when Shanks nearly face planted into the table. For a moment, all she could see was a straw hat where his head had been a moment before. The hat looked very familiar to her, but for the life of her, she couldn't place the tattered well-loved straw with it's bright red band. A second Later, Shanks levered himself off the table using both hands, and she got a clear look at the boy underneath the hat that had attached himself to her date's neck and shoulders in a very enthusiastic hug. Her first impression was of a blindingly wide smile that had the kid's eyes closed it was so big and a scar under the left eye. Messy black hair became evident as the hat fell to hang about the boy's neck on a string as he rubbed his cheek against Shanks' grinning all the while. The redhead just laughed.

"Shanks! Happy Birthday!" The boy beamed, "Can I have your bread sticks?"

"Dahahaha! No, you can't have them, you little dork. How'd you find me?"

"Ray. He said you were on a date," the boy looked at her for the first time, his smile faltering for just a moment as the burnt-chocolate brown eyes studied her intently.

Makino didn't miss the way the man gently squeezed the boy's hand, or the look of tenderness in his own lighter brown eyes as he glanced at the child. She knew she was missing something important. "This is Maki, she's a friend, kiddo. I've known her for a long time; she's good people."

"Maki...?" The boy seemed to think about it for a moment before grinning at her, "You're pretty."

"Thank you, you're very handsome yourself."

"Don't waste your flattery, he's too dense," Shanks' winked at her. "Where's your brother?"

"Mmm? Oh, he fell asleep by the bar so I told Patty to use him as a towel rack until he wo-" an arm snaked around his neck cutting him off as he was pulled into a headlock by a taller teen with a murderous look in his grey eyes.

"You little shit! Now I smell like sock!" The newcomer growled out, digging his knuckles into the younger boy's scalp. The younger just yelped playfully and giggled, apparently unaffected by the rough treatment. "Happy birthday, Shanks."

"Thanks, Ace. You've still got a dishrag in your back pocket you know." Makino hid a laugh as the
teen released his brother at those words and tossed the rag at the bar as hard as he could. It actually made it, too.

The teen smirked as he caught the orange hat that was flung back at him by a laughing bartender. He casually spun the orange bucket hat on his finger before flopping it onto his head haphazardly, allowing Makino to get a good look at it for the first time. She knew the symbol on the patch stitched to the front of the hat. It belonged to a man who had contacted her bosses in an attempt to form an alliance only to be turned away. Something about him had bothered the two leaders strongly, and from what she knew, he was also the very man who'd been giving Shanks trouble. She turned to Shanks worriedly.

"Yes, Maki-dear?"

"These boys are members of Blackbeard's gang? Isn't he your rival?" She was not expecting both boys to bristle angrily.

"Well, aren't you a smart bitch?"

"Ace! Language!" Shanks snapped, before turning to her just as the food was brought. "It's...complicated."

"We're not in his Fu...freaking gang." The elder brother grumbled looking away from the warning glare the Mafia leader gave him. "We don't like him, lady. We're...stuck."

"Shanks is cool though! He's tried to bully smelly Teach into letting us go!" The younger boy grinned, tugging on his hat. The grin faltered, "It doesn't work though...he just get's mean about it."

It was easy enough for Makino to tell what he meant by that, even without the heartbroken look that flashed across Shanks' face. She could tell right then that he truly cared for the boys and wasn't just using them, even if they were somehow tied to one of his worst enemies. It was just as clear to the resistance member that he'd been completely unaware of the repercussions of pressuring his enemy. A foolish yet endearing quality, since he'd never consider doing something like that himself.

"Boys, I..."

The freckled teen waved a hand, "Don't worry about it, you know how he is. He'd find some other reason, anyway. At least you give a shit, right?" His phone started to ring, and he pulled it out with a look of great reluctance, "Yeah, Teach?...Sorry...sorry Uncle...bu...Yo...W...Yes Sir...Yes Sir..."

He wilted, literally collapsing into himself while the smaller teen pressed against his side looking miserable. Finally he hung up and sighed, "Come on, Lu. We've got to get back."

"We're in trouble again, aren't we?"

"Us? When aren't we in some kind of trouble? Enjoy your date, Shaymus."

The worried look was gone from Shank's face as he sputtered in shock, his cheeks coloring, "Shay...Ace! What did you just? Where did you hear that?!"

"Rayleigh. He said that your mum was gonna name you Patrick if you'd been born like a week later, too." The younger boy grinned, walking backwards as his brother kept a firm hand on the back of his shirt.

After the boys had left Shanks refused to meet her eyes, still blushing. She couldn't help but tease him a little bit, "Is it true? Is that your real name, Mr. Shanks of the red-hair?"
"It's a family name." He explained, "Benn and Rayleigh used to tease me about it when I started making a name for myself and all. Gotta admit, they had a point. Who's going to take Shaymus Rua seriously around here? Besides, it never suited me." He chuckled, tugging on his hair, "Well, except for the Rua part."

"Well, I think it's a sweet name. Though it definitely doesn't fit with your bad-boy image." Makino leaned in and smiled seductively at him, "Lá Breithe Sona duit, Mo Shaymus Rua."

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The Enemy of the Enemy

Whitebeard remained seated as Shanks was lead into the room. The younger man has a jaunty gate, though he carried himself like he was ready for a fight. Good, he can feel the tension, Newgate thought. One week ago he'd had one of his men approach the other mafia boss with his request for a talk and the possible alliance, above and beyond what they'd already had worked out. Something he was beginning to think might not have been a good idea. Everything he knew of the man called Shanks said that while he could be ruthless, he was a leader Whitebeard could respect. Or at least he thought he could.

A few days ago, two of Newgate's sons, Thatch and Marco, had been late for a meeting about yet another shipment that had been destroyed. He hadn't been unduly worried until they'd arrived almost an hour late. Thatch had been practically vibrating with tension, and even Marco, the calmest of all of his adopted children was visibly rattled. They had found Blackbeard's Devil-fruit users. They were mere boys, and Teach was hurting them. It was pandemonium as everyone wanted to know who they were, and how they'd been found. The story came out and Edward had never been so proud of his boys as he was that moment when Thatch and Marco both looked at him and told him in no uncertain terms that they were going to help these two.

Of course he gave them his blessing, how could he not? The rest of his men had pitched in, taking on the extra work so the two could help the brothers move in to a run down apartment and get closer to them. The reports were anything but promising. Both were distrustful and with apparent good reason. Thatch had tailed the older boy, Ace, back to Teach's place. He hadn't even made it in the door before the man had lit into him, slamming the unresisting young man against a brick wall before dragging him inside. His commander had said when the freckled teen emerged carrying two boxes an hour later he was in obvious pain. Pain he'd done his best to mask in front of Marco who'd been waiting at the apartment with the younger boy, Luffy.

Luffy, from what he heard, was barely more trusting than his brother. He wasn't too bright from what Whitebeard understood. Something Marco had shamelessly taken advantage of when he'd seen a certain strawhat unpacked. It hadn't taken much to get the teen talking about the person who'd given him the hat. The very same man who was now standing before Newgate, a cocky grin on his face.

"Nice place you have here, Whitebeard! Much better than my place," he clapped his hands together. "So, I'm here."

He glowered down at the younger man, "Yes. You are."

"Whoa whoa, what's with the look?" The redhead sounded downright bewildered as he took his seat.

"It appears we have much to talk about." He sighed, willing to give the man in front of him the benefit of the doubt for the sake of their alliance. Leaning back, he began, "What can you tell me about two teens who go by the name of Ace and Luffy?"
Shanks blinked, taken by surprise, "Marshall's boys?"

"So it's true that you know them." He shifted forward, his heart sinking as he felt the chance for a lasting alliance slipping away. He did find it interesting how the other man returned his glare with one of his own.

"Why do you want to know about them? Did you do something to them?" The air practically crackled with tension, "I swear to you, Newgate, if you hurt Luffy..."

"Don't threaten me, you brat!" He snapped, "Rushing to the defense of Marshall's get, are we Shanks?"

"I don't give two shits about who they're with! I'm their friend! Well, mostly Luffy's." Shanks huffed, insulted, "Cute kid once you get past the biting."

He growled, "What do you do to him that he bites you?"

"Nothing like that! Geesh, what do you take me for? Luffy was something like eleven at the time. Poor tyke was hiding in a box, shaking like a leaf. Still tried to take my hand off when I dragged him out. Been trying to look out for him and his brother ever since." The man made a fist, and Whitebeard saw a faint scar that did resemble a bite, "Why? Have you and your men seen them? Are they alright?"

"Is there a reason you'd think they wouldn't be?"

Shanks gave a humourless chuckle, "Besides Marshall liking to beat the crap out of the both of them when things don't go his way, you mean?" Newgate said nothing, "Teach knows I'm fond of Luffy. At first, me giving the brat my hat was a good way to keep the bastard from killing him. Or worse...Newgate, I know you had your reasons, but you should have killed that sonofabitch when you had the chance. Now that he's got some power behind him, he's not above forcing my hand using the boys..."

"And you fear he knows we were meeting for an alliance." Whitebeard could easily understand the other's worry in that case.

"It's the only thing I can think of. No one has seen them on the streets since just after Christmas. No word at Rip-off or Barite... from what I can gather their last job went reasonably well, too. They've been completely gone from sight for weeks now. So please, screw the alliance talk right now. If you know where my friends are, you have to tell me."

He studied the man in front of him. Shanks looked decidedly haggard and amazingly sober as well. It was obvious he was worried, and Whitebeard was grateful that he had been wrong about the man's relationship with the two young Devil-fruit users.

"They are a little worse for wear, but the boys seem to be fine. Two of my men stumbled across them a few days ago, in fact. Apparently Ace decided it was time to move out and find a place of his own."

"Damn. Luffy alright?"

"He's getting there. Ace has taken quite a beating as well...Shanks," Newgate chose his words carefully, "I am to blame for what has happened to those boys. What Blackbeard has done to them is perhaps worse than you realise."

Shanks froze, watching him intently, "What, exactly, do you mean by that, Edward?" His tone was
frighteningly serious.

Whitebeard debated with himself if it was really his secret to share. In reality he knew it wasn't his place, but this man before him had been there for the two he already thought of as sons. Shanks had no reason to help to street rats working for the very man who'd scarred him. Yet he did, and he worried about them. The young man deserved to know why and how Teach hurt his little friends. As the one indirectly responsible, he owed it to Shanks.

"I'm sure you know of Devil-fruit users, boy." He began with a sardonic smile. The redhead's lips twitched ever so slightly in response. "Before Teach, no, Blackbeard left us, he'd been offered the drug. He refused. The mortality rate was too much for him."

"Yeah, so? What's this got to do with Ace and Luffy?"

"Apparently Blackbeard got it into his head to make his own users." Whitebeard held up a hand, "I swear to you, Shanks, on the lives of my children, we did not know! We knew he had two users who were interfering with our work. I had always thought he had found adults, hardened criminals if he'd given the drug to anyone. I was a fool."

Shanks held up a hand, "Wait, you mean to tell me that Ace and Luffy are Devil-fruit users?"

"Yes."

The look he gave the mustached leader was incredulous. "Luffy? Ace, yeah. I can kinda see that. Kid has a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas. But...Luffy? Have you met the kid? God, he's got the personality of a lab puppy on pot. He couldn't follow orders if his life depended on... I guess that explains the mystery bruises though." He nodded, "So, about that alliance...I'd like to revise it. Take into consideration a mutual interest in the future well being of my young friends. Whaddya say? We have a deal, Whitebeard?"

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**Betting Pools**

Tony slipped into the observation room after dropping off food to Ace. He didn't seem surprised to see her standing there; arms crossed, glaring at the suspect on the other side of the glass. Instead, he just silently joined her. He knew she needed some time and would talk when she felt like it. It was one of the reasons they got along so well. They understood each other. Not that Ziva would ever admit it out loud. She felt that way about her whole team, really. They were a family, and a better family than the two suspects they brought in.

Ace had finished both his sandwiches before she finally spoke, "I do not trust them. The little one especially."

"Oh, Ziva, don't be like that!" Tony teasingly admonished her, watching the dark haired young man rattle his cup, peering into it. "You hardly know them. What the hell is he doing?"

"I do not need to know them. My bruises know them enough for me." Ziva grumbled, pointing at a particularly nasty one on her arm, "he barely grazed me and look at this! Tony, if it had connected, he would have broken my arm!"

He hissed, wincing at the dark purple mark in sympathy, "Wow, that looks painful. You should put some ice on it or something. I'm sure Luffy didn't mean it?"

The young man in the interrogation room dumped out all the ice cubes onto the table and was poking them around, "Oh-ho, he meant it. And you know what else? He cheats!"
"How do you cheat it fighting?" Tony asked, brows furrowed as he watched Ace place one ice cube on top of another, "I think he's trying to stack them."

"I do not know how! But he does! I am telling you, I would go to bock, and it wouldn't work. That won't either."

He turned away from the window, looking at her incredulously, "So...he was better than you?"

"NO! It was a solid block!" She began to pace, running thought the fight for the hundredth time and trying to explain to her friend what had happened in a way he would understand. *Which is impossible, because I do not understand it myself,* Ziva huffed, "I connected. But, it was like, he, I do not know, somehow moved around the block at the same time."

"Well, the kid is flexible. Freakily so. Should have seen him in our car. Almost gave me heart failure. Maybe it has something to do with his ability." Tony suggested, watching Ace stack the ice cubes.

"Maybe...And this one. Do you know what he did? He told the person at McDonald's that we were trying to kidnap him. Can you believe it?"

Her partner smirked, "The nerve of some people."

"I know! I mean, first he tried to kick out the window on the highway. That I could understand. Maybe. But the whole McDonald's thing?"

"Ridiculous. How did it work?"

"The window?" She looked over at Tony, deliberately playing dense just to get a rise out of him, "About as well as could be expected." It worked, and he rolled his eyes in an exasperated manner.

"No, Ziva. The pretending to be kidnaped thing."

"Oh. That."

"Yes, That." He huffed, turning his attention back to watching Ace lick an ice cube before adding it to the stack, "I bet you twenty bucks he stacks them all."

"You're on. It worked surprisingly well, actually. It is something I will have to remember. I think the icing on the cup"

"Cake"

"Cake was at the end when the mess was straightened out. He asked if they had any honey for his fries, all smiles. He is very...cheeky. I do not like him."

"Got to give him points for style though."

She had to smiled, "Yes. Except for the orange hat. That is just...gaudy. Is that the word?" Tony nodded. The door opened, and both agents turned to see Ducky enter with Gibbs before returning their attention to the ice cube tower. There was money riding on it, after all.

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**Killer Tantrum**

"Alright, in you go."
The tall redhead shrugged himself out of the officer's grip and threw himself back at the bars of the cage they had dared to throw him in. Stupid police interfering with his damn fight. He hadn't even started the thing, but he sure as hell was going to finish it. No one messed with Eustass, let alone broke a bottle over his fucking head. Fuck that. Bullshit, man. Total bullshit. So what if he never got a look at the bastard? He figured if he tossed enough drunks into tables and punched enough people, he was bound to smash the guy good. Not like the others were innocent either anyway. They'd fucking laughed at him. Course, someone had to go call the damn cops just when the fight was getting good. See if he ever took care of a slave trafficking ring in the area again. Hope their kids got sold to a whorehouse. No, wait, he liked kids...Dammit but he was pissed.

So now here he was, stuck in a small ass little cell until he 'cooled off'. He slammed the bars again in frustration before turning around and noticing for the first time he wasn't alone. The other man in the tank with him was almost as tall as he was with a wild mane of golden blond hair. It wasn't even the kind you got out of the bottle, and his first thought was damn, this guy loves his hair before he shrugged it off and went back to being pissed. The slightly bemused look sent his way helped in that regards.

"What the fuck you lookin at?"

"Not much." The man smirked, "The bars insult you?"

"Yes! They're there, dammit! Fuckin' cops bustin' up a good fight!" He plopped down on a bench across from the man, "Said I was drunk. Do I look drunk to you?"

"No, you sound pissed. What was the fight about, Mr...?"

"Some asshole mistook my head for a bottle opener. Didn't catch their face, so I spread the beating around." He grinned, remembering the thrill of the fight. "It's Kidd. Eustass Kidd, by the way."

"Ah, so you were throwing a temper tantrum then."

"...I could kill you with my aglets."

The man blinked at him, taken back. "Excuse me?"

"Aglets. You know, those things on the end of shoelaces. I could kill you with mine." He pointed to his boots and the small caps of metal on them, "Just sayin."

The blond seemed to seriously consider that for a moment before laughing. Kidd was a bit surprised as it wasn't the usual sound of derision he got, but one of genuine amusement, "I'll keep that in mind. Name's Killer."

"For real?"

"Jack Tueur." The other explained.

"If you tell me your middle name is 'Ripper' or gah, what's the French for it? Éventreur? I'm gonna die laughing." Eustass leaned in, the man, Killer, colored slightly and wouldn't meet his eyes. He howled in laughter, "Damn that's good!"

"My parents thought they were...funny." Killer pulled a face, "But I like the nickname more."

"I can see why. Man, a name like that would be useful in my, uh, line of work." He mused, noting how silent their little slice of the jail was.
"Oh?"

"Yeah." Kidd grinned at the other as he put things together, "Just last week I busted up this human trafficking ring. Kind of what I do, ya know? Go looking for trouble, I guess. You?"

"Me?" Killer cocked his head to the side, fingering his goatee, "This and that, whatever my bosses want."

"That why you broke a bottle over my head?" The tension returned to the small cell, confirming his suspicion. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't off you right now, Killer."

"Well, you do like my name."

His manic grin widened a bit, "There is that. But it's gonna take more than that to save your ass. That bottle fuckin' hurt, man."

"It was to get you in here-"

"You've gotta be kidding me!" He snarled, "You wanted to get me arrested?! I shouldn't waste the boot lace, I'm gonna beat the crap out of you."

"Would you let me finish before you throw another tantrum?" Killer snapped, earning a glare. "I needed to get you alone away from prying eyes and ears. Do you know how much this little endeavor has cost? I had to pay off the whole precinct!"

That was a bit of a shock. He settled back on his bench, "Alright, you've got me here. Why?"

"Have you heard of the group called 'The Resistance', lead by Dragon and Roger?"

"Yeah, who hasn't? They're serious players, man."

"I'm in the resistance." Killer paused and let that sink in before continuing. "I was sent to scout you, see if you'd be worth asking to join up with us. We've been watching you, Roger's been impressed, actually. Dragon, well, he thinks you're a bit nuts."

"Thank him for me." Eustass grinned. He might not be the most stable guy around, but getting people to think you were crazy meant they tended to underestimate you.

Killer smirked back, "You can thank him yourself. I've followed you for a week, you know. Roger gave the okay yesterday to approach you. To ask if you'd join. So, you in?"

"Does that mean I get to keep making fun of your name?"

"Only if I get to make fun of yours."

Kidd thought about it for a moment. He'd never in his dreams imagined he'd attract the attention of the big-leagues when he'd started going after lowlifes back home. Yeah, sure, he wasn't on the up-and-up himself a lot of the time; he hated most governments he'd crossed paths with, but he got that people as a whole were just doing their best. This whole turn of events was a big shock, but in a good way. Though, he was still pissed about the bottle. If he agreed, he could always get Killer back later for it... "Sure, sign me up."

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I gave Killer and Shanks real names. Killer's name translates to "Jack Ripper Killer" in French. Obviously his parents thought they were funny... Shank's name, Shaymus Rua, would be very Irish. There are many ways to spell Shamus (Samus, Saymus, Saemus, you get the idea) I wanted the 'h' though. Shamus means 'the usurper' loosely. Rua is Gaelic for Red, as in a description of a living thing's color (Red fox, not the red box). Makino says "Happy birthday my Shamus Rua." to him in Gaelic. Make of that as you will. ;D

So, in my head, Shanks is obviously Irish. Killer is French, and Kidd is actually from Spain.

The Omake are in time-line order, by the way. Just thought I'd point that out, in case you were wondering. The date occurs about a year before Ace turns 18 and moves out (and Shanks and Whitebeard rework their alliance). No, Makino doesn't recognize the boys, and they don't recognize her because she's in disguise. She thinks Shanks is using a nickname for the older brother.
"Well now, I heard you boys have had quite the exciting day." Ducky smiled as he opened the door to the small conference room the brothers had been sequestered in. He was greeted by a pair of glares that would have been terrifying if he had not gotten to know them. Instead he held up a large bag of Arby's and kept smiling. "You've been in here all day. Why don't we go out front to eat?"

Neither said a word as they stood and followed behind him. The tension in the air was thick, and he was beginning to see what Abby had meant when she said something didn't seem quite right between the two. He hid a sigh as he divided the food equally between the two bottomless pits. Ace barely acknowledged him with a grunt before digging in. He practically inhaled his fries before turning his attention to the large wrapped sandwich. It had cost a bit extra for them to double up on the meat, but the look on Ace's face when he saw the mounds of red meat covered in cheese was worth it. Just as the young man was about to bite into his meal, he seemed to notice his bother wasn't eating and nudged him with his elbow, wordlessly telling him to get a move on.

Luffy stared at the ground pensively, ignoring his brother for the first time since Ducky had met them. Naturally, he found the behavior worrisome. Added to the fact that Ace seemed oblivious to his brother's mood the medical examiner could only conclude something was wrong. "Are you alright, Luffy?"

"Ignore him. He's just throwing a tantrum." Ace muttered around another bite of his roast beef sandwich.

"I am not!" His cup of soda was crushed in his grasp, cola going everywhere.

Ace rolled his eyes, "Calm down. You're acting like a baby."

"And you're being selfish!" Luffy shouted as he lept to his feet.

Ducky could only watch as the other rose as well, responding with some heat, "How exactly am I selfish, huh? How dare you say that! I always put you first, Lu!"

He decided to step between them, sensing tempers rising. "I think you both need to take a deep breath and calm down." Both ignored his words as they pushed against his arms in an attempt to reach each other. Off a little way he spotted Gibbs talking still to Garp and Sengoku and found himself wishing they'd notice the commotion sooner rather than later.

"That's what I'm talking about, Ace! Stop doing that, I hate it when you do that!"

"You hate it? If you even knew half the crap I had to do to keep you safe...!" Ace froze, realizing he'd stepped over some line. "I didn't mean it like that, Lu. It's just... you're my little brother and-"

Luffy snapped. Seeming to forget that physically attacking his brother was foolish and difficult he threw a punch that sent a surprised Ace to the ground in an ungodly sprawl. Holding his jaw his grey eyes stared up at his brother in shock. "You're a crappy big brother, you know that?" The younger brother snarked, ignoring the former marines who had finally noticed what was going on. "Selfish! You say it's for me, but what if something happens to you?" Luffy flexed his fists, "What if Pony-chin is serious, Or T-T-Blackbeard finds out you talked?"

"Better me than you," came the sullen response, "I can handle it. If anything happened to you, though..."
"You don't get it! You think you're protecting me, but you're not! I'll be alone, Ace! I don't have anyone else, not really!" Tears formed but didn't fall even though Luffy's voice broke, "I'd rather die than be alone. It hurts too much."

"Don't talk like that!" Ace sounded truly panicked, and Ducky couldn't fault him in the slightest for it. The freckled youth was on his feet, reaching for his brother who stayed just of reach.

"Why not? If, if it weren't for me, he would have left you alone. You wouldn't have to be a monster, Ace...!"

"Luffy..."

The boy was crying now, "You would have been better off without me, Ace...so it's ok. It's ok when he hurts me...because you're all I got, and he's not gonna hurt you then. I know I'm stupid, weak, and useless, Ace..."

"Luffy, you're not useless! Never useless!" Ace crushed his brother against his chest, muffling the rest of the boy's words.

Ducky imagined that it was a stream of self derision; though how anyone could mistake Luffy for weak was beyond him. The willingness to be hurt worried him. Ace's willingness to protect Luffy by any means necessary was nothing surprising to him at this time. He got the feeling the man would do anything to protecting Luffy and had come to terms with it long ago. Luffy, though...Ducky realized shamefully as he watched the teen being held close that he'd been deceived by the cheerful grins. The child was broken, so very broken for all he hid it well. Looking up, he noticed Gibbs had a hand on Garp's shoulder, holding the man back even as Sengoku looked on with a frown. *I need to talk to Jethro...I need to talk to him now. But the boy's can't hear...*

I need to talk to Jethro...I need to talk to him now. But the boy's can't hear... he spotted Anthony leaving the building with Abigail and Timothy, teasing them about something as Ziva followed a short distance behind and sent a quick prayer of thanks.

"Anthony, my boy! Have you decided on what movie we are all seeing tonight?" He shot the younger man a desperate look, one the two brother's wouldn't be able to see.

Tony looked at him, confused. Then he looked behind him, noticing something was wrong and caught on quickly, "Uh, no. Sorry, Ducky... Tim here distracted me. Isn't that right Mc-Dork?"

"Huh? But...?"

"Anyway, Ziva thought it was a better idea to see what the kiddos wanted to watch, so we thought we'd steal them for a bit and check movie times. That cool with you, Boss?"

"I did?" Ziva glanced at the boys and at Ducky, reading the situation at the same time Abby went over to the brothers and started to lead them over to a still slightly confused Tim. She blinked, "Ah, with that fantango"

"Fandango"

"Yes, thank you Abby. Fandango thing. There were just so many movies to choose. Tony wanted to see some action one, but Abby and I thought a comedy would have been better and Tim said you might enjoy something perhaps animated, Luffy. So we thought we'd come get you."

"Not a good time..." Ace weakly protested as Abby latched onto both of their arms and dragged them back towards the building, ignoring the way their feet dug in in an attempt to slow or stop the goth-woman. She wouldn't be stopped, though, and before long the whole group was once again back inside the building.
Ducky glared at Sengoku, "You, sir, should never have been allowed near those poor boys without their lawyer present."

"I don't see what you're problem is, I got you the answers you needed," the man bristled. "Besides, the harpy already bitched me out."

"By frightening them half to death! Do you realize what you've done?" Ducky snapped, "Of course not, you people rarely do. More concerned about the results. I'm of half a mind to contact Miss Nico and suggest she sue you for negligence and reckless endangerment."

"Ah now, don't be like that, Doc! So the brats got a little worked up. They'll be right as rain in a bit. They're tough little bastards." Garp grinned, though the glance he sent to the entrance belied his confidence as everyone fell quiet.

Gibbs spoke after a moment, "Ducky, why don't you tell me what's got you so worked up? This got any reason with why we're all suddenly seeing a movie?"

Ducky took a deep breath. "Yes. I'm afraid it does. Abigail brought it to my attention after she brought the boys their lunch. She said both were acting quite strangely. Only to be expected, I'm sure. I became worried when she told me Luffy didn't eat." Abruptly he looked at Garp and seemingly switched topics, "Were you aware that your grandchildren were prescribed new medications the other day?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" The man grumbled before answering, "No. What kind?"

"Ace is on an anti-anxiety medication as well as something for his narcolepsy. Luffy for his ADHD and another for his night-terrors." Gibbs explained, having looked at the medication himself. He added, "It's an anti-depressant."

"Are you suggesting the younger one is depressed?"

"I'm not suggesting anything." Ducky told Sengoku, "I'll tell you that Luffy truly believes he is useless and weak, though. If you were to follow through on your threat to arrest Ace, or in any way separate the two of them at this point, you would be directly responsible for anything that happened to that boy."

"We wouldn't do such a thing till Blackbeard was taken care of, Doctor Mallard." Sengoku frowned, "The man is a threat to more than Luffy, you know. Ace will need to be dealt with, though. He's a Logia, or element user, and he's got a temper. If nothing else he needs to be trained in a secure location before he hurts himself or someone else. Like his brother."

Donald frowned right back, "You're not listening to me. If you separate them, you'll do more than hurt Luffy. You could quite possibly be signing his death warrant."

"He's suicidal?" Garp's voice was barely more than a whisper, but his partner looked to him before his gaze snapped back on Ducky, his eyes narrowed.

"Possibly. It would be more accurate to say Luffy has no regard to his own well being; he considers others more important. Ace in particular." Ducky sighed and turned to Gibbs, "With him going on a new medication that is an antidepressant in the middle of all this, and now threatening to lock them up, I'm going to have to recommend a suicide watch for the next few weeks. I'd suggest stopping the medication, but in the long run this is the better solution for him."

"Ducky, you must be over reacting?" the boys' grandfather asked.
Gibbs spoke up, "I keep typing to tell you. They've been brutalized for a decade. You think POWs are bad? These kids run hot and cold at the same time, all the time, Sen. They're both very badly damaged, even Luffy. Treating them as you would a normal user is going to end up with someone dead, and it's going to be your fault. So back off."

The other looked frustrated as he shook his head. "I can't just take your word, Gibbs. You know I'm going to have to explain to my bosses why I'm going to turn a blind eye to these kids. They're not buying the victim angle, and even if they were, the fact remains that untrained Devil-fruit users are dangerous. Emotionally unstable half trained users? Garp, I'm sorry, but the more I hear the more it's looking like I'm going to have to lock them up for their own good until they learn some control."

"If you do that, you'll be no better than Blackbeard," Gibbs snapped at him.

Ducky spotted movement by the door and held up a hand, "It seems we are about to have company. I would suggest we continue this at a later time. Perhaps when we'd be less likely to be overheard by the temperamental subject of our conversation."

Ace was the first one out of the building. The young man had apparently taken it upon himself to get the last two members of their group that were present for the movie, despite Tony's attempts to stop him. Duck was relieved to see that he was smiling, and Luffy was animatedly chatting with Ziva about something or other, hands waving for added effect as she just nodded. The smile faded when the elder brother reached them. His eyes narrowed as he looked between the two groups, arms crossed over his muscular chest.

"You were talking about us, weren't you?" It sounded more like a statement to Ducky. Ace snorted, "You think there's something wrong with us, with Luffy. I can tell...there's nothing wrong."

"Ace, you can't honestly expect us to believe that." Ducky admonished, "I know you are a smart young man. Surely you've se-"

"He's just upset, alright?!" The younger man snapped, cutting him off. "You people keep pushing and pushing us for answers, expecting us to...and we can't, Luffy can't! I won't let him take the blame for any of this. It's selfish, but he's my kid brother, and I have to look out for him."

Sengoku raised an eyebrow, "These two were suggesting that your brother might not be able to handle being on his own. That he might become suicidal." Ducky wished not for the first time in his life that he was the type to slap people upside the head for saying stupid things as he glared at the man.

"Luffy?" Ace blinked, seeming surprised but luckily not offended. He opened his mouth then closed it again, looking pensive. When he finally spoke it was with obvious reluctance, "I don't think so... but Lu doesn't handle being alone well. I've never been gone longer than a few weeks, and he doesn't spend much of that time by himself. Hell, he used to be happy to see Teach after being locked in a closet for a day. I don't think he'd try to kill himself deliberately, but he'd probably do something really stupid. Like, 'let's see if getting hit by a train worse than being alone' stupid." He offered a shrug, "It's Luffy."

Sengoku pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache, "Alright, I'll talk to our superiors, Gibbs. They're still going to want that evaluation, though. Which means I want the both of you at our training grounds at eleven hundred tomorrow. Got it?" He jabbed a finger at Ace's chest, "I'm sticking my neck out for you, boy. Don't make me regret it." With that the man turned and strode away.
Ace blinked after him, "Did I just miss something?"

"Nah! Senny likes you! He's just shy!" Garp grinned, slapping the young man on the back before turning and following his partner.

"Gramp's is nuts."

"Yep." Gibbs smirked as he turned, heading over to where the rest of the group was now waiting, listening to Luffy's story. "Still have to go tomorrow, though."

Noticing the look of annoyance on Ace's face, Ducky attempted to lighten the mood, "Come now, it might be fun! Ah, speaking of fun, did you ever decide on what movie we are going to see?"

"Well, in the end we kind of let Luffy pick. He wanted to see *Avengers* again, so..."

**LATER**

"It has been quite a while since I've seen a movie in theater. That was quite the experience." Ducky still felt a bit muffled as he unlocked the front door. Somehow, when they'd met Palmer at the cinema, he'd bought tickets for the IMAX version of the movie, which was a bit louder than he'd been expecting. It had been a surprise to run into Director Vance in the theater with his wife and children. Apparently his son was a big comic book fan and had begged to see the movie on the big screen one more time. It had been quite fun, if he was honest with himself. Most of the group was more then a little familiar with the movie, but none gave away scenes, only saying the occasional line together. They'd stayed all the way through the credits, something he'd found amusing. He held the door open for Ace and Gibbs who were still animatedly discussing the benefits of Hawkeye's bow while Luffy followed behind, staring at his hand while clenching it into a fist. Ducky instantly worried, "Luffy?"

Brown eyes looked up, startled. "Hmmm?"

"Is something wrong with your hand?"

"My hand?" Luffy cocked his head to the side, obviously confused for a second before brightening and giving him a wide, happy smile, "Oh! Shihihihi! That! Nope! Just thinking."

"Is it something I can help you with?" He rest a cautious hand on the boy's shoulder as he shut the door behind them.

"Mmm, I don't think so. Thanks, anyway, Ducky." Luffy grinned, "Don't worry, it's not bad or nothing. It'll be really cool if it works! Ah! But don't tell Ace, ok? I want it to be a surprise."

*I don't even know what it is I'm not supposed to be telling Ace.* Ducky ruefully thought, a little confused. At this point he was getting used to feeling like that around the brothers, though. *At least he seems genuinely happy.* "Alright. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help."
Sengoku stood back with what Garp had deemed his work-face on as he watched the two brothers warily exit the car and look around the parking lot. The younger one's face lit up when he spotted Robin, waving to her enthusiastically even as he pressed closer against his brother, the fight from yesterday apparently forgotten. The elder was just as quick to put himself between the teen and an overly-enthusiastic Garp who apparently wanted a hug from his grandsons. Sengoku suppressed a sigh, not surprised in the slightest when both boys tensed and braced for a moment before dancing to the side. He'd warned his friend that he was expecting too much from them. Hell, he was pleased the elder brother hadn't tried to attack, given what he suspected their lives had been like.

"Remind me again why I have to let you be here?" He muttered to the lawyer who was still standing at his side as the group made their way over to them.

"Because my clients will happily bankrupt your organization if you put those two boys in any danger, and I will personally see you in financial and social ruin if you upset them." Her smile was a little too friendly while she said that. Almost like a serial killer's. "Also, you promised your friend Gibbs that you would play nice, remember?"

"You're an evil woman, Miss Nico." He grumbled.

"I've been told that."

It was a relief to face someone he was actually able to deny entrance to, even if it was someone he actually did respect and like. "I can't let you past this point, Gibbs."

"Oh?" It was amazing how the man had always been able to convey so much with so little. Sen got the message, though. If the other suspected even for a moment that the boys were in danger for any reason he'd be in there in a flash, screw regulations. For now, though, he'd trust his old friends not to overstep themselves again. Not that the harpy-lawyer would let him. "I'll wait out here then."

"But Gibbs..."

"Can't let anyone sneak up on you two when you're showing off, right, Ace?" Gibbs offered the young man a half smirk, and the freckled young man warily nodded before turning towards the large building where he and his brother would be put through their paces.

One thing Sengoku had always insisted on was complete anonymity in the training grounds. Though he was loyal to his branch of the CIA, he was still well aware of the underhanded methods employed by the government as a whole, and he refused to allow them to install surveillance devices in the training grounds in order to 'observe'. It would only lead to disaster when someone who wasn't supposed to got a hold of the footage and attempted to out some of their hidden members, or coerce potential new recruits like the two brothers looking at the expansive facilities now.

"Well, whacha think, boys?" Garp grinned at them, slapping both of his grandsons on the back enthusiastically. "Figured we'd just have you try something easy, nothing too strenuous. Target practice. Get a feel for what you can do, but don't worry about trying to impress Senny, alright? Just wanna make sure you boys got enough control is all."

Ace snorted, "Oh, we got plenty of control old man."

"Prove it, then." Sengoku pulled out a stopwatch, "Hit all the targets at the far end as fast as you
can. Try not to hit anything else. Think you can manage that, punk?"

"Lu? You up for this?" Ace bumped his brother's shoulder, "Or want me to go first?"

"Shihihi, I let you go, and there won't be anything left to play with, Ace!" The teen grinned widely walking away from his brother closer to the far end and muttering, "I thought we were actually gonna fight someone. This is kinda lame."

"Begin."

Luffy wasted no time getting to work, attacking the targets with a rapid barrage of punches so fast his arms blurred. His body didn't move from the spot he had started in, but then again, Sengoku guessed with his rubbery abilities he wouldn't need to move much to be able to reach every target with ease. He hit every target soon enough and Sengoku stopped the watch, expecting the boy to turn to them with a grin. Instead he continued to stand there, tense, as if waiting for an attack of some sort.

"Lu, zombie's are gonna get you." Ace called, getting an instant reaction as Luffy yelped, hands shooting all the way over and latching on to the wider shoulders of his brother."Shit! No! Nonononon-! Ow." Ace had just enough time to try and bring up his arms to slow the inevitable impact before the rest of Luffy followed, slamming full force into his brother's chest with a wide grin that said it was completely deliberate.

Garp of course started laughing, and even Robin seemed to find the situation amusing as the two untangled themselves and playfully batted at each other. He had to admit, it was amusing, though he could still see the tension that made their eyes a little too wide, and their smiles a little too forced. Casually, he glanced down at the stopwatch, checking Luffy's time. The kid hadn't done too badly, hitting everything in under ten minutes; much better than he'd expected, actually. Even if all the targets were left standing, it was still a decent job, considering he had not hit anything else but the targets. Sengoku wondered how well Ace would do, though.

After a few more minutes of goofing around, Ace gave his brother a light shove, sending him over to what he apparently deemed the relative safety of Miss Nico's presence next to their grandfather before striding without a word to where his brother had begun the test. He didn't say anything, no did he flex, all he did was look over his shoulder at Sengoku, grey eye challenging.

"Begin."

Ace went up in a blaze of fire as his flames raced across his skin, the whole place suddenly feeling warm. They seemed to boil back under his skin after a moment only to be released in a series of small fireballs shot from his pointer fingers at the most difficult targets. For some reason he seemed just as determined as his brother not to move from the spot as he switched to a controlled punch that sent a small torrent of flame at the far wall, even though Sengoku had never said anything about that. Smoke rose from the burned corpse of the last target as he pressed the button on the stopwatch and checked the time. Ace had 'killed' all the targets in under five minutes, as he'd expect from a Logia user with such destructive powers. The young man still stood braced though, much like his brother had before him and again Sengoku was forced to deal with the possibility that Gibbs had been right about getting them to demonstrate their skills like this. It was apparently bringing up something with both of them, more then likely whatever that bastard Teach had done to them in his sick misguided way of training. He pretended he didn't see the slight flinch when he called Ace, or the way the man's head snapped around so fast, instead holding up the watch calmly in a signal that the test was over.

When he was standing in front of him, it was impossible to miss the look of surprise when Sengoku
handed him a bottle of water. "Got to stay hydrated."

"Huh. Never really thought about it. You know. Fire and all..." He still readily opened the water and downed half of it quickly enough.

"You're still human. Too many Devil-fruit users burn themselves out thinking they're invincible. Especially elementals like you."

Ace grinned at him cockily, brushing hair out of his face as Sengoku surveyed the damage with a critical eye. It was impressive, though he let none of his thoughts show on his face. Every target had been annihilated with minimal damage to the surrounding obstacles. Something told him that Ace had been holding back, though. Despite knowing Garp would have told them that the training ground was up for anything that the two brothers could do and daring them to do their worst he'd seen nothing in the way of originality. Sengoku knew for a fact that as children the two had been responsible for their fair share of pranks and plots. It was hard to believe that they'd been beaten down to such a point where they were afraid to try something daring or new...it pissed him off if that was the case. He had warned Garp that there was always the possibility that the damage done to them had not only stunted their emotions but their abilities as well. Given the limited range of skills Luffy had demonstrated it was a distinct possibility in his case. Then again, he couldn't really see how a rubbery body would be too much use in combat beyond what the boy had displayed.

"So, what do you think, geezer? Our control good enough for ya?"

He shrugged, ignoring the insult, "To be honest, I wasn't terribly impressed with your skills. I think you're wasting your potential, Ace. Your parents would be disappointed, or they would be if that truly was the range of your abilities. Still, I'm sure there are things you could learn here."

"And Lu?"

"Your brother has done about as well as I'd expect." He caught the look Ace gave him, "It's nothing for him to be ashamed of. He has good mastery over a limited ability, I'll admit that."

"Huh. So you think it's useless, too."

He saw no reason to sugar coat his words like Garp would undoubtedly try to in order to make things easier on them. "Yes."

Ace was silent for a moment, watching his brother talk to Garp while Robin rested a supporting hand on his shoulder. Given the body language, Sen assumed the discussion was about the types of training the boys had undergone; none of it pleasant from the looks of things. Garp had his hands stuffed in his pockets and wasn't looking at Luffy, that in itself told him the calf-eyed teen was being much more forthcoming about things his brother had only hinted at. It must have been hard for the man to stand there and hear about such abuse.

"So you know our parents?" Ace asked, his voice sounding guarded.

Sengoku glanced out of the corner of his eye at the young man now using the cooler as a makeshift chair as he watched his brother, still playing with his bottle of water and refusing to look up at him. His shoulders were tense; every line of his back screamed that he was fighting to just stay seated there. He wondered how much the boys even remembered of their time before...All they knew for sure was that the two remembered Garp, but since fleeing the island was the start of all this, that wasn't too surprising.

"Watched your fathers grow up. Bright boys. Your father, Roger, spent more time under Garp's
roof than his own. Man raised him like a second son, really. Garp was the one your father introduced Rouge, your mother, to. I've got to say, watching her put Garp in his place was a real treat. Of course, Lily, that would be Luffy's mom, was always a bit softer spoken. But she had this way of making the boys, especially Dragon, just give in to her. The two of girls hit it off, became great friends almost instantly. A bit like sisters almost. Don't think your fathers ever got over their loss."

The plastic bottle crunched loudly, "What happened?" Ace looked at him, pain evident in his eyes.

"That, I don't know." He lied, keeping his face impassive. It wasn't something Ace should hear from him in the first place, especially since it was obvious that he didn't trust him. "Garp only mentioned it in passing when he went to pick you two brats up. Something about last wishes..."

"They wanted us dumped on some little sandbar of an island?" He sounded incredulous.

Sen laughed, "No, that was Garp. We needed you out of the way for a bit while he dealt with something. Had the paperwork to 'adopt' you and get you set up on a marine base under the care of a matron all set, but when we came back, you were gone."

"Eh, well. We were fine on our own, you know. Up until Teach spotted us..." He said, finishing off the last of the bottle. Somehow Sengoku didn't believe his words, though he didn't doubt they had been better off before Blackbeard had come along. 'Fine' is an overstatement, boy...most children die on the streets... Still he said nothing, letting the young man keep his pride. After a moment Ace offered him a smirk, "You serious about us not getting in trouble for anything we might, uh, break, in here?"

"Yes, we were. This is a place users come to learn control."

"Cool. Great." The smirk morphed into a full fledged grin, "Me'n'Lu might have some shit to show you then."

"Oh? Why the sudden change of heart?"

The young man crossed his arms over his chest and looked over at his brother, "It's not. Just don't want to feel like I owe you. It's payment. For telling me about who our mother...our moms were." He huffed, "Anyway, you interested or not?"

"Sure, impress me." If he had been a lesser man, the look on Ace's face would have been downright terrifying.

"OY! Lu! Com'ere a sec!" Luffy was quick enough to comply, trotting over with the eagerness of a puppy waiting for it's favorite ball to be thrown. He barely glanced at Sengoku before turning his full attention to Ace. If he'd been expecting the teen to say something, he was disappointed, as the boy apparently read something in his brother's expression and watched him curiously instead. "Pony-chin here wants a physics lesson, Lu. An advanced physics one. I think you should give it to him."

Luffy shifted his weight nervously, "Are you sure Ace?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." He walked behind his brother, draping an arm over his shoulder and grinned evilly at Sengoku, "Impress him."

The moment Ace said that Luffy's face morphed into an equally wild grin, and Sengoku suddenly knew that something was wrong. He just didn't know what yet. The younger teen crouched down, legs braced apart in the classic horse stance and a first resting against the ground with the other
hand braced on a knee as he continued to offer that creepy grin. He noticed Ace had backed up quickly, getting off to the side and braced himself for whatever it was that was coming.

"Level two." The flesh of Luffy's legs undulated downwards in clumps before bouncing back, his whole body becoming flush and instantly breaking out into a sweat. Sen didn't see the point of this until the boy moved. One moment he was crouched in front of him, the next second, he was right next to him, "Pistol!" fist skimming scant centimeters from his glasses before he was gone again. " Whip!" Behind him, he turned his head just enough to see the leg come flying at him at knee level before the attack was aborted deliberately right before connect and the teen was gone again, only to be across the room over by the targets this time flipping into the air another leg shooting out "Axe!" and a row of targets was nothing but toothpicks sent scattering as Luffy regained his balance. A sharp whistle and the brown eyes snapped up and around, searching and locating a heavier target, airborne, tossed by Ace no doubt, heading right towards a surprised Garp and a ridiculously calm Miss Nico. Arms rolled back and shot forward so fast that if Sengoku had blinked he would have missed the motion and only seen the explosion of sand "BAZOOKA!" when the sand settled, Luffy was in front of him, gently setting the lawyer down while Ace was heading over with Garp. The teen was panting heavily, every breath leaving his mouth in a visible puff.

"How you holding up, Lu?"

"Can't hold much longer...Ace...might get one more...but I'm wiped..."

"Still better than last time. See if you can hold for a while without doing anything a bit longer, k? Drop it if you start to feel funny though."

"Easy...for...you...to say...Gotta move!" He whined in response.

"Yeah yeah..." Ace turned to Sengoku and his Grandfather, "I keep telling people they're underestimating him. Level two, whatcha think?"

"Impressive. How exactly do you manage it boy?" Sengoku asked, only to receive a wave and a grimace from Luffy.

"He finds it hard to talk during it. Short version is taking advantage of the fact that he's rubber and has full control. Not sure how, but he increases the tension of everything, and ups the blood pressure. Turns himself into a super-powered rubber band, basically."

"And the side effects?" Garp asked, sounding worried, "It can't be good for him."

Ace threw up his arms in an exasperated manner, "Hell if we know. You guys are supposed to be the experts, right? You tell us."

"What do you know about it?" Sen asked, carefully picking up Luffy's slick wrist and checking his pulse. The boy twitched at the contact, obviously unhappy but held still long enough for him to feel the rapid flutter just beneath the overheated flesh.

"Well the docs who know about us, they said it could be bad for his heart. You know, beating so fast. But then they said it might not be, since his heart is rubber and all. They just told him to use it sparingly, and we never, ever let Teach know."

"I see. you can stop now, boy." Sen watched as Luffy let out a big sigh, his skin losing the flushed look as his knees buckled and he landed on his rear in front of him, still panting.

The teen's hair was plastered to his skull as he pulled off his equally damp shirt, revealing a horrendous scar that had Garp growling quietly next to him. Ace handed his brother a full bottle of
water before standing behind him and offering his legs as a backrest for the obviously worn out
teen. Their lawyers crouched down, ignoring her expensive suit, and pulled a candy bar from her
bag and offered it to the boy, apparently unsurprised by the display or the sudden weakness that
followed it. She must have caught the look he was giving her, for she offered a small smile.

"I've been required by a certain client to observe his more orthodox training sessions before in
order to have a better understanding of my charges. Captain here," She fondly ruffled Luffy's hair,"has occasionally invited me to see how they really train. Mostly because I treat them to dinner
afterwards, though, right, Luffy?"

"Shihihi, yep!" Luffy grinned, "Whacha think?"

"I'm surprised you have not used this technique on Marshall. It's powerful."

The teen pouted, a hand going over the scar on his chest, "Can't. Have to touch him...I can't...I...
he whimpered, drawing his legs up to his chin and his body shuddered. Sen didn't like the images
his mind was providing.

Ace rested a comforting hand on the mop of still sweaty hair, his voice full of a hopeless anger,
"It's that damn coral shit. Guy wears it all over all the time. Rings, necklaces, bracelets, belt. Let's
just say getting touched by him is unpleasant, no matter what the circumstances and leave it at
that. If Lu tried and missed knocking him out or killing him on the first shot? It would be very,
very bad. So I'm workin' on a little somethin' to hit him long distance..." He held up a free hand and
tiny green lights danced around his palm, "but my fireflies aren't strong enough to kill the fucker
yet."

"Fireflies?" Garp asked, reaching out a finger to poke one.

"Careful old man. They explode on contact." Ace smirked, flicking his wrist and sending the
glowing dancing orbs towards what remained of the targets from before. Sengoku watched as one
seemed to lightly touch against the remnants of a frame before suddenly exploding, setting off a
chain reaction of concussive sound and flaring lights that settled, revealing singed cement and little
else of the framework. "Hurts like a bitch, but it won't kill you."

Sengoku grabbed his wrist, using haki to prevent him from pulling away as he forced Ace to look
at him, his blood running a bit cold as he glared at him, feeling his gut boil with anger. He had
tried, really tried to see them as just victims, but Ace sounded smug when he spoke of his
dangerous little fireflies. Smug and disappointed that they didn't kill. Which led to the question
how he knew that. If he was deliberately using his abilities to hurt people, Sengoku would end this
farce and arrest the two of them right now. What one did the other was inevitably doing as well,
after all. That much was glaringly obvious.

"You've used this on someone?" He snarled out, glaring down into wide grey eyes as Ace struggled
to pull away, "Who?"

"Let Ace go!"

"Garp, reign Luffy in before I have to." His eyes never left Ace's, though he the other's pulse jump
when he said that and felt a momentary twinge of guilt as the elder brother's head whipped around
to look at his precious little brother and make sure he was alright. He didn't let it show, instead
increasing the hold he had, "Answer me!"

"Let go! You're scaring Luffy! Robin, do something, dammit!"
"Let go of my charge, Mr. Sengoku. Or don't you remember our earlier chat?"

"Not till I get answers. Now. Who did you use this on?"

Ace glared at him, free hand clawing at the hold he had on his wrist, "No one!" he snapped out, "I'm not that stupid, Asshole. People already think we're fucking monsters, you know!"

"Then how do you know if it would kill someone?" He asked, refusing to let go until he had an answer that satisfied him.

"Seriously?" Ace rolled his eyes, "We buy a dead pig once a month. Scorched half the skin off the thing and melted the eyes out, but most of the bones and internal organs were fine. So that's how I know it won't fuckin' kill ya. Pig was tasty as hell, though. Now will you let GO?!"

"A pig?" Garp asked, letting go of Luffy, "Really?"

"Yes, a pig. Sometimes a goat, but usually a pig. Lots of similarities between pigs and humans, plus we get to eat the evidence. Got some guys we know who run a food stand. They buy the hog wholesale, and we get it from them, no questions asked." Ace huffed as Sengoku finally let go of his wrist and shook it out before hugging his brother close, "We can beat the crap out of each other, but, Lu's rubber, and I'm fire, so that tells us nothing about what'll happen to a normal person if we got into it, right? Didn't wanna find out the hard way that our 'holding back' wasn't good enough and got someone killed."

"Some people deserve killing, though." Luffy muttered darkly into his brother's chest.

Sengoku opened his mouth to argue that, but his eyes caught the tail end of the scar on Luffy's chest and he found himself agreeing. He was just glad that once again he was wrong about the two brothers, even if it did mean that they were going to be even more suspicious and wary around him. Hell Garp wasn't going to let him forget that he was jumping to conclusions, either. Still, it was good to be wrong. Now he could easily tell the brass above him that the two were hardly a threat and were truly the victims, even if they were a bit stronger than the average victim. The hard part was going to be convincing the brass that recruiting them was not an option. Something told him the CIA wouldn't survive the first snack run.
Backyard Barbecue

Dragon resisted the urge to snatch the binoculars out of Rogers hands in order to get a better look at his son. *Oh, how I want to, though* his friend rested next to him prone against the slanted roof of the house Bart had found vacant the street behind the Director's home. Shiny had his eyes trained on the window into the livingroom where he gathered their sons were a movie with Leon Vance's children. He wasn't quite sure at the turn of events that had led to the boys being there at the moment, but even he had to admit that they should be safe enough there.

With a sigh, he forced himself to turn away from scan the neighborhood with an eye to anything out of the ordinary. Roger's running commentary a buzzing sound more than a distraction from his self appointed task. Makino smiled indulgently even as she kept her binoculars sweeping the house, keeping an eye on everyone. It was an opulent house, by their standards. He couldn't imagine living in such a place, raising children in this world of false security...but maybe if they had, none of this would have happened to their sons. It killed him to think that Lily had been right, just not the way any of them had expected.

"They're on the move." Makino's voice snapped him out of his revelry. "Coming outside."

"Looks like they're got the fixings for a barbeque. Vance seems jumpy." Roger reported, serious for a moment, "My boy's taken the plates...where did he learn manners? Never mind, looks like the wife made him. Your brat's got the drinks..."

Scales couldn't take it anymore. He ripped the binoculars away from Roger , ignoring the indignant squawk and got his first good look at Luffy in years. *Pictures only tell you so much,* he realized, watching as the grinning boy vaulted over the banister onto the grass with a tumble, waving for the kids to follow.

"Dragon! Come on, I want to see too! At least tell me what they're doing..." Roger pouted.

"He's teamed up Vance's children to play war against your son."

"Really?" Roger perked up, pulling out his phone and activating it's camera to zoom in. Noticing the look Dragon was giving him he sputtered, "What? You've got the binoculars, Scales. Plus, look at that! We can now take pictures! As fathers, we need to have lots of pictures, right?"

He rolled his eyes and went back to watching their sons. Luffy was stalking behind Ace while the two younger children whacked at the young man with pool noodles. Ace defended himself with a kickboard, backing up as he was 'overwhelmed' until Luffy pounced on him. The teen clung to his back, feet locked around his waist as he shoved a bright orange hat over Ace's head, blocking his view. The two kids moved in and 'attacked' with a shout that Dragon could hear from where they were. Ace went down, landing first on his knees and flopping onto his back, pinning Luffy who laughed and squirmed, trying to get out from under the weight now holding him down. The young brother and sister were not much help, laughing too much to effectively pull the teen out from under the 'dead' warrior who was laughing as well. The more they tried, the more they laughed. Dragon felt his lips twitch in a smile even as Roger openly chuckled next to him. The struggle ended when Vance's wife leaned over the rail of the porch and said something, getting an instant reaction from all four. The two kids dropped Luffy's hands and took off while Ace rolled to his feet, fixing his hat as his younger brother flipped to his feet before the two of them raced over to the grill. On the way, Luffy snatched up a hat of his own that had been left hanging from the corner of the banister and slapped it on his head, shifting his weight as he waited to be served.
Makino tensed next to him, drawing both their attention, "What?"

"That hat Luffy has...I've seen it before..." she clenched the binoculars she was using so hard they groaned, "I've met them, sir! In New York...if I had known..."

"What do you mean, you met them in New York? How?" Scales questioned.

"Shanks. He knows the boys. They came looking for him while I was there." She chewed her lip, "I can't believe I didn't recognize them. We could have..."

"There was no way you could have known that they were still alive, Makino. Let alone that you'd run into them in New York." Roger pointed out. "There's no point in beating yourself up over it. Just focus on what we can do for them now."

Dragon had to agree with his friend. Even if he'd wanted to blame Makino, it was obvious that she was devastated by the realization. Their sons' care had fallen upon her shoulders after Rouge and Lily died, and she loved them like they were her own family. Something of a big sister and an aunt rolled into one, and the boys had adored her. Even Ace, though he'd always been less expressive about it. Unlike now, Scales mused, watching his son be pulled into his brother's lap. From his new seat, Luffy attempted to grab a hotdog only to have Ace pluck it from his grasp and eat it. He snatched the next one as well, holding it over the younger's head just out of reach. When Luffy finally stood to get it, Ace wasted no time in taking off into the yard, Luffy shouting as he gave chance. Both went tumbling as the teen tackled his brother from behind, the hotdog still held aloft. Luffy grinned widely from his new perch as he claimed his prize before rolling off of Ace to lay in the grass next to him.

Roger sounded incredulous, "I think Ace just fell asleep." They waited for the young man to move or roll over for a moment. When he didn't the man sighed. "Yep. Asleep."

As they watched Vance's children romp around their boys, Scales felt a welling desire to snatch them away right then and there. He knew that would end poorly, they'd been through so much already. He barely noticed when the youngest child looked up before taking off, ignoring his parents shouts. He heard it then, the sound of an ice cream truck hidden from view. For a moment they all froze. The NCIS director's obvious dismay striking a cord, but they were unwilling to leave their own boys unguarded. Luffy sprinting out of the yard after the child decided them. He and Roger took off, leaving Makino to watch over Ace. By the time they'd reached the end of the block, his son had the child by the hand and was carefully crossing the street.

"You stay here. I'll keep an eye on them." Dragon found himself saying as the two were lost from view, hidden behind the truck. For once Roger didn't argue, instead handing him an earpiece.

"Come on kid, I haven't got all day." The vender groused as he rounded the truck, leaning out of the small window to watch as Vance's young son dug around in his shorts for money. With a pout the boy shook his head. "Then you don't want it."

"Wait," Dragon spoke up, "I'll pay for them."

Luffy turned and glared at him, for a second looking so much like Rogue. It was the same look she used to give him and Roger when they'd done something particularly stupid. "No." Luffy held the little boy back from accepting the money he had held out, instead pulling of a sandal and squeezing it till a small slit gaped in the rubber sole. He gave Scales another dirty look, reaching into the slit and pulling out a fifty before handing it to the vender and dropping the shoe.

"Damn, will you look at that!" Roger's voice buzzed in his ear, letting him know his partner had
seen the trick from his new vantage point. "Wonder where he learned that trick?" Dragon minutely shook his head, betting that they wouldn't like the answer.

"I got it. Can we get six fudge bars, two rocket pops, um, two drumsticks and two crunch bars?" He grinned passing over the bill. The man behind the counter placed the sizeable stack of frozen treats on the table and made change which Luffy shoved in his pocket before turning to the boy next to him. "Right, so Jared! It's your job to get the two drumsticks to your parents without breaking them. Like a mission! Can you do that?"

"Mmmm-hum!" Jared nodded enthusiastically.

"Good, now, off you go, soldier. No running this time, ok? It's a secret mission."

Dragon watched this as he casually bought himself a plain ice cream bar, wondering how Luffy was going to juggle the remaining ice creams he had bought. The same thought had apparently occurred to his son, who stood looking at the pile resentfully. It brought him back to when his wife had still been alive. Lily had forever been buying too many snacks or supplies only to discover that she couldn't possibly carry it all on her own. She'd always have the exact same pout; and while Luffy's look was different, it was obvious to him what was going on through his mind. Just when he was pretty sure the teen was about to take his own shirt off and make a bag out of it, he spoke up. "That's a lot of ice cream you've got there. If you leave it sitting like that, it's going to melt. Need a hand carrying it?"

"Why?" The suspicious look was back, a hard wariness out of place on the son he remembered. The child who had always been quick to laugh and make friends with everyone.

"Do I need a reason to help?"

"You're not getting any ice cream." Luffy warned, apparently coming to a decision. He handed over half the food with a nod before grinning widely. "Follow me! It's a mission to get the food back before it melts!"

Dragon had not been expecting the boy to take off at a run before he'd even finished talking. Luffy was fast, too. If he hadn't known exactly where the dark haired teen was leading him, it was possible he would have easily lost him. As it was, he doubted that the other was deliberately trying to lose him, since he did have half the ice cream. He could hear Roger laughing as he trotted after his own son, obviously amused by the whole situation. He's just jealous. The director looked up from where he knelt in front of his own son as the two of them opened the ornate gate and entered the back yard. Vance's expression was guarded as he took him in, and he tried to make himself look as harmless as possible. Still, the director's tone held a sharp note to it when he turned his attention to a grinning Luffy. "Who's your friend there?"

Luffy grinned as he dumped the frozen treats onto the ice in the cooler left on the porch. "This is Roadkill! He helped carry the ice creams! He wants a hotdog." Scales was startled. He had taken a chance on offering to help carry the ice cream, but he'd known better than to try and stick around. It was risky enough getting this close to the Director of NCIS, and foolish to stay, even if he wanted to.

Vance obviously didn't want him there either. "You can't just invite people to a BBQ, like that. I'm sorry Mr...?"

"Er...Gon." He answered, still trying to figure out what was with the weird nickname he'd been given. "No, Quite alright, I was just leaving."
His son pouted at that. "Stay! It's a party!" He called as Ace woke up.

Grey eyes took in the scene quickly before he looked at his grinning brother and sighed, "You just dragged some dude off the street again, didn't you?"

Luffy just laughed, tossing the man sitting in the grass a fudge bar when the other held up a hand. "Shihihihi!

"What am I going to do with you?" Ace muttered, rubbing a hand as if trying to wipe away the smirk on his face. "Might as well let the guy stay. Luffy's made up his mind."

"You expect me to let some stranger into my house on your brother's say so?" Vance glared at the elder brother, and Dragon found himself agreeing with the man's instincts, even if it was more than a little insulting on a personal level.

Taking a big bite out of his ice cream, Ace just shrugged, "It's what normally happens when Lu decides something. In case you haven't noticed, you can't argue with him."

"You're kidding, right?" Vance stared at the two brothers who just offered benign looking smiles. "Fine. Your new friend can stay. I'm warning you, Mister, one wrong move and you'll be in a world of hurt."

Dragon didn't doubt it for a second. "Yes, sir. I won't stay long. Thank you."

"Honey! Don't terrorize the man." Vance's wife scolded, offering him a plate full of food. "You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like, Gon."

"Thank you." He nodded, taking the plate. The food looked delicious and he was starving. He could hear Roger complaining about how he should have been the one to offer to watch Luffy. The man was begging Makino to let him join the party. Luckily, she wasn't the type to be easily swayed, even by her boss.

Ace sat on the bench next to him, gaze focused on his brother as he played with Jared and Kayla. Taking a slug of his soda he asked, "So, who the hell are you, really?"

"Excuse me?" Scales turned to look at the young man who looked so much like his father. "You wanna be that way about it?" Ace shrugged, not bothering to look at him. "Fine. Let me just say this, Mr. Gon, I'm on to you. You stay the hell away from my little brother. Or else."

"Is he threatening you?" Roger's voice buzzed in his ear, "That's my boy!"

"That's not funny." He muttered, only earning a laugh from his friend. "Not trying to be." Ace looked at him, his eyes cold. "I'm serious. You fuck with Luffy, and I'll kill you."

Dragon returned the look level, "Does your brother know you're threatening me?"

"Probably. Not that I really need to. He's more than capable of taking care of himself, you know. But he's my little brother, after all." The grin that he offered was predatory, "He shouldn't have to get his hands dirty because of a creepy stalker."

He was more than a little shocked that the young man had known he'd been watching them, but he refused to admit to it. "I get the feeling you don't like me much."
"Ace doesn't like anyone much!" Both men jumped slightly. Ace offered his brother a glare while the teen laughed. "It's ok though, because I like him lots! Ace, Kayla wants you to go show her how to juggle. I tried, but I ended up dropping everything."

"You're such a klutz." He snorted, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. "Fine, You toss me the balls, though."

"Sure!" Luffy turned to where Dragon sat as his brother headed over to where the two kids waited. His cheerful expression dropping into a guarded look. "Ace threaten you?"

"Yeah."

"Good." The teen nodded, "That makes it easier."

He didn't like the way Luffy had said that. "What easier?"

"My threat." He glared at the man, "You hurt Ace, and I'm gonna beat the crap out of you. No one hurts my brother." He turned away and trotted after his brother, all smiles again.

"Wow, looks like the Old Man was right." Roger sighed through the earpiece, "They're scary messed up."

"The question is, what can we do about it..." Dragon muttered back, wondering if maybe there was nothing they could really do to help them after all.
Rayleigh didn't even bother to look at the man sitting hunched over at the bar. Instead he continued to dry the heavy bottomed glasses as Shanks moaned, resting his head on the raised lip of the bar. "How you holding up, Shanks?"

"Horrible! I've never been so stressed out in my life!" The redhead groaned.

Rayleigh knew the mob boss was working hard, possibly harder than he'd worked in a while, but he didn't think it was that bad. "Don't you think you're being a bit extreme there?"

"This is Ace and Luffy we're talking about here! Do you have any idea how much danger they're in?" The redhead blanched, "Oh God, the trouble they could cause... what if Luffy breaks into the Whitehouse?!"

Silvers snorted as he realized what the issue was. Trust Shanks to be more worried over his little friend then the life-and-death war on the streets that he'd helped instigate. "You're overreacting, kiddo."

"Luffy, Ray! You know it's possible!" The other whined. The sad part was he actually could see it happening.

A beer was thumped in front of the Mafia boss, "Marco and Thatch are watching them, right? I'm sure those two will prevent anything from happening to them and reign the brats in if needed."

"Ba. Whitebeard's boys cause nearly as much trouble. They're bad influences." The door behind Shanks opened, but he didn't bother to look up.

"What are you, their mother?" Ray laughed. "Relax, Shanks. Ace won't do anything happen to his little brother anyway. That NCIS guy isn't a slouch either. I know of him, good man for a suit. They're in good hands."

Another drink was placed next to Shanks at an empty seat. Rayleigh didn't even need to ask what this man wanted, he was a fan of the hard liquors. Whitebeard sat next to his sometimes-rival sometimes-ally with a nod, the stool squeaking slightly under his weight. What do the kids call it again...Frenemy? Ray snorted into the silence as both men sipped their drinks. For all their differences the two made a powerful team when they decided to work together. The only problem naturally being the very fact that they were each so charismatic. Top dogs, used to being obeyed, not obeying.

"My boys called this morning." Whitebeard began without any preamble. "Said the brats are fine. A little on edge, but fine."

"I still don't like it." Shanks grumbled into his drink with a pout.

"We agreed that our energy was best spent here, stomping out the roots of Blackbeard's little organization while he was away." Newgate reminded the other. "There's no point in them returning if it will only lead to bondage again."

"Yeah yeah. I know, old man. Still doesn't mean I have to like it. They're so far away, and with Teach in the wind, who knows what could happen! That's not even including how much I don't like their little secret being outed like this. You know as well as I do what could happen."
"Miss Nico has assured us that she's doing everything in her power to prevent such things."
Whitebeard reminded Shanks, "She won't fail."

"Yeah, well. I'm still ready to send Benn and Yasopp to get them out of there." He glared challengingly at the older man sitting next to him, "Don't you even pretend that your two wouldn't do the same."

"In a heartbeat."

"Now that we've established that you two don't give a fuck what the law decides to do with the brothers, can we get down to business?" A sullen voice growled out from the kitchen. Rayleigh nodded to the green haired young cop as he walked around the bar to sit, arms crossed. "I've got my hands full out there, you know."

The young cop didn't look away from them as he took the beer Rayleigh handed him. The man had never quite understood the friendship between the undercover detective and the troublemaking little brother, but he had to admit it was a solid one. When Zoro'd come pounding on the back door when the two had gotten arrested, the man's face had been livid. Only a fool would have gotten in his way. It had taken the Zoro some time to calm down, or at least coherently explain what had happened. At first all he'd gotten was 'stupid idiot' and 'run over by a car to get arrested!' Which told him nothing beyond Luffy being Luffy, as usual. Though the teen had come a long way from the broken child he'd first met years ago, he still tended to act before he thought things out. So he'd patiently waited for the green haired cop to rant himself out and when the man had finished he was able to get to the heart of the matter. Immediately he'd called Shanks, who in turn had called Jimbe and Whitebeard. Before the three had even arrived, Shakky had gotten Robin on the phone and was effectively preventing the woman from taking any other calls until some sort of arrangement could be worked out. Damn, but how he loved that woman's fast thinking.

Within a few hours everything was hashed out, almost as if they had planned the whole thing. Granted, the three Mafia bosses had already been setting up a coordinated strike against Blackbeard's growing threat in the city while the man was away, but even he was amazed at how readily they got that rolling. The only thing they'd been worried about had been police involvement. It was easy to see how messy things would become if they weighed in on the street war. It had come as a shock when Zoro had quickly promised that it wouldn't be an issue. Apparently the underworld of the city weren't the only people who'd gotten fed up with Teach's interference in the city.

Rayleigh was the first one to break the tense silence. "Well, you might as well get started. Jimbe called a little while ago. He's over at the docs dealing with Arlong right now."

Shanks looked up, surprised, "When did he call?"

"Right before you got here." Ray turned his attention to the only law abiding citizen in the bar. "How are things on your end?"

"Over half the cops in the precinct are compromised, including myself, you know." Zoro growled, "We're talking a major sting here, Internal Affairs is having a field day."

"So what, you turning yourself in, too?" Shanks snorted, "Fat lot of good that'll do."

"Captain Smoker convinced them to go after those with 'blatant loyalty to the criminal element' as he put it."

Whitebeard grinned, "Ah, those in Blackbeard's pocket, you mean."
"Exactly. Anyone who's got ties to that gang, and just that gang, are going to find themselves getting to know the inside of a jail. Everyone else is going to be detained for questioning." Zoro snorted, "As a warning or some such bull. They just know they can't take us all."

"And yourself, boy?" Whitebeard asked, raising a brow, "Your friendship with the brothers could be seen as a tie to Teach, could it not?"

"I'm safe." He smirked, "It's the good thing about being a narc, I just say I was on a long term case to weed out the criminal connection to the precinct. Tashigi helped fake the paperwork."

All three men laughed at that. Ray himself knew of this Tashigi. She was one of the pride and joys of the area, having actually made something respectable of her life and still coming back to help her hometown. She was a horrible stickler for the law, though, unbending in an almost endearing way. Still, she did good work, even if it put her at odds with many of those she'd grown up with. He'd heard that she had a bit of a thing for the precinct's resident green haired bad boy. "Well, they say opposites attract and all that." He placed a beer down in front of the young cop, "So, when are you going to bring her by for a drink?"

"Our little Zoro is all grown up, eh?" Shanks added, slapping him on the back. "Such a player! I could give you a few pointers, you heartbreaker."

"Don't listen to them, boy." Whitebeard laughed, taking in Zoro's red face, "I'm sure she's a wonderful woman."

Zoro wouldn't look at any of them, "I should have you all arrested." He grumbled, though there was no heat in it. "Any news on Ace and Luffy? How's the idiot recovering from being shot?"

"Robin says he's doing just fine. Hasn't slowed him down in the slightest." the redhead offered a shrug, "They're co-operating more from what I've heard."

"That's good. It'll make it harder to press charges against them."

Shanks shook his head, "I still can't get over the fact that we're getting help from a relatively clean cop."

"Yeah, well. I'm not doing it for you, you know. Besides, you guys aren't too bad for stinking criminals."

"Smoker say that?" Rayleigh asked, lighting up a cigarette.

"He was a bit more...colorfully descriptive." He could only imagine what the man had said about them if the smirk on the young cop's face was anything to go by. "I'm supposed to let it slip that because of IAB is swarming the precinct and questioning everyone, patrols are going to be light over the next few days." Zoro snorted, "Around the Baratie and that's about it."

"That is not what I'd call letting it slip." Whitebeard shook his head.

"Anyone asks, I was drunk and talking about pulling a lame patrol in front of shit-cooks place."

"And because you're an undercover officer, we supposedly put it together that the precinct is short handed, right?" Silvers shook his head, "Tell Smoker that he's giving Shanks here too much credit."

"HEY!"

Zoro stood, "I've got to run. We are short handed. Let Usopp or the Sanji know if you need to
reach me. Nami’s laying low with her family.”

"We'll keep an eye out for her and the little doctor, don't worry, boy." Whitebeard acknowledged the unspoken worry as the green haired man left through the kitchen. "I should go as well. Unless there was anything else?"

"You don't want to stay for a drink?" The other joked even as he climbed to his feet as well, a lot more steady than most would expect.

"Get out of here, you two. I'll call if I hear anything." Rayleigh promised as he cleaned up the glasses. "Imagine, here I am retired and I'm still getting mixed up in crap like this." He shook his head at the thought, "At least we'll be busy tonight. Shakky'll be happy."
Luffy was remarkably good with the Vance kids. Ace was a bit more reserved, but Leon wasn't surprised by that at all. Honestly, he had half expected the two to start a brawl in the middle of his backyard. He hated to admit that his wife had been right, the barbecue was a good idea. It had been hard at first when he realized that the Vance children were around the same age that the brothers had been when they'd been forced to take the drug. The two brothers looked so much more relaxed than they had all week.

At least, they had until this 'Gon' character had shown up. He had a sneaking suspicion about the man; if he were Gibbs he'd have said it was a gut feeling. Something about him just didn't sit right with the Director, a nagging suspicion that he'd seen him somewhere before. He just didn't know where. With that thought in mind he slipped into the kitchen and dialed Gibbs. The man picked up on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

"Gibbs." Vance turned, opening the fridge to get out the mayonnaise. "We might have a problem."

"Boys acting out?"

"No, surprisingly."

The other sounded mildly amused. "Then what's the problem? They not entertaining enough for you?"

"Hardly. Luffy brought home a 'friend'."

"Marco or Thatch?"

"Neither. Some guy by the name of Gon." He glanced out the window. No one seemed to have noticed his absence yet. "You ever hear of the guy?"

"No." Gibbs sounded mildly suspicious. "What's he look like?"

"Tall. Dark hair, dark eyes. Tribal 'tats down the left side of his face. Sound familiar?"

"No."

"I think we're being watched, too."

"I'll be right there." There was a click as the line went dead.

Putting down the phone Leon snorted. Gibbs was protective of the brothers, that was for sure. He picked up the condiments and headed out. The only person who looked up when he came back out was his wife. The children were too engaged in apparently learning some martial arts moves from their guests. He wasn't sure if he should be worried about that. On the one hand he doubted they were in any danger of getting hurt, but he was still a father. In fact, maybe he should stop them before his children learned something they just had to try out on their friends.

"Don't even think about it, Dear." Jackie didn't even look over at him as she admonished him while re-setting the table. "The boys promised they would stick with the basics. Luffy is trying to convince your daughter that ballet is helpful in karate."
"Is that what they're doing?" He watched the mini-lesson critically.

"Doesn't look much like it to me, either." Gon admitted.

"Good to know I'm not alone at least. Care for a burger or hotdog? I was just going to throw the next batch on."

Gon looked down at the ice cream wrapper still in his hand, "I thought you already had eaten."

"That was only the first half." He laughed, "Ace and Luffy are trying to eat me out of house and home. So, you want something?"

"Burger, please." There was a pause, "Ace and Luffy, right? They seem a bit too old to be friends with your kids, and you'll forgive for saying it, but they don't look like they're related to you. Friends from work?"

"You could say that." Leon looked up just in time to see Ace toss Luffy straight up into the air while his own children looked on. "Hey! knock it off!" he shouted. "Honestly, worse than Dinozzo. Let's just say that they're in town on a work related visit and staying with some coworkers of mine."

"I see." Gon's tone suggested that maybe he did, too.

He heard a car door slam, Gibbs was always rough on his vehicles.

"We're in the back!"

"Uncle Gibbs!" Jared shouted, running up to the man as he let himself in through the gate carrying what looked to be a few bottles of some expensive looking alcohol.

"Hey there, Sport. Thought you'd be entertaining your new friends." The senior agent rubbed his son's head as he put the bottles on the table, his eyes slyly cutting to Gon. "Jackie, nice to see you again."

"And you too, Gibbs." She turned to their daughter who'd skipped up onto the porch, "Kayla, can you go get the glasses from the kitchen, dear? Gibbs, this here is Gon, Luffy's new...friend. Where are Ace and Luffy?"

"Luffy saw a black squirrel and Ace is trying to get him out of the tree." His daughter piped up, hanging from the handle of the sliding glass door.

Jackie smiled, "The squirrel or his brother?"

"Depends if he's caught the thing." She shrugged, opening the door to duck inside.

"No! You can't have it!"

"But I could have named it Blackie!"

"You can't even remember to feed a goldfish, Lu! No squirrel! Or Pigeons, or rats, or raccoons. You know what? No vermin. I don't care if they'd eat the scraps..." Brown eyes dancing, Luffy opened his mouth, "AND NO PIG!"

The younger pouted for all of three seconds before snagging a paper plate and loading it up, pet squirrel forgotten. Gon shook his head as the teen sat across from him, "Short attention span, huh kid?"
Ace rolled his eyes as he sat next to his brother. "You've got no idea. If it's not important getting Lu to focus is a real pain in the ass."

"Ace, language." Jackie scolded as Jared and Kayla sat on either side of the brothers, leaving the other side of the table for the older group. Vance was glad he'd invested in the long one for family gatherings after all, even if usually it was too much space given how cramped it was feeling.

He ducked his head in apology."Sorry, ma'am. When he's set his mind on something though, he can stick with it till the very end and get it done."

"You're an awesome big brother, Ace!" Kayla smiled up at him like he was some teen idol. Vance was a little worried that his little girl had a little crush.

"Well, Lu's a pretty special little brother, you know. Besides, you look like a pretty cool big sister yourself, Kayla."

"Really?" She beamed at him, yep, she's got a crush. "Daddy always says I have to watch out for Jared, but sometimes it's hard. Did your dad used to tell you stuff like that?"

Ace tensed ever so slightly, and Vance waited for him to blow up. He was shocked when he didn't; instead, the young man shook it off and said, "Never really knew my father."

"Mmm, what is it like, having a dad, anyway?" Luffy mused around a hamburger. He noticed Gibbs eyes narrow ever so slightly, his attention on Gon.

"Well, don't your friends have dads?" Jackie asked.

"Only Sanji and Usopp, and Sanji's adopted and Yasopp's never home." The teen blinked looking at his brother, "Is that why the principle called us hoodlums from 'broken homes' that one time?"

"I think it had more to do with running Franky's speedo up the flagpole," Ace laughed. "Usopp's the only one with both parents, though." Catching the look on Jackie's face he shrugged and waved a fork, "It's not too unusual. There's a reason they blame a broken home for the rise in crime rates. Of course, you need a home for it to be broken, so I'm not sure how we fit into that."

Vance noticed that Gon looked worried. The man played with his drink, "Isn't there someone you two could turn to? A distant relative? Old friend? Teacher?"

Luffy started to snicker. "Shanks!"

"Yeah, guy's something like the crazy-cool uncle you're half embarrassed to admit you know."

"Thundercats HO!"

After a moment Vance finally asked, "What does that even mean?"

"Well," Ace began, pausing to chew his burger, "it was a bit after we met Shanks. Halloween was coming up, right? So, Luffy wanted to know what was up with all the kids talking about costumes and candy."

"It's Halloween! Duh!" Jared said in a tone that suggested he couldn't believe they didn't know that.

"Yeah, we know that now. But we didn't have a normal childhood." Luffy grinned, nudging his brother to continue.

Ace took the hint. "Shanks has the exact same reaction. Of course, he was drunker than a skunk, so
it was really hard to understand what the he-" He caught the look Jackie was giving him"-ck he
was talking about. So there he is, hanging off his best buddy Benn, crying about how unfair it is or
some such bull and Benn says..."

"So take them trick or treating!" Luffy cheers, taking over the story, "'N Shanks says that it's an
awesome idea, except Benn realizes that Shanks is just gonna take us to bars, so he says he'll come.
Then Rayleigh invited himself along."

"He said something about Benn being too much of a stick in the mud to do it right." Ace chuckled,
a real smile on his face. "Shakky picked the costumes. Thundercats; said it covered up the
bruises." Vance wasn't the only one who had to stop himself from frowning at the thought, judging
by the tense way the other adults suddenly grabbed their glasses. Ace either didn't notice or didn't
care. "Shanks got to be Lion-o because of he was the only one who wouldn't need a wig for his
hair, and Benn was Tygra. His cocky attitude is perfect for the guy. Rayleigh got stuck as Panthro
because Shakky wouldn't let him be Jaga."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow, "And who were you? Snarf?"

"Heck no!" Luffy shook his head.

"I was WilyKit and Lu here was WilyKat, on the account that he was younger and shorter."

"It was awesome! Shanks kept running around knocking on doors shouting 'Thundercats HO!' and
waving his sword around." Luffy laughed, "Then he had a few drinks, and he was challenging kids
to sword fights for their candy."

"And then he got wasted and he started up with the 'By the eye of Thundera, you're hot!' and 'Ever
wonder why Cheetara comes running when Lion-o says Thundercat's Ho?' which was around
midnight, so Benn decided we'd all had enough and we went back to the bar."

"Sounds like you boys had a real fun time."

"You could say that. 'Course, Teach found out and that sucked, but Ray'd stashed the candy at the
bar, so at least it wasn't a total loss. 'That does put a damper on the story,' Vance sighed. 'Between
the five of us we had enough candy to last most people till Easter.' Ace grinned, 'Shakky rationed
it, so It lasted till Thanksgiving at least."

Leon shook his head, a smile on his face. "I'm impressed you two made it that long. You've run up
one heck of an expense the last few days."

Gibbs stood, draining what was left in his cup in one last gulp. The man didn't say anything as he
started to pick up the plates, now completely clear of food. It said something about the two
brothers that they had cleared not only their plates but any sizable scraps on everyone else's plates
as well. It did make cleanup easier as Gibbs stacked the plates. Luffy warily held his plate up for
the agent, his head cocked to the side in an obvious question.

"Nah. You kids set up, we'll take care of the cleanup." Vance had barely finished speaking before
the four of them were off and into the yard, once again playing. "Jackie honey? Can you keep an
eye on them and we'll take care of this."

"No problem. Oh, looks like Luffy found that squirrel again." She chuckled as she tidied up.

She missed Gibbs nudging their uninvited guest slightly, causing the man to rise. "Let me give you
a hand with that."
"I'll get the door. Be back in a bit, honey."

The kitchen was filled with just the sounds of plates clicking as they were loaded into the dishwasher for a few moments. Leon just watched the tension rise as he rinsed the glasses. It was obvious that whoever Gon was, Gibbs had figured it out and the man was just letting him stew. What made him a real master was he didn't even have to look at the guy to lay on the pressure.

"When was the last time you spoke with your father."

Gon startled, looking sheepish. It was an odd look to to see on such a stern face. "Thursday."

"Uh huh. That'd make you Garp's boy. Dragon, right? What the hell is with the tattoos?"

"When you deal with the people I'm forced to associate with, it helps to look tough."

Vance snorted, "And tire tracks down your face help?"

Dragon ran his fingertips down the marks, and the Director had to admit that he did look dangerous right then. "Yes."

"You just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought you'd stop in and see your kids?" He asked leaning on the counter, his gaze hard. "Or are you here to bring them back to their 'Uncle'?"

The response was sharp and immediate "Don't you ever suggest that!" He was relieved to hear it. "We came to help our boys. We thought...God, if Roger ever catches that bastard...!"

"But not you?"

"...I'm working on it." He muttered darkly. "Don't want it traced back to us." All three stood there, thinking their own thoughts before Dragon spoke again, "I wasn't planning on interacting with the them. We wanted to put a tail on them. Keep them safe. Figured we'd call the Old Man later, find out what was going on. But then your son, Jared, went running towards the street..."

"I see." Actually, he appreciated it. "So what's your plan?"

"Take Ace and Luffy as far away as possible. Somewhere Blackbeard will never find them again."

"No." Gibbs tone was final.

Dragon glared at the two of them. "What do you mean 'no'? They're obviously not under arrest."

"As the Director of NCIS, I can't let you take them because they're our lead to a case we're trying to solve and under our protection."

"You're talking about my son and godson you can't..."

He spoke over him, "As a father I can't let you take them because they don't know you." The stern face became craggy looking. Leon had never been as good at explaining things like this, but he hoped he could get the man to understand. He pointed out the window where the two brothers could be seen playing with his own children. "I know it may not look it to you, but those two are hanging on by a thread. They've just started to believe that my men aren't going to hand them over to some strangers to be experimented on or worse, and they don't know you. If you try to abduct them - and that's the only way you'd be able to take them from us, I assure you - someone will get hurt. Badly. And they will never trust you."

Luffy's father turned away from him, looking solely out the window. "Is it really that bad?"
"Worse." Gibbs was ever the blunt one. "You should go, call your dad. He had some time with them the other day. After you talk to him, call me."

Dragon’s tan skin looked grayish when he turned to them finally. He nodded, heading towards the front door. "Thanks. I'll do that. And thanks for finding them. Taking care of them. Caring."

"No problem."

Leon snorted as the door clicked closed. "'Call me'? You realize I just had an internationally wanted terrorist over for a barbecue, and you want him to call you?"

Gibbs offered a half shrug as he headed back towards the back yard. "He's one of their fathers, Leon." He smirked, "Besides, you were about to say the same thing."
Last Minute Planning

Gibbs wasn't surprised at all that Ace and Luffy had made such good friends with Vance's kids. The crush Kayla had was funny, but not half as funny as when Luffy had started teasing the new little couple that evening. The normally angry young man had turned an interesting shade of red and sputtered denials while his brother laughed. Ace, it seemed, was not sure how to deal with crushes. If he thought about it, it was sad, given the kid was twenty and good looking, despite the attitude. Jethro just refused to think about why neither brother seemed to have any idea about normal relationships. Ducky told him that after four marriages he didn't have any room to talk. Luffy, naturally, thought that was almost as funny as someone having a crush on his brother.

Trust his old friend to turn the whole thing into a discussion of how relationships were supposed to work. Naturally, he brought up the baseball bat incident. And the time wife number three had gone after him with golf clubs... there was a reason his fourth wife didn't do a sport. Badminton wasn't a sport, no matter what Stephanie had claimed. Ducky had just gotten into Diane's whole divorce him and marry his friend stunt when his phone went off. If nothing else, the talk did distract the brothers from noticing when Gibbs had to step into the other room to answer a certain call.

"Are you Agent Gibbs?"

"Yep."

"I'm Roger. Ace's father." The voice on the other end sighed. "We just got off the phone with the Old Man."

"I thought Dragon was going to call."

He could hear shouting in the background, "He's...occupied."

"I see."

"Old Man wants us to meet him tomorrow. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Gibbs cautiously glanced into the living-room where Ace was laughing at something Ducky had just said, Luffy watching TV. "Nope. Haven't heard from Garp in a few days."

"Uh-huh. Right. Well. He's not exactly the most subtle man out there, and given he wants to go on a tour or some shit, I'm betting the old coot's going to be calling you next."

"Trying to set up a meeting?" Gibbs smirked. "You sure you want to do that?"

"...I won't lie. I want to meet my boy. See the man he's become." There was a shuddering breath, "We know the risks, it could go horribly wrong. So, Dragon thinks it would be best if you had some of your team there just in case, and I agree. Of course, the Old Man doesn't know I'm asking, but the boys trust you. I could tell that much watching that barbecue."

He let the line fall silent for a moment as he thought. He could understand what Garp was trying to do, respect it even. Still, he didn't need Ducky to tell him that this wasn't going to go smoothly at all. If he asked Ducky, the man would probably say something about having the kids get to know them before dropping the whole father thing on them, especially with the issues Ace had about his father. It was lucky for Roger then that the doctor was busy trying to convince his son that Kayla was not going to turn into Hancock. "I guess my team could use a break on the case. I think Abby
"was saying something about wanting to see the new baby hippo at the zoo."

"Thank you, Agent Gibbs."

"Don't thank me until afterwards. Can't believe I'm doin' this. You know it's my job to arrest people like you?"

"Which is why we'll be on our best behavior." More shouting could be heard, "I need to go. We'll see you at the zoo." The line went dead.

Gibbs had barely slipped the phone back in his pocket and taken a step before it rung again. Rolling his eyes he pulled the stupid thing back out and glared at the screen, recognizing the number instantly. "What?"

"Gibbs! I was just wondering how my darling grandsons were doing!" Garp laughed.

"They're fine, Garp." He sighed.

"That's great! Listen, I was thinking..."

"Meet my team at the National Zoo sometime around noon. Call me when you guys get there." Gibbs cut him off, knowing exactly what he was getting at, "And Garp? You get to tell Vance." Quickly he hung up the phone before his friend could protest.

He knew he should call, or at least text his team and give them the heads up, but one of the good things about having Gibbs go through Vance was he wouldn't have to deal with Tony's whining until the next day. That left the next couple of hours to just relax until he and Ducky had to chase the boys to bed. There was no staying up after that; the two brats would come sneaking out with the stupidest grins and just stare at you without saying a word until you caved in. Even he had to admit it was effective. Creepy in an Abby-thought-it-was-cute kind of way, but effective. He'd be glad when the case was over and the brothers could leave. Gibbs wasn't used to getting so much sleep.

"Gibbs!" Luffy cheered, turning around as he came back into the living room. "I thought the monsters had got you!"

"They did," he replied, taking his seat once more, "but I was too tough for them."

"More like old and stringy." Ace grinned. "Wanna watch Deep Blue Sea? Killer mutant sharks..." he suggested waving the remote at the TV.

"Not tonight. We should turn in early. Big day tomorrow."

The younger brother snorted, "What, more questioning? Boring."

"Nah. Going to the zoo." The wide grins more than made up for Tony's future company, though his gut told him that maybe he should have Abby bring leashes or something. Just in case.

*\&*&\*BREAK*\&*\&*

Luffy was literally bouncing in the back seat with excitement. "This is going to be so cool!"

"Don't tell me you boys have lived in New York and have never been to the Bronx or Central zoo?"

"Oh, we've been." Ace snorted, "Exactly once to each one. Lu here got us kicked out both times after an hour." He leaned forward, draping an arm between over Ducky's headrest, "And Banned. For life. Are you guys sure this is a good idea?"
Gibbs smirked into the rear-view mirror, "Sure. Might as well let you boys do the tourist thing as long as you're in town, right?"

"Does that mean we get to go to the White House, too?!"

"Hey, let's try not to get kicked out of the zoo first, ok? Then we'll bug them about the Lincoln memorial and then the White House. We got to work our way up to it, alright?"

He tapped the brakes as a car cut him off, barely avoiding a collision with the other vehicle with a half frown. He usually noticed when someone was about to merge, but this person had sped up from a few cars behind them just to get in front. It was odd, given the light traffic. He was only partially aware of Ducky talking with Ziva on the phone trying to work out where everyone would meet up. It sounded like everyone on his team wanted to meet in a different spot which really didn't come as a surprise. Nor the fact that he could hear the babble through the phone as they each talked over each other, even with Ace and Luffy chiming in. Why the hell are they offering advice again? He wondered as he had to quickly tap his breaks again to avoid hitting the driver ahead of him again, earning a surprised look from all three passengers. Soon enough Luffy was yammering on about the petting zoo and Ace was voting for the seals of all places to meet up. Gibbs almost rolled his eyes at the enthusiasm in their voices as he navigated the streets.

They were almost there when the car in front of them slammed into reverse, tires squealing in protest as it rapidly sped up. "SHIT!" As he attempted to back up he saw Ace, eyes wide, shove his brother between the seats and brace for impact. Distantly, as he watched the licence plate of the other car vanish below the hood of his car he could hear Ziva demanding to know what was wrong and hoped his team got there quickly.
Ducky wasn't moving. That was the first thing he noticed and it scared Luffy. Gibbs was making these half-groans, blood on his temple as he slowly shifted. He could still feel the warm press of his brother across his back, keeping him pinned between the seats. "Everyone alright?" Ace sounded as shocked as Luffy felt. It had happened so fast...

"Y-yeah. I'm ok."

"Gibbs?"

"Give me a minute. He didn't sound good, but he was talking at was a good thing, right? "Ducky, you alight?" There was no answer. "Ducky? Hey! Donald?! Shit."

"Your friend is the last thing you should be worrying about." No! Not here! Desperately he scrambled against the cheap carpet interior of the car as the voice laughed. Luffy knew that voice, knew that wherever Burgess was, Blackbeard wasn't far behind.

"Stay down, Lu!" Ace growled into his back, leg kicking out. "Let go! LET GO OF ME YOU ASSWIPE!"

"Gotten feisty, huh?" There was a thud that shook the car, and Ace's grip loosened. Why didn't Ace...? "Bad boy." Luffy could hear the sick grin in the bastard's voice as his brother was pulled off him.

"Ace?" Gibbs snarled, "Let the boy go or..."

A hand closed on the back of Luffy's neck and pulled him from the car as he felt his strength leave him, telling him that damn coral was around. Sharp nails told him it was Cat before the hag even spoke. "Or what, old man? Ya move an' Auger 'er blows your 'ead off."

"No!" he shouted twisting in her harpy like grasp, brown eyes wide and panicked at the sight of the sniper less than five feet from where Gibbs sat, trapped by his seatbelt. "Don't hurt them!"

"Aww, will ya listen ta 'im?" Catarina cackled, shaking him by the neck roughly enough for him to stumble. She continued in a high faseto, "'Don't 'urt 'em! Let 'um go!'" She turned nasty. "You should be begging for your life, brat."

The door of the car in front of them opened, and Luffy's whole body shook before he could get control of himself. Those merciless mud-colored eyes had seen the moment of weakness and revelled in it. Teach offered a wide jovial gap-tooth grin that scare him shitless and it was all he could do to not look away whimpering in fear. The man took his time looking over the situation, that smug smile never leaving his face.

"Cat, you being rough with my pet there?"

"No sir." her hand loosened slightly. No one crossed Blackbeard when he was in a mood. Not even his trusted crew.

Teach didn't even look as Burgess dragged a resisting Ace next to him, hands cuffed behind his back already. His brother attempted to jerk away from the ringed hand that found it's way into his hair only to have it work deeper into the locks. "Good." The matter seemed to be forgotten. "Ace, my boy! You and your brother have been very bad little boys, haven't you? Telling tales on your
dear old Uncle, humm?"

"You sold me out!" Ace spat out, head instantly snapping to the side as he was backhanded.

"You think I didn't know you were plotting against me? Thought you could escape?" Blackbeard gently rubbed off the blood from the corner of Ace's mouth, "You belong to me, boy. I will always find you."

"I HATE you!"

Blackbeard just grinned, "It looks like you still need to be taught your lesson. I know not all of this was your fault, Ace. That treasonous bitch Robin was against you, so I'll give you a choice. Van here can shoot those nice old men in the car, or Catarina'll slit your brother's throat."

"W-what?!" Dark grey eyes impossibly wide, Ace shook his head as he looked back and forth.

Luffy barely felt the cold kiss of the blade at his throat, but the look on the other's face said the threat was very real. "No. No-nonono...please-no n-"

"If you don't pick, I'll kill them all." Teach wasn't smiling anymore.

Pick them, I'm not worth it... He begged with his eyes, willing his brother to understand. Gibbs and Ducky had been so nice to them. Feeding them, helping them, feeding them... Ace didn't need him around to always mess things up anyway, he'd be much better off without him. Maybe next time...next time he'd actually manage to get away. Because Luffy just knew that if Ace was responsible for getting Ducky and Gibbs killed, he wouldn't be Ace anymore. Not really. He couldn't let that happen. Ace's eyes darted back and forth between him and the car. From where he was standing he wasn't able to see anything but the headrests, and for that, Luffy was thankful. The way his brother looked at him told him exactly how he was going to answer.

"L-Luffy!"

Blackbeard pretended to misunderstand, that sick grin back on his face as he casually waved his hand. The knife at Luffy's throat pressed close enough to draw blood. "How noble of you. Willing to sacrifice your precious younger br-"

"NO!" Ace shouted in panic. "No...Please...not Luffy...anyone but him..."

What was that, boy?

"Ace don't..."

"Shut yur yap!" Catarina hissed, knife pressing a little deeper to make her point.

"Please Uncle, don't kill Luffy." Just like that the knife was gone, just a thin trail of blood to let on it had ever been there.

"You hear that, government pig? My boy Ace here thinks his worthless brother is more important than both of your lives!" Teach laughed slapping Ace on the shoulder as his brother's skin turned green under his freckles. "Remember this, Ace. You killed them, Van."

Luffy began to struggle harder as Van Auger raised the pistol a little higher and took aim into the car. He didn't want this to happen, couldn't let this happen! At this distance though, there was no way he could stop it in time. Level two took too long to get into and he needed to block everything. If only I was like the Hulk and could ma- he looked at his right hand. It was risky, he had only barely begun to play around with the idea the other day, and it would probably hurt, but it
was worth a try. Anything was worth trying. Quickly he lifted his leg and slammed it as hard as he could into Catarina's stomach, ignoring the scrapes he nails left as he finally managed to tug free as he chomped down hard on his own thumb.

"Level Three!" Luffy shouted around the digit and blew as much air as he could strait into his bones. He ignored the agony building as his fist grew to insanely large proportions, drawing everyone's attention. Getting his arm to stretch was hard. His hand didn't really weigh more, he knew that it couldn't possibly. It just felt like it did. Still his aim was dead on as usual as he got his limb between a shocked Auger and the car, feeling the two bee-like stings as the man fired reflexively into his palm.

"Giant SMASH!" He slapped the enlarge palm right into the man, intending to stun him.

Instead, the lanky blonde went flying backwards into a parked car, crumbling into a heap. Luffy hadn't expected that to happen at all. He stared at his hand in shock for a split second before glaring at Teach. plan half formed. Agonizingly he raised his right hand in a fist and strode forward intending to smash him into the ground. He only made it two steps before his hand shrunk to normal and then kept on shrinking down to child size, taking the rest of his body with it. It felt so uncomfortably tight and painful it drove him to his knees, gasping for breath.

"Luffy!" Ace sounded desperate, "Get out of there!"

Opening his eyes, *When did I shut them?* he saw Blackbeard glaring down at him. With a sneer, the man slammed his boot into Luffy's much smaller chest, knocking the teen onto his back and causing him to groan in pain. "Holding out on me, boy? Attacking my men? You know what I do to traitors?" Each question was punctuated with a stomp to the ribs, and it hurt like it never had before. Over the frantic shouting of Ace and Gibbs, he thought he maybe heard sirens in the distance. "I'll teach you to know your place, you piece of shit!" He snarled, foot pressing down on Luffy's chest. The last thing Luffy saw before he gave into oblivion was the terrified look on his big brother's face as he struggled to reach him.

*&&*ACE POV*&&*

Ace felt like his world was ending as he was forced to watch Teach attempt to stomp his brother to death. From the whimpering yelps and way Luffy's now child-small hands clawed at the laces of the boots he honestly thought his brother was to die. He couldn't let that happen! After what seemed like an eternity, Luffy fell silent, and Ace became aware of the fact that he was shouting. He wasn't the only one. Looking over at the car, he saw Gibbs struggle with something in the car that seem to have him trapped, hurling insults at Teach. Blackbeard continued to ignore them both, and viciously kicked the teen again, causing him to just flop limply on the asphalt, even as his body returned to normal.

"Useless." The man seared. "Cat. Get rid of this piece of trash."

Even the hardened woman seemed a bit shocked as she drew her wicked looking knife, "Yur sure, boss?"

"Questioning me?"

"Neva!" She stood over Luffy and roughly grabbed him by the hair, intending to finish what she started earlier.

"W-wait!" Ace begged, limp now in Jes's grasp. "Uncle, please! You promised!"
Teach's eyes were snake-like as when he looked at him, "I promised nothing."

"Uncle, please!" The word was bitter on his tongue.

"You knew about this?" The stare was merciless. Ace knew if he answered wrongly, his brother was dead.

"About the giant thing? No! I swear it!" The man didn't believe him, so he continued, silently begging Luffy to understand why. "But...We train together. He's been working on new attacks. He just didn't want you to think he was useless, I swear to you!"

"Luffy attacked Van. He went to attack me."

"You...you know how he is about his friends...Auger was going to hurt them. Lu just reacted, that's all! He's not bright, you know that, Uncle!" Ace stammered, thinking fast. "And I know he'd never attack you! Right? I mean, we've never done something that stupid. Not even Lu! He probably just got excited and wanted to show me his new attack or something. You know how he is..." he swallowed nervously, hoping the man would buy it.

The moment stretched on as Teach searched his face, looking for something and Ace tried to keep his gaze level. He didn't even flinch when an old Ford pickup truck hauling a tiny horse trailer bandaged it's way through the few cars now abandoned in the road. A part of his mind wondered what had happened to all the people, it was the same part that was wondering where the hell the cops were. Still, he refused to look away. His brother's life was on the line here.

A shaggy head appeared over the roof of the Ford. "Boss? You ready to go?"

Teach didn't break eye contact. "Is there a problem, Avalo?"

"Ne'ya. Just some crazy drivers on the road."

"Good." Teach turned, walking over to the car that had backed up into Gibbs. "Looks like it'll still run. Cat, restrain my pet and toss him in the trailer with his brother. Guess he's not so useless after all, eh?"

Ace could only watch helplessly as the woman rougly manhandled his brother before tossing him into the metal trailer that was barely big enough for a pony. It was going to be a long, rough ride. Before Burgess dragged him over to be loaded he sent one last look at Gibbs, begging him to understand why he'd choose Luffy over them. Instead of looking at him with disgust like he was expecting, the man just gave him a cool tight smile. "Ace, it's gonna be alright." He kept staring over his shoulder in shock, even as Jes shoved him into the hot cramped metal box, sending him sprawling. If only I could believe that.
"Ducky? Ducky com'on need you to wake up now!" Gibbs shouted as he struggled against his seatbelt. He knew very well that even if he got the stupid piece of nylon crap to let go he'd still have the problem of the steering wheel that was currently digging into his thigh and pinning him in place. Still it made him feel better to be doing something as the off-white trailer pulled away, scraping against a few of the cars that had been abandoned in people's rush to get away. He hated feeling this useless. The sirens reached a crescendo, two oversized SUV's pushing their way down the road with a little more care than Blackbeard's men had shown. The moment they stopped, his team came boiling out of the one, swarming what was left of his car. "What the hell took you guys so long?!"

Tony's face was drawn tight as he yanked on the door, throwing his whole weight against it to pry it open. "Gibbs! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Tony. Just stuck." He gestured at the wheel and the belt, even as Ziva came forward with her knife.

"Oh my God! Ducky! Is he...?" Abby flitted into his view and darted around the car, dragging Tim with her. "Oh, Ducky!"

"Abby, calm down. He's just knocked out."

"Oh good. Well, not good, but you know." She offered him a sheepish grin that was still a bit taut as she examined Ducky. Luckily the man was beginning to come around.

"Gibbs what happened?"

"Here's a better question." He looked out his cracked windshield to see the glowering stormcloud that he knew to be his friend. "Where the hell are my grandsons?"

"They took them." He admitted, grinding his teeth.

"Who? Who took them?"

"Who the hell do you think, Tony? The same guy that shot at us the other day! Teach," he spat out, "and some goons of his. I couldn't stop them, alright? Now get me the hell out of this thing so we can go after them!"

Ziva had made fast work of the belt, but it took both her and Tony to unjam the steering column and free his legs. Quickly, he explained as much as he could about what had happened, pointing out the man that Blackbeard's men had left behind in their haste to escape. Tim after only a moment's hesitation left Ducky's side after helping Abby get the dazed man out of the car to check the still form. Gibbs was shocked when McGee called for a second bus; the man was still alive. Judging by the way he'd hit the car earlier though, he wasn't going to be going anywhere anytime soon. All that meant to him was if they didn't get on the trail fast enough he knew exactly who to go to for their next lead. And he wasn't going to be asking nicely. It took him precious seconds after being freed to find his legs again. Ignoring the pain that told him he had done some serious damage to his thigh, Gibbs stood, holding out his hand for the keys. The look he gave Tony brook no argument, and Tony wisely handed over the keys even as the rest of the team stood, ready to go.
Gibbs shook his head, pointing to Abby and Tim. "You two, I need you here with Ducky. Wait for the bus, get him and he bastard that tried to shoot at us to the hospital and stay there. We'll keep in touch." He turned his head to Sengoku, who was standing stock-still by the door to his SUV, every line of his body screaming righteous fury. "Looking for a dark blue sedan, rear-end smashed in, License plate Bravo-Bravo-Charlie-One-One-Mike. Also a banged up old truck, red. Didn't get the license plate. It's pulling an off-white trailer. The kind you'd put a horse or something in. Kids are in that."

"Got it." Sengoku nodded, in and pulling away before Gibbs had even put the key in the ignition. Not that he was far behind him. It took awhile to navigate out of the clogged streets where people had left their cars haphazardly after either hearing or seeing something about what had happened that had spooked them. If Gibbs had to guess, He was going to go out on a limb and say at this distance it was most likely do to Luffy's strange new trick. As impressive as the trick was, he had not liked what it had done to the kid. Between what had happened to Luffy and seeing Ace beg like that, he knew they needed to get to the boys quickly.

Sengoku's driving was better than he remembered it. The two SUVs cut through the traffic easily, ignoring the blaring horns. Still, there was no sign on the road up ahead of the dirty off-white trailer or a sedan with a smashed in trunk. He refused to pay attention to the little voice in his head suggesting that maybe he was wrong about which way they went, that maybe they'd gotten away.

"Boss! Boss, watch out for the ca- that was a close one... Coming up on your left!" Tony's knuckles were white.

"Would you relax? I know what I'm doing." Gibbs smirked as he merged back into the HOV lane and laid on the gas. Up ahead there was a ripple in the traffic pattern. A small subcompact falling back in the fast lane, forcing cars to go around it.

The speaker phone crackled to life, he hadn't even been aware that Tony had connected the phone. "I'm going around the slowpoke first before Garp shoots them." He could hear arguing in the background.

"Right behind you." He replied, slowing down just enough to let the other SUV in and by before speeding up again. Before long he pulled even with the subcompact.

Tony sounded confused, "Hey, Isn't that Marco?"

"Why is he getting closer?" Ziva raised her voice, "Gibbs. Gibbs! There's a person hanging out the window! We're going to hit the-!

Gibbs didn't even flinch as a torso appeared right above Tony's lap right in the corner of his peripheral vision. Instead he focused on keeping the same speed and not swerving. He had to admit that the dark out of focus forum was a little disturbing. He glanced over at Tony's yelp of fear. Alright, very disturbing, he amended as the human shaped shadow he logically assumed was Thatch hung onto the handle on the door and reached into it's own murky depths before dropping a cellphone in Tony's lap. The shadow let go and was gone in an instant, the subcompact speeding up and zipping off into traffic again.

"What the Fuck was that?!" Tony shouted just before the phone in his lap rang.

Gibbs huffed, pushing the SUV harder. "Help. I hope."

"Gibbs! What's going on, you guys crash?"
"No. Just got a scare. Tony! Answer the damn phone will you?"

The man looked at it like it might bite him but answered the call just the same, putting it on speaker. "-trying to kill me Marco? I'm not immortal you ass!"

"It worked, yoi."

"Screw you and drive."

Gibbs cut in. "Hello?"

"Gibbs! Good to see you're alive. Ducky alright?"

"He will be." He swerved around a slower moving car and kept going, spotting Sengoku's SUV just ahead and the subcompact a little ahead of that. Marco was a reckless driver apparently.

"Spotted them again." Marco said. "Half a mile up. Looks like you were right Thatch. Bastard's plotting to hide out at the visitor center."

"Who the hell is this?!"

"Shit. Garp-the-devil-hunter." Thatch muttered, "Uh. No one. Just, er... helpful civilians?"

"Not important right now. You can yell and threaten us later." Marco snapped, "You'll be able to spot them any second now. Two vehicles, a Ford truck pulling a trailer and a dark blue sedan with a smashed rear end."

"Boys are in the trailer." Gibbs offered, spotting the two vehicles.

"I see them." Garp's voice sounded rough over the speaker.

"What's the plan, yoi?" Marco asked. "Trail him to the visitor center or take him out here?"

"Tail him. Don't want to risk something happening to Ace or Luffy."

"Got it."

"Copy that." Sengoku grumbled, "I should say something about taking them alive, but I've worked with Garp long enough to learn not to ask for the impossible. Remember to try not to kill them."

The next mile passed in relative silence as all three vehicles made sure to stay far enough back to not draw attention to themselves yet keep the trailer and sedan in sight. The traffic had eased up, making the task a little bit more difficult, but not impossible. The gap had to be closed when the sedan shifted lanes to take the exit to the visitor center, just like they'd thought Blackbeard would do. Gibbs had to admit it was a good plan. With the police combing the highways for the next few hours and searching the city, it would be unlikely that anyone would have thought to check the Washington visitor center. Not with how public the place was; it would seem like the worst place to hide. It would be the perfect place for the boys to make a break for it actually... except he'd seen the look on Ace's face. Gibbs' grip tightened on the steering wheel.

"Shit! I think he spotted us! He's speeding up!" Thatch snarled over the phone as the Sedan accelerated, cutting back across the rumblestrip and back into the traffic flow. Marco was not on his tail, barely avoiding getting sideswiped by a semi as he raced after him. "Dammit! We're on it!"

Quickly, he and Sengoku moved to attempt to box in the truck in an attempt to force him off the road. It would have worked except for the impatient jackass who cut between them, forcing them
to back off. Swerving the ford attempted to avoid the car in the next lane as it sped off the exit ramp, the trailer bouncing and swaying with the sudden movement. Horn blaring the other vehicle speed around the truck, clipping the trailer and snapping it to the side where it balanced on one wheel before slamming back down. Still, the truck didn't slow down as it barreled down the highway, trailer swinging wildly from near misses and causing the truck itself to fishtail as the driver struggled with the counterbalanced weight. Other drivers noticed the trouble and it was almost like a bubble started to form around the dangerous vehicle as they alternately slowed down or sped up to get away from the threat. Gibbs wasn't exactly sure when he knew for a fact that the driver had lost complete control, but he did notice when the man foolishly tried to slam on the breaks. The truck wasn't new, and with a trailer being pulled behind it at high speeds it didn't stop. It just crunched onto its side, the trailer riding up and over the bed of the truck as the who thing slid sending sparks flying before the trailer further wrenched and caused the whole thing to buckle and roll, debris flying. He could only stare at the carnage.

"Gibbs? Teach is pulling off onto the next exit. Where are you guys?" Thatch sounded annoyed. "Come on, it's two against three here and he's got that damn coral. Are you guys helping take this bastard out or not?"

He didn't answer as he watched two me- he assumed the one he didn't recognize was Roger as Dragon was distinctive- get out of the SUV. Both men looked absolutely devastated as they slowly made their way to the smoking wreckage. The other SUV started up its engine.

"Gibbs. The boys...Dragon and Roger want to deal with this. Alone..." Sengoku's voice was soft. "We still have a job to do."

"Yeah. Yeah, we do. Tony. I want you to stay here. Call an ambulance."

"Got it boss." Tony slid out of the car, his phone already in hand as Gibbs pulled away.

*&*&*&Ace*&*&*

"Luffy?" His brother didn't even groan, and Ace knew something was wrong. Luffy always bounced back from anything. It was Luffy. Wobbly he dragged himself over to his brother's prone form, cursing the coral embedded in the cuffs that kept him from holding him close. "Lu? Please, Lu..." Ace moaned, spotting the well loved straw hat wedged under the limp form. He prayed Luffy's lockpicks had been returned as he gently nudged his brother to the side and checked the hat band. They were there, and despite the fact that his hands were behind his back, Ace made fast work of his restraints. Carefully he placed Luffy against his legs and removed his brother's before gathering the still body in his arms and leaning against the wall. His little brother didn't make a sound the entire time; a cold lump of worry settling in Ace's stomach. "I'm so sorry..."

The trailer lurched, and he braced his legs, preventing his brother from feeling as much of the movement as he could as he let his head fall against the wall. Over by the front of a trailer a single bucket hung from a clip, sloshing water. It was insulting, he knew it, but he couldn't care. It was nothing less than he deserved to be treated like some kind of animal. It was all his fault. Gibbs and Ducky were hurt. Blackbeard had almost killed them because of him. And Luffy... He couldn't do it. Not again. There was no doubt in his mind that Teach would have killed his brother if Luffy hadn't passed out when he did. As it was, Luffy still had a thin trail of blood from Cat's blade. He wouldn't survive next time. Ace wouldn't survive, either. Not without Luffy. Tears started to fall as it sunk in, but it didn't change the fact. Ace knew that he couldn't do it anymore.

"Lu? Lu, I'm so proud of you. You know that, right?" He muttered, "I never wanted something like this! I just... I wanted us to be free. For you to be treated like a damn person Lu! I'm so sorry... Listen Luffy...We're..." Ace took a shuddering breath, thinking of how he was going to tell his
brother, even if the other couldn't hear him. "I...You know how I said we wouldn't ever stop trying? How I wouldn't stop? I...I can't. I'll do anything to keep you safe, even if that means...even if that means we've giving up. I just hope you understand...even if you can't forgive me."

There was no answer; he wasn't expecting one either. Not with how much pain Luffy had looked like he was in before. The trailer was hot and stuffy, the four side windows offering almost no ventilation. It wasn't uncomfortable to Ace, but he worried that it might be bad for his brother. Chopper would know. I wonder if we're ever going to see Chopper again. Or any of our friends. He shifted, trying to get Luffy off the uncomfortable metal as the trailer jerked roughly to the side. Reflexively he held the still form closer to his chest as he closed his eyes.

There was a strange jarring bounce and Ace felt himself slide across the slick floor of the trailer towards the other side. Eyes snapped opened and Ace attempted to turn or shift or do anything to prevent Luffy from slamming into the far side of the trailer in vain. Before he could even worry if his brother was alight he felt himself sliding again and curled tightly around Luffy's head and shoulders determined to protect him as best he could even as his spine slammed into the unforgiving metal frame earning a gasp. He forcefully suppressed the urge to ignite, knowing that doing so in such an enclosed metal space would kill Luffy, even if he wasn't holding him. Instead, he just blindly held on, praying that whatever Avalo was doing it would be over soon. His eyes snapped open again in panic the moment he felt his body become weightless.

"Fu-!" He tried to simultaneously go limp and tense up at the same time as the crappy little screened widows came up too fast-too fast TOO FAST! and felt a whole new level of pain blaze across his back and shoulders as the world became a dizzying spinning vortex of grays, blacks, and blues where there was no up anymore and can't burn-can't burn Luffy! before an explosion somewhere behind his eyes finally took everything away.
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"Who the hell do you think, Tony? The same guy that shot at us the other day! Teach," he spat out, "and some goons of his. I couldn't stop them, alright? Now get me the hell out of this thing so we can go after them!"

Ziva had made fast work of the belt, but it took both her and Tony to unjam the steering column and free his legs. Quickly, he explained as much as he could about what had happened, pointing out the man that Blackbeard's men had left behind in their haste to escape. Tim after only a moment's hesitation left Ducky's side after helping Abby get the dazed man out of the car to check the still form. Gibbs was shocked when McGee called for a second bus; the man was still alive. Judging by the way he'd hit the car earlier though, he wasn't going to be going anywhere anytime soon. All that meant to him was if they didn't get on the trail fast enough he knew exactly who to go to for their next lead. And he wasn't going to be asking nicely. It took him precious seconds after being freed to find his legs again. Ignoring the pain that told him he had done some serious damage to his thigh, Gibbs stood, holding out his hand for the keys. The look he gave Tony brook no argument, and Tony wisely handed over the keys even as the rest of the team stood, ready to go.
Gibbs shook his head, pointing to Abby and Tim. "You two, I need you here with Ducky. Wait for the bus, get him and he bastard that tried to shoot at us to the hospital and stay there. We'll keep in touch." He turned his head to Sengoku, who was standing stock-still by the door to his SUV, every line of his body screaming righteous fury. "Looking for a dark blue sedan, rear-end smashed in, License plate Bravo-Bravo-Charlie-One-One-Mike. Also a banged up old truck, red. Didn't get the license plate. It's pulling an off-white trailer. The kind you'd put a horse or something in. Kids are in that."

"Got it." Sengoku nodded, in and pulling away before Gibbs had even put the key in the ignition. Not that he was far behind him. It took awhile to navigate out of the clogged streets where people had left their cars haphazardly after either hearing or seeing something about what had happened that had spooked them. If Gibbs had to guess, He was going to go out on a limb and say at this distance it was most likely do to Luffy's strange new trick. As impressive as the trick was, he had not liked what it had done to the kid. Between what had happened to Luffy and seeing Ace beg like that, he knew they needed to get to the boys quickly.

Sengoku's driving was better than he remembered it. The two SUVs cut through the traffic easily, ignoring the blaring horns. Still, there was no sign on the road up ahead of the dirty off-white trailer or a sedan with a smashed in trunk. He refused to pay attention to the little voice in his head suggesting that maybe he was wrong about which way they went, that maybe they'd gotten away.

"Boss! Boss, watch out for the ca- that was a close one... Coming up on your left!" Tony's knuckles were white.

"Would you relax? I know what I'm doing." Gibbs smirked as he merged back into the HOV lane and laid on the gas. Up ahead there was a ripple in the traffic pattern. A small subcompact falling back in the fast lane, forcing cars to go around it.

The speaker phone crackled to life, he hadn't even been aware that Tony had connected the phone. "I'm going around the slowpoke first before Garp shoots them." He could hear arguing in the background.

"Right behind you." He replied, slowing down just enough to let the other SUV in and by before speeding up again. Before long he pulled even with the subcompact.

Tony sounded confused, "Hey, Isn't that Marco?"

"Why is he getting closer?" Ziva raised her voice, "Gibbs. Gibbs! There's a person hanging out the window! We're going to hit the-!"

Gibbs didn't even flinch as a torso appeared right above Tony's lap right in the corner of his peripheral vision. Instead he focused on keeping the same speed and not swerving. He had to admit that the dark out of focus forum was a little disturbing. He glanced over at Tony's yelp of fear. Alright, very disturbing, he amended as the human shaped shadow he logically assumed was Thatch hung onto the handle on the door and reached into it's own murky depths before dropping a cellphone in Tony's lap. The shadow let go and was gone in an instant, the subcompact speeding up and zipping off into traffic again.

"What the Fuck was that?!" Tony shouted just before the phone in his lap rang.

Gibbs huffed, pushing the SUV harder. "Help. I hope."

"Gibbs! What's going on, you guys crash?"
"No. Just got a scare. Tony! Answer the damn phone will you?"

The man looked at it like it might bite him but answered the call just the same, putting it on speaker. "-trying to kill me Marco? I'm not immortal you ass!"

"It worked, yoi."

"Screw you and drive."

Gibbs cut in. "Hello?"

"Gibbs! Good to see you're alive. Ducky alright?"

"He will be." He swerved around a slower moving car and kept going, spotting Sengoku's SUV just ahead and the subcompact a little ahead of that. Marco was a reckless driver apparently.

"Spotted them again." Marco said. "Half a mile up. Looks like you were right Thatch. Bastard's plotting to hide out at the visitor center."

"Who the hell is this?!"

"Shit. Garp-the-devil-hunter." Thatch muttered, "Uh. No one. Just, er... helpful civilians?"

"Not important right now. You can yell and threaten us later." Marco snapped, "You'll be able to spot them any second now. Two vehicles, a Ford truck pulling a trailer and a dark blue sedan with a smashed rear end."

"Boys are in the trailer." Gibbs offered, spotting the two vehicles.

"I see them." Garp's voice sounded rough over the speaker.

"What's the plan, yoi?" Marco asked. "Trail him to the visitor center or take him out here?"

"Tail him. Don't want to risk something happening to Ace or Luffy."

"Got it."

"Copy that." Sengoku grumbled, "I should say something about taking them alive, but I've worked with Garp long enough to learn not to ask for the impossible. Remember to try not to kill them."

The next mile passed in relative silence as all three vehicles made sure to stay far enough back to not draw attention to themselves yet keep the trailer and sedan in sight. The traffic had eased up, making the task a little bit more difficult, but not impossible. The gap had to be closed when the sedan shifted lanes to take the exit to the visitor center, just like they'd thought Blackbeard would do. Gibbs had to admit it was a good plan. With the police combing the highways for the next few hours and searching the city, it would be unlikely that anyone would have thought to check the Washington visitor center. Not with how public the place was; it would seem like the worst place to hide. It would be the perfect place for the boys to make a break for it actually... except he'd seen the look on Ace's face. Gibbs' grip tightened on the steering wheel.

"Shit! I think he spotted us! He's speeding up!" Thatch snarled over the phone as the Sedan accelerated, cutting back across the rumblestrip and back into the traffic flow. Marco was not on his tail, barely avoiding getting sideswiped by a semi as he raced after him. "Dammit! We're on it!"

Quickly, he and Sengoku moved to attempt to box in the truck in an attempt to force him off the road. It would have worked except for the impatient jackass who cut between them, forcing them
to back off. Swerving the ford attempted to avoid the car in the next lane as it sped off the exit ramp, the trailer bouncing and swaying with the sudden movement. Horn blaring the other vehicle speed around the truck, clipping the trailer and snapping it to the side where it balanced on one wheel before slamming back down. Still, the truck didn't slow down as it barreled down the highway, trailer swinging wildly from near misses and causing the truck itself to fishtail as the driver struggled with the counterbalanced weight. Other drivers noticed the trouble and it was almost like a bubble started to form around the dangerous vehicle as they alternately slowed down or sped up to get away from the threat. Gibbs wasn't exactly sure when he knew for a fact that the driver had lost complete control, but he did notice when the man foolishly tried to slam on the breaks. The truck wasn't new, and with a trailer being pulled behind it at high speeds it didn't stop. It just crunched onto its side, the trailer riding up and over the bed of the truck as the who thing slid sending sparks flying before the trailer further wrenched and caused the whole thing to buckle and roll, debris flying. He could only stare at the carnage.

"Gibbs? Teach is pulling off onto the next exit. Where are you guys?" Thatch sounded annoyed.
"Come on, it's two against three here and he's got that damn coral. Are you guys helping take this bastard out or not?"

He didn't answer as he watched two me- he assumed the one he didn't recognize was Roger as Dragon was distinctive- get out of the SUV. Both men looked absolutely devastated as they slowly made their way to the smoking wreckage. The other SUV started up its engine.

"Gibbs. The boys...Dragon and Roger want to deal with this. Alone..." Sengoku's voice was soft.
"We still have a job to do."

"Yeah. Yeah, we do. Tony. I want you to stay here. Call an ambulance."

"Got it boss." Tony slid out of the car, his phone already in hand as Gibbs pulled away.

**&**&**Ace**&**&**

"Luffy?" His brother didn't even groan, and Ace knew something was wrong. Luffy always bounced back from anything. It was Luffy. Wobbly he dragged himself over to his brother's prone form, cursing the coral embedded in the cuffs that kept him from holding him close. "Lu? Please, Lu..." Ace moaned, spotting the well loved straw hat wedged under the limp form. He prayed Luffy's lockpicks had been returned as he gently nudged his brother to the side and checked the hat band. They were there, and despite the fact that his hands were behind his back, Ace made fast work of his restraints. Carefully he placed Luffy against his legs and removed his brother's before gathering the still body in his arms and leaning against the wall. His little brother didn't make a sound the entire time; a cold lump of worry settling in Ace's stomach. "I'm so sorry..."

The trailer lurched, and he braced his legs, preventing his brother from feeling as much of the movement as he could as he let his head fall against the wall. Over by the front of a trailer a single bucket hung from a clip, sloshing water. It was insulting, he knew it, but he couldn't care. It was nothing less than he deserved to be treated like some kind of animal. It was all his fault. Gibbs and Ducky were hurt. Blackbeard had almost killed them because of him. And Luffy... He couldn't do it. Not again. There was no doubt in his mind that Teach would have killed his brother if Luffy hadn't passed out when he did. As it was, Luffy still had a thin trail of blood from Cat's blade. He wouldn't survive next time. Ace wouldn't survive, either. Not without Luffy. Tears started to fall as it sunk in, but it didn't change the fact. Ace knew that he couldn't do it anymore.

"Lu? Lu, I'm so proud of you. You know that, right?" He muttered, "I never wanted something like this! I just... I wanted us to be free. For you to be treated like a damn person Lu! I'm so sorry... Listen Luffy...We're..." Ace took a shuddering breath, thinking of how he was going to tell his
brother, even if the other couldn't hear him. "I...You know how I said we wouldn't ever stop trying? How I wouldn't stop? I...I can't. I'll do anything to keep you safe, even if that means...even if that means we've giving up. I just hope you understand...even if you can't forgive me."

There was no answer; he wasn't expecting one either. Not with how much pain Luffy had looked like he was in before. The trailer was hot and stuffy, the four side windows offering almost no ventilation. It wasn't uncomfortable to Ace, but he worried that it might be bad for his brother. Chopper would know. I wonder if we're ever going to see Chopper again. Or any of our friends. He shifted, trying to get Luffy off the uncomfortable metal as the trailer jerked roughly to the side. Reflexively he held the still form closer to his chest as he closed his eyes.

There was a strange jarring bounce and Ace felt himself slide across the slick floor of the trailer towards the other side. Eyes snapped opened and Ace attempted to turn or shift or do anything to prevent Luffy from slamming into the far side of the trailer in vain. Before he could even worry if his brother was alight he felt himself sliding again and curled tightly around Luffy's head and shoulders determined to protect him as best he could even as his spine slammed into the unforgiving metal frame earning a gasp. He forcefully suppressed the urge to ignite, knowing that doing so in such an enclosed metal space would kill Luffy, even if he wasn't holding him. Instead, he just blindly held on, praying that whatever Avalo was doing it would be over soon. His eyes snapped open again in panic the moment he felt his body become weightless.

"Fu-!" He tried to simultaneously go limp and tense up at the same time as the crappy little screened widows came up too fast-toofastTOOFAST! and felt a whole new level of pain blaze across his back and shoulders as the world became a dizzying spinning vortex of grays, blacks, and blues where there was no up anymore and can't burn-can'tburnLuffy! before an explosion somewhere behind his eyes finally took everything away.
The scene of an car wreck always had a surreal quality to it. Roger had assumed it was because of his line of work, really. He caused 'accidents' after all, so he'd always felt a little detached. Really, he'd been able to think things like 'well, that's a shame' or 'unfortunate' when confronted with such images before. The reality of having people you know, your children, involved was a thousand times worse. He could barely breathe as he stared at the twisted metal that used to be a truck and trailer. It took Dragon squeezing his shoulder to get him moving, reminding him why they were there.

He wasn't even aware at first that they were not alone. The man with them was younger than either of them by quite a few years, but held himself like a seasoned warrior. Roger vaguely recognized him from earlier as one of the NCIS agents. He wasn't sure which one it was, nor did he particularly care for the man's presence. Irrationally he didn't want anyone to see his son -their boys- hurt. Or dead... his mind whispered as they approached the wreckage and he promptly squashed the thought as he clambered up to reach the door of the trailer. He wouldn't admit the possibility, not after just finding them. If they were... hurt badly... it would just destroy him, and he knew for a fact Dragon would be just as bad. He couldn't deal with that kind of loss. Not again.

The door of the trailer screeched as the three of them forced the handle down, metal protesting loudly. The frame was so warped Roger knew there was no way they'd be able to open the door fully, but hopefully it would still be wide enough to get to the boys. With one final tug, he braced himself before glancing inside, expecting to see the worst. Instead, there was nothing. All that was in the trailer was a bucket, cracked and broken, still rolling uselessly along the side of the trailer. There was no sign of the boys. His heart froze even as he heard Scales viciously mutter a string of curses. Roger knew how he felt, torn as he was between relief at not finding them hurt or worse warring with not finding them. He closed his eyes as he slipped off the trailer wall and tried to collect himself. It wasn't doing anyone any good for him to act like this.

"I've got blood!" The NCIS agent shouted from the other side of the truck. He didn't even have to look at his friend before both of them were around the trailer looking at the dark read smear on the ground. A little distance away there was another smear, and Roger wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. The agent frowned, looking between the blood trail and the cab of the truck before shrugging and pulling out his phone. "I've got things here, you guys check it out. I'm gonna call for a bus."

Roger felt a rush of gratitude towards the younger man. "Thank you, agent?"

"Tony." The man offered a tight-lipped smile that fell just a quickly as it came. "Don't mention it. I'm sure they're alright. I mean, they're pretty tough. Besides, someone's got to check on the driver, and I'm pretty sure I'm the best one for the job."

There was quite a bit of truth to that statement. It would be had to explain to paramedics how the driver ended up with a bullet between his eyes if he'd survived the crash... He turned his attention back to the trail. It was possible that maybe Ace and Luffy had somehow escaped during the crash. Sure, they'd be injured, but he doubted that would stop the boys. They were strong and smart, after all. Naturally they'd have moved away from the trailer. It explained the blood perfectly. Roger felt the vice around his heart loosen. His boy, their boys were ok. Everything would be alright. He saw Dragon tense slightly and jogged the last few steps to catch up with him. "What is it? Did you find them?"

Several yards away, against the dividing midian a figure was slumped to the side, and Roger
grinned. It had to be Ace. He quickened his pace, hands held up pacifyingly in front of him so he wouldn't seem like a threat. The figure didn't move, didn't acknowledge his approach at all. "Ace?" He called softly. There was absolutely no reaction, bringing reality crashing back.

He didn't need Dragon to point out the blood on the median, not with the way it glistened cruelly on the little metal reflector that jutted out. He felt sick as he looked back towards what was left of the truck and trailer over a hundred feet away and saw the early strait line the blood trail they'd followed. He knew then that his son hadn't walked away; he'd been thrown. Inspite of it all, Ace was still wrapped around his little brother. The little brother who also wasn't moving at all.

Carefully they knelt next to the still forms, ignoring the blood. This close, Roger could see every freckle on Ace's face standing out in sharp relief against his waxy complexion. He couldn't tell at this angle if his son was breathing. Gently, he reached out with two fingers, aware that Dragon was doing the same as he checked for a pulse. *Thu-Thump. Thu-thump.* His shoulders sagged in relief before he looked over at his friend.

"Luffy?"

"It's thready, but he's got a pulse." Dragon confirmed. "Ace?"

"About the same." They were silent for a moment. "Scales? How does a Logia-type even get hurt like this? I don't see any prism coral."

"I'm not sure. Protecting Luffy, I'd guess. Don't know why if the kid's rubber, though." he gestured at the teen still held in his brother's arms. "Help me move them."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Roger mused, though he started to carefully pull Ace's arms out of their tight hold. "Shouldn't we be waiting for the experts?"

"Just keep their heads and necks stiff."

"That's not what I meant! What if we hurt them?"

Dragon glared at him, "And what if the paramedics find out they're not normal?" That was a good point. He could picture the panic when the EMT's went to separate the boys only to discover Luffy stretched, or worse, that bones were optional for Ace. On the heels of that thought was a new wave of anxiety as it occurred to him that they had no clue how to treat them. *First thing's first. doing what first-aid we can now.* He resolutely told himself. "On three." Scales met his gaze, holding his son's head and shoulders firmly as Roger gripped the unresponsive boy's hips in preparation for moving him. "One...Two...Three!" They lifted in perfect synchronization, planning on moving Luffy onto the asphalt.

A hand reached out and closed on Luffy's limp wrist, flames flickering across the knuckles. "L-luffy..." Dull gray eyes gazed with pain opened, "Can't take...him...

"Easy. We're just moving him a little so we can try and help." He offered a smile. "You need to let go now."

"NO! Lu...!" Flames ripped spreading out from them dangerously. One moment they were raging, the next they almost flickered out before roaring to life once more as Ace panted, gaze completely unfocused.

"Don't move." It sounded like Tony had finally caught up with them.

Dragon hissed through clenched teeth as sweat dripped down his brow. "Wasn't planning on it."
The agent knelt between them, right in Ace's line of sight and snapped his fingers in an attempt to get the young man's attention. "Ace." His voice was brisk, tinged with concern. "Ace, buddy. Look at me. Good. Know who I am?"

"To-ny?" The eyes were still unfocused and Ace's words were thick, slurred badly.

"Yeah, that's right Hot-stuff. Tony." Tony offered a ghost of a grin before turning serious once more as the young man's eyes fluttered flames died down to a mere flicker before going out. Roger didn't think it was a good sign. "Ace stay with me, buddy. Can you do that?"

"Wha-?"

"You've been in an accident." Tony pointed out the obvious, continuing, "I think you have a concussion."

Gray eyes struggled to stay open, pulling at Roger's heart. "Lu?"

"He's right here. You both got hurt in the accident. You following me, Ace?" A moan was the only answer. "We're going to get you help. But I need you to not use your powers right now."

"N-nnn."

"I hope that was him agreeing." Roger muttered as he went to move Luffy off his brother's lap. A single eye opened and blurrily watched him. "Easy, now. We're just here to help, son." Part of him felt the thrill of being able to address him like that. To lay claim in some way. He wasn't sure if Ace heard him, though. Carefully they laid out Luffy as the sounds of sirens drew near before turning their attention to Ace. His back was shredded the tattered remains of his t-shirt offering no protection against the road's rough surface as they gently laid him down next to his brother. A choked out sound, somewhere between a sob and a whimper forced it's way out of Ace. His breathing was still erratic and sounded far too shallow to him. Roger hoped the paramedics would hurry, though he truly wondered what they'd be able to do.

It felt like an eternity passed while they waited, watching both boys. Finally he couldn't take the silence any longer. "The driver?"

Tony glanced at him, "Dead. Passenger, too."

"Good." Dragon grunted, expression completely closed off. Roger knew how much he was hurting, though. At least Ace had sort of come to for a bit; Luffy remained frighteningly still and unresponsive. Out of the two brothers, he looked as if he'd taken the least amount of damage in the accident, making it even more worrisome. Hadn't Gibbs said something about that bastard beating Luffy? He prayed that the boy was just unconscious as the EMT's finally arrived on the scene.

"You moved them?" The lead paramedic's look could peel paint as he glared at them. Roger responded with a glare of his own. "Yes. It was necessary. We were exceedingly careful. Field training from the war."

"Right. Sure." The EMT obviously didn't believe him as he turned his attention back to the two forms laying on the ground, his team surrounding them like a swarm of flies. Roger didn't understand half of what they were saying, but the phrases he did catch had him pailing. "Sue, get out some adhesive pads. I don't want to risk any further damage to the neck or spine here, but this guy's back is a mess. If we don't do something, he could bleed out before we get to the hospital."

The woman nodded and with brisk efficiency had half a dozen pads open as one of the other EMT's
secured a neck brace on Ace. "Ready."

"Alright. On three Ben and I will roll him while you and Eric put those on and get the board ready." The man barely glanced at them, "Move back, please, sir. One. Two. Three."

Roger could see the strain on both men as they held his son perfectly still and raised slightly while the other two EMT's quickly applied the bandages to the worst spots before dragging over a bright orange board and situating it underneath Ace. The moment he was lowered the team descended again, strapping him down firmly in a way that Roger was sure would have his son panicking if he were awake. The board was smoothly moved to a stretcher and two of the team rushed off with him towards one of the waiting ambulances. Roger took a step to follow them before looking again at his friend who stood stiffly, hands clenched at his sides and thought better of it. He wouldn't be able to do anything to help his son, but Dragon needed his support just as badly as he himself needed support right now. His friend would never admit it, though. The man did offer him a tight nod when he rested a hand on the man's shoulder, accepting and giving his silent support as the EMT's returned with a second stretcher and backboard. The two that had been left looked concerned, and Roger forced himself to listen past the roaring in his ears and the voice that screamed in his head that this couldn't be happening. Luffy's pupils were dilated and were not reacting to the penlight and Roger knew without the EMT's saying anything that it was bad.

"Steve, massive bruising on the chest, might have a few broken ribs. Hard to tell, but I think there might be some internal bleeding." One spoke up, drawing the lead EMT's attention to the dark purple that had taken over the teen's chest, even obscuring his scar as the shirt was removed.

Steve looked over at them, his eyes still hard. "How did you find them?"

Tony spoke up, "Ace, the one with the torn up back, was wrapped around Luffy. We think they were thrown from the trailer."

The EMTs looked over towards the remains of the truck and one pulled a face. "They were in the trailer?"

"Yes." Roger hissed, bristling. "In the trailer."

For the first time the lead EMT's expression softened slightly. "I hope you catch the bastard that stuck them in there."

"Gibbs, my boss, is working on it now." Tony nodded, expression cool.

"Right. Ben, on three again. Let's make this fast. Ben, I want you to hold his waist still. Don't let it shift. Got it?" There was no response and the man quickly counted down before rolling the small teen onto his side. It was over in a second, and Roger could pretend he hadn't seen the limp way Luffy's legs had flopped, telling himself it was just because the boy was rubber even as he saw Dragon pale.

Luffy groaned, the first sign of life that he'd shown yet as they carefully raised the stretcher. The subtle click of the frame seemed to rouse the teen as his eyes flew open; a look of panic on his face. He struggled to turn his head against the brace, only to let out a strangled whimper when he couldn't Roger almost smiled in relief as Dragon reached out and gently ran a soothing hand through his son's hair after receiving a nod from the EMTs. Wide brown eyes found Dragon and the boy cringed away as much as he was able from the hand, fear evident in every line of his body.

"Shhh. It's alright, boy. No one is going to hurt you. We're taking you somewhere to get help. You were in an accident."
"NOO! Let me go! Ace! Where's Ace?! Bastard, give Ace back!" Luffy's voice was barely a raspy shout as he thrashed, uncaring of his own injuries as the straps holding him creaked and threatened to tear. Suddenly he gasped in pain, his back arching as his eyes rolled wildly.

"He's seizing! Sir, please step back. I need 40mg Lorazepam!" Steve snapped out, rushing over to the waiting ambulance. Roger knew there was no room for them, but it was still the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, watching them drive away.

Roger raised a hand to run it through his hair, only to flinch away as he noticed it was covered in blood. Desperately he wiped his hands on his pants, trying to rid them of the tacky substance. Dragon just stood there, stoically staring off in the direction the ambulances had left, body so tense it was quivering. The worst part was they were stuck there without a ride. He could almost scream in frustration and rage at being so helpless. Roger almost jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand clap on his shoulder, instead spinning to face the fool who dared touch him right now with a snarl.

Tony just raised his hands in a placating manner. "I've got this." He nodded to the police cars that were parked over by the flipped truck. *When had they gotten here?* "Have one of them take you to the hospital. I'll call Gibbs and let him know what's happened. Alright?"

Roger just stared at him, trying to figure out what exactly he was saying when Dragon spoke up. The man's voice was hoarse with emotion. "Thank you, Tony. We'll...We'll call if..." He couldn't finish, but he didn't need to, the agent nodded anyway, expression tight as he turned his attention back to the truck. In minutes they were on their way to the hospital.
"It's been three hours. Why hasn't anyone told us what's going on?" Garp's voice cracked as the man leaned forward on the uncomfortable seat next to Sengoku in the waiting room.

"They're probably busy." Gibbs offered, outwardly stoic as ever.

If he was truthful with himself, he was as worried by the lack of information as everyone else. He couldn't afford to show it, though. Not with the boys' family already a mess and his team not much better. Abby was a nervous wreck with not only Ducky in the hospital for observation but the two young men she'd made friends with. Tim was blaming himself for not seeing this coming. That's the problem with having a good team, he mused, when something goes wrong they blame themselves. He conveniently overlooked the fact that he did the same thing all the time. Vance knew that, of course, which was why he'd ordered the whole team to stay at the hospital. For protection, he'd said. Gibbs wasn't fooled at all by the man's order. True, Blackbeard was still on the loose, but his team wasn't needed here. Not with the brothers' family here and their two friends. Speaking of Marco and Thatch, the two of them had stepped out a short time ago and hadn't come back yet. He wondered what exactly they were up to.

Ziva turned from where she was staring vacantly towards the emergency hall doors. "This is a case of 'no news is good news', yes?"

"Yeah, maybe. Good news or not, it's stressing me out, though!" Tony snapped at no one in particular.

"They'll be fine, right Gibbs?" Abby asked, hugging her purse to herself as she watched Dragon and Roger pace.

He shook his head, leaning against the wall as he looked at his team. "I don't know, Abby, I hope so."

The door to the emergency room opened with a bang, causing everyone to jump. Roger and Dragon stopped their incessant pacing, turning to look at the man in scrubs with mirroring expressions of hope and fear. Gibbs himself just raised an eye at the man, taking in his blood spattered blue surgical gown as the equally red gloves were peeled off with a snap and carelessly tossed into the waste followed by the mask. He was honestly surprised to see the young man there. Law's eyes had darker circles under them then he remembered as the young doctor collapsed onto one of the waiting room chairs and put his head back against the wall without a sound.

"Well?" He asked after a moment.

"They're alive." The doctor replied, not bothering to look at any of them. The relief was palpable in the room until he spoke again. "For now, at least."

Roger bristled, "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like." Law began, looking at the distraught father and shifting forward. "They survived the surgery, but they're not out of danger yet. It'll be a few days before we'll know if they'll recover. If it wasn't for Ace's abilities, he'd be dead. Usually I'd be thrilled; getting the chance to work on a logia Devil-fruit user. Seeing one of them hurt is rare, ya?"
Something this bad should be impossible. He's got severe lacerations, a fractured tibia, broken collarbone, a few broken ribs, and a cracked skull. But he'll live. That's if he doesn't kill himself by ripping open his stitches struggling again, or reject the blood transfusion."

Silence met his statement. Abby tentatively raised her hand. "Why would he reject the transfusion?"

"He's an elemental," Law shrugged. "Ace's whole body is fire, even his blood. The new stuff might be his type, but his immune system might still reject it because it's blood. We should know by tomorrow."

"Well, that sucks." Tim groaned, sitting down with a sigh.

The group sat in silence for a while, thinking it over as the blood on Law's scrubs turned brown. Gibbs wondered again where Marco and Thatch had disappeared to. He knew that the two were at least as worried as the rest of them. In fact, given the pained look that had flashed across Marco's usually placid face, he was willing to bet they were as upset as the boys' family. He hadn't forgotten that the two had introduced themselves as friends of the brothers, and given Ace's personality it was entirely possible that they were his only real friends. Gibbs could easily see how much they cared, so he doubted they'd gone far. Still their absence was unusual.

At great length Dragon spoke, his voice whisper soft. "And what of my son, Luffy? How is he?"

Law's sharp gaze passed over the man before looking over Roger with the same intensity. The young man shrugged, apparently unsurprised even as both Garp and Sengoku tensed. "I thought you'd be more impressive, Dragon-ya. Little Luffy...well, he didn't break anything. Expected, but still a relief. Not sure how you'd go about setting a rubber bone in a rubber body. He did manage to..." Law paused with a frown, "pop some vertebra out of place, for lack of a better way of explaining it."

"Is he...is he going to be paralyzed?" Garp blanched at the thought.

"It's hard to say right now. Rubber doesn't show up well on x-rays. Bepo ran an MRI earlier, but Pen and I aren't sure if the results will be much better. He could be, even though his spinal column wasn't broken. If he wakes up, we'll check. Of course, that's if he wake up. His brain rattled around in that thick skull of his. There's swelling. He's got a fever, too. As I said, they're alive for now."

"It's hard to say right now. Rubber doesn't show up well on x-rays. Bepo ran an MRI earlier, but Pen and I aren't sure if the results will be much better. He could be, even though his spinal column wasn't broken. If he wakes up, we'll check. Of course, that's if he wake up. His brain rattled around in that thick skull of his. There's swelling. He's got a fever, too. As I said, they're alive for now." Law smirked darkly, "Care to donate their bodies to science if they don't make it?"

"Why you...!" Garp lunged forward only to be restrained by Sengoku. Gibbs had expected that kind of reaction from the man given how uptight he was. Dragon and Roger just glared at the young man. murder in their eyes. Not that he didn't understand where they were coming from.

"That's not such a bad idea." Cackled an older woman as she entered the room like she owned the place. Gibbs wasn't usually one to judge people based on how they looked, but he thought this woman might have some serious issues. She was dressed in tight fitting jeans and an even tighter fitting tee that rode up to show a pierced navel despite the fact that she was at the very least his age. She looked something like a glorified Hollywood version of a witch; a fit looking body with the face of a crone. Not that she's bad looking, he mused, as she continued to grin at everyone, bet that's how Abby'll dress when she's older. The woman apparently noticed the dark looks she was getting and flapped her hands at them in disgust, "Get real. After all that bastard's done to them, it'll take a lot more than a little accident to finish them off."

Marco appeared in the doorway, shaking his head, "Tactless as ever, Kureha."
"It's called humor in the face of levity, boy." She snapped back, earning a raised eyebrow.

"You're too young to be calling me that, yoi."

"Damn right. I'm still a hot young thing at ninety two, right Chopper?"

"R-right!" A voice chirped from somewhere behind her legs before a head of messy brown hair appeared. The boy was very young, with wide trusting eyes as he braced himself against the woman's leg and stare at the crowd before focusing on Lawrence. His eyes lit up and he ran over to the man. "Are you the doctor who treated my friends?"

"Eh?" Law frowned at the boy.

"Ace and Luffy. They're my friends! My grandparents and I are their doctors! Well, my grandparents are." The boy offered a smile, "But I'm gonna be a doctor too, someday! So Luffy lets me practice on him. He's my first patient."

"Chopper here does a good job for a kid." The woman added in praise as she took a seat, crossing her legs. In response the boy wiggled in joy. Gibbs thought he heard the kid mutter some curses, despite the very happy expression on his face.

Tony broke in, asking, "What kind of name is Chopper? It sounds more like a butcher's name. Or the villain from a horror movie."

The boy just laughed, "That's what I said. But Luffy wouldn't stop calling me that, and now everyone does. My full name is really Anthony Tonie Choppino."

"Wow, that's a mouthful."

Marco smiled, "Now you know why everyone just calls him 'Chopper' now."

"Enough of this nanny-pansy bullshit." Kureha waved a hand, "How are my patients? What kind of trouble did they get into this time?"

"Your patients?" Law leaned forward, "It that's the case, they should sue you for malpractice. The medication you had them on was highly addicting and dangerous."

"What do you expect? Hiluluk got it cheap, and Ace agreed to be a guinea pig before we tried passing out the medication to other people in the neighborhood. Not like lots of them have insurance, brat." She shrugged, answering the unspoken question, "And Luffy didn't want to be left out. Kid's got some serious issues after the crap that bastard Marshall used to do to him."

Sengoku tensed, "What... kind of things?"

"What did that bastard do to my boys?" Garp asked at the same time.

"Um. I don't think they'd want us talking about it..." Chopper weakly protested. With big watery eyes the boy looked up at everyone staring at him and pulled his little backpack around his chest like it was a shield before speaking again. "Teach is mean. Luffy doesn't talk about it, but everyone knows anyway. Blackbeard likes to hurt him. A lot...and...and I think he makes Ace watch, because he almost always knows exactly what happened. Luffy has nightmares about it sometimes." Chopper hugged his bag, his voice soft with obvious worry for his friend. "He has a lot of nightmares."

Ziva knelt in front of the boy, "Not to worry, little one. That man will not ever be able to hurt them
"I wouldn't bet on that." Kureha spoke up, crossing her arms with a frown. "A certain little birdie told me that the bastard got away."

"He won't get anywhere near our sons!" Roger growled at her.

"Now you listen here, sonny. Marshall's got a bad reputation for a reason. He's vicious, possessive and he doesn't like to lose. That man won't give up until he's got his hands on them or he's dead." She glared at the man, "If I were you, I wouldn't let those boys out of my sight for a second until you know for a fact Marshall's been taken care of. But what do I know? I'm just the doctor that's patched them both up time and again after one of Marshall's temper tantrums."

"Interesting." Law mused, "Are you suggesting he might in fact attack them here, at the hospital, instead of running?" She nodded. "I see. Well then, it's a good thing I requested they be put in the same room. Sometimes it pays off to be connected. Two of my associates are with them now. Since I am sure you wish to check my work- though you have no reason to- I think it would be best if we checked on them."

Kureha walked next to the much younger doctor as the rest of the group trailed behind. Law barely glanced at the nurses' station as he strode purposely down the long hall. Finally he stopped at a room with a closed door. Right across the hall from the door a man slouched on a plastic chair, a magazine in his hands. Gibbs couldn't get a good look at the guy's face, his view was obstructed by a baseball cap with a wide brim that was blue and white, the word 'Penguin' emblazoned across the front.

The man didn't even bother to look up at the large group as he turned the page of his magazine.

"No one's been by, Law. Bepo is in there with them right now."

"Good." Law turned to them before opening the door. "Normally you wouldn't all be allowed in at once, but since I'm sure you'd like discuss some things in private, I'll allow it just this once. After today though, I'd suggest keeping the number of people down to three in the room at the most to avoid suspicion."

Gibbs stood back, letting the doctors go first. They were quickly followed by Garp and his sons who hovered over the two occupants in the room. He'd known that both boys would be unconscious but it was still difficult to see them laying there with tubes coming out of them. The steady beeping of the machines being the only physical sign that they were still alive without feeling guilty. He knew it was ridiculous, but it was hard to ignore the part of him that would always blame himself for things like this. In an attempt to giving their family the privacy they deserved he glanced around the space room, still listening to the muttered conversation between the two doctors. There was a man sitting next to the door, a worried expression in his face as he watched all. Gibbs was surprised he didn't notice the guy at first; he was pretty distinctive with his dark tan and bleached white-blond hair. Not to mention he was tall.

Marco leaned over and spoke to the strange man. "Bepo, any change?"

"No, sorry we couldn't do more." Bepo apologized dejectedly.

"That's alright. It was a relief that you guys were still in town in the first place, yoi. Thatch will be by in a bit. He's busy arranging the payment. When he shows, we'll take over guarding them for a while."

"Are you sure? Aren't you exhausted?"
"Thatch and I are used to being up for long stretches. Besides you and Pen obviously need some rest." Marco glanced over at the doctors, "Law, too."

"Sorry."

"You apologize too easy." The blonde smirked before looking over at Gibbs. "So how does that sound. Gibbs? We'll take first shift so you guys can get some rest or do whatever paperwork or shit you need to."

"Right. I'll take the next." Gibbs nodded.

Sengoku looked over, "Let your team get some rest; they did good work today. I'll sit with you."

Roger chewed his thumb, his worried gaze still on his son. "It's better to be safe and run shorter shifts. Less likely we'll miss anything that asshole pulls. A couple of our...associates... are in the city. We have most on the lookout for that bastard, but I'll give a few a call."

"You sure that's a good idea? You're wanted terrorists, remember?" McGee pointed out from by the door, earning an eye roll.

"We prefer the term Revolutionaries, agent." Dragon spoke up. "Let us worry about that. Our sons are worth the risk."

"Right. Abby, go check on Ducky, tell him I'll be by shortly. Ziva, let Vance know what's up. Tony, you go see how those two members of Blackbeard's crew are making out. I want a full report, and tell them to make sure they're not going anywhere. McGee? You're with me." Gibbs turned and walked out, heading towards the nurses station. "I want a list of every nurse on this floor. Then I want you to do your thing and get me a schedule so we can work out our own."

Chapter End Notes

*In cause you might have noticed, I slightly changed Chopper's name from chapter 16: Rolling Stones. In 16, Ace introduces Zoro to Chopper as "Tony T. Chopper" And here it's "Anthony Tonie Choppino". This was deliberate, and the only real difference is Chopper vs Choppino. Ace was the first person to start calling Chopper "Chopper" after his brother gave him the nickname because (In Ace's words) "Your name sounds like you're a part of the Italian Mob. I keep wanting to quote the Godfather to you, kid." Hope that clears up any confusion and seems logical.
Teach suppressed a chuckle as he strolled down the hall towards the room his pets were being kept. Three days of hiding out in shoddy motels. Three days before he felt secure enough to contract Doc Q and get in touch with his gang. Three days to plan, and now it was time to act. While the law enforcement expanded their search for him out of the city, he'd steadily moved closer to his targets. It was the last thing they'd expect him to do, to return into the viper's nest for his prize.

He tugged his hat down lower as he passed the nurses station. The woman behind the counter barely paid any attention to him past a casual nod and Teach grinned. Everything was going according to plan. All he had to do now was get into the boys' room. He'd yet to decide if he was going to kill the ungrateful brats or allow them to live. They had cost him a lot. Van was still unconscious and in police custody, Cat was already jailed, and Jesus, Avalo, and Sanjuan were dead. The losses were steep, all things considering. But he'd escaped, and that was the important thing. He could always rebuild; stronger than before, of course. First thing was first, to take care of the loose ends. If he killed them, it would send a message to his enemies as well as his allies that he was not someone to cross. The message would be even more satisfying considering who was related to his pets. Who would have thought that Garp had grandkids. If I'd known I'd had the kids of the Resistance leaders, I would have put them to better use. Of course, if he kept them alive, he'd have continuing leverage against them.

Causally he leaned against the wall before glancing around the corner. Fate sure favored him. Right across the hall from the room his pets were being kept in was a chair. The man sitting in the chair didn't look familiar to Teach at all, meaning he couldn't be a member of Whitebeard's gang. Nor did he look like a government suit. Not with the tattoos covering one side of his face and partially shaved head before disappearing into the collar of his shirt. If he didn't recognize the man, it was highly unlikely that he was a power player. Even if the grunt knew who he was, Teach was confident that he would be more than able to handle himself. In fact, it was a little insulting; they underestimated him if they thought this was going to stop him.

Blackbeard studied the supposed guard for a little while longer. As best as he could figure it the man was probably a Resistance member. That served his plans nicely. What better way to make a name for himself then to strike a crippling blow right under the nose of the Resistance by recapturing their heirs? He nodded to himself, Yes, they will serve me much better alive and under my thumb then dead. That arrogant pair won't dare to stand against me when I have their sons hostage. Just like that fool Shanks. Now the hard part would be getting them out of the room. Though since there was a window, he could always toss them out it and collect his pets below if he couldn't rouse them. Teach had no doubt in his mind that the two would cave into his demands if awake. Ace, after all, knew the consequences of refusing.

Adjusting his shirt and making sure his hair was tied back into a loose ponytail, Teach took a single step into the hall just as the door to the room opened. He backed up, instantly recognizing the NCIS bitch that has the audacity to point a gun at him before. From where he stood, he couldn't hear anything she said to the other guard before retreating back into the room. This put a cramp in his plans. The grunt at the door most likely wouldn't recognize Teach, but the woman...she would. She'd looked at him with too much hate not to. When he made it into the room, he'd have to incapacitate her quickly before she could raise the alarm. It should be within his abilities, but it would be difficult. Killing the grunt and then killing her was shaping up to be the better plan, even if it wouldn't be as satisfying as sneaking the boys out and leaving the guards alive to face the wrath of their leaders. Quietly, he drew his gun, only to pause when a heavy hand fell on his
shoulder. Teach glared at the one who'd dared to interfere with his plans only to be taken back when he recognized the man. Mocha skin with hair that had prematurely silvered made Daz Bones memorable, but it was his snake-eyes that were what truly made him stand out. The eyes of a cold-blooded killer. It was no wonder Crocodile favored this man as his go-to member.

Teach covered his shock at seeing him there, instead snapping at the man while batting his hand away. "What?"

Instead of speaking, the other silently signaled for Blackbeard to follow him. Bones lead him a little ways down the hall before opening the door to an apparently empty room and gesturing for him to enter first. For a while they stood in silence as the door clicked closed.

"Crocodile sends his condolences for the losses you've suffered."

"Condolences my ass! He's probably gloating!" "Thank him for me. It means a lot that he has taken such an interest in my humble group."

"You man thank him yourself."

Blackbeard frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Simple." The man's expression didn't change, "He is in town on some business and would like to see you."

"Oh." This, as far as Teach was concerned, was either a really bad thing, or really good. He hadn't been caught though, nor had their alliance come into light. He was positive that he had nothing to lose in meeting the man and everything to gain. "I'd be happy to meet him," he grinned, "would tomorrow be good?"

"Yes. Tomorrow is acceptable." Daz turned to leave, effectively ending the conversation.

"Wait! Where should I meet him?"

"He will find you."

Teach glared at the door for a few moments after it closed. After he judged the other far enough away, he spat "Arrogant prick" before leaving himself. He'd have no time to retrieve his pets today, but if all went well, they'd be back in his care by tomorrow evening.

*&&*&Break&&*&

Tomorrow he would meet with Crocodile. Tomorrow, he'd trick the man into helping him get back his pets. Then he'd bide his time until the fool let down his guard and then...then he'd kill him and take over the organization. Yes, fate was truly shining on him. He smirked at his reflection in the mirror, breathing in the hot steamy air left over from his shower. For now, he'd put up with this shoddy motel, the humiliation of working for a man who dared to think he was better. It would all pay off in the end. Everything was going to work out just the way he planned it, Teach just felt it in his bones as he opened the door from the small bathroom to the rest of his cockroach infested temporary hovel.

"Are you quite clean yet?" Blackbeard's head snapped to the side, quickly locating where the voice was coming from. The speaker sat on the worn chair next to the desk, the solitary lamp casting a yellow glow on the rings on the man's lone hand. Teach instantly recognized the hook that had long ago taken the place of the man's other hand. Feigning a nonchalance he didn't quite feel he snorted before walking over the bed to grab his shirt, deliberately turning his back on Crocodile.
"People like me, dirt just don't stick to." He grunted, pulling his shirt on. "But you know all about that, eh?"

"Your attempt at flattery is poor. As are your manners."

"Wasn't expecting guests."

"Obviously." The other picked up the bottle of expensive scotch that had been sitting on the table and poured himself a shot. Teach hid his frown at the sight; ice was already in the glass, suggesting that Crocodile had been there for a while. "I hope you don't mind that I moved out meeting time up," the man glanced at the glowing alarm clock, "by two hours."

"Not at all." He grumbled back, pouring a drink for himself before taking a seat on the bed. It was hard and lumpy, but there was no way he was going to stand like some kind of inferior in this man's presence.

You've gotten careless." Crocodile swirled his drink, looking at him with disdain, "Well, more careless, if that were possible."

Blackbeard instantly bristled. "This is only a minor setback!"

"Yes, I can see how the loss of half your core members would be a 'minor setback'."

"When I get my pets back...!" Yellow eyes flashed dangerously, silencing him instantly. "Ah yes. Your pets. That would be those two boys you turned into Devil-fruit users, correct?" The question was obviously rhetorical and Teach didn't bother to answer as Crocodile took a sip of his scotch. "Your plan to use them to overthrow me would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic."

"Wh-I'd never-!" Ice water ran through his veins. He knew! He knew my plan! But how?

"How could you even think that I would betray your trust? Our partnership?"

"Really now, you expect me to buy that?" Croc laughed, mockingly. "You think you are so clever, but I know your type. You're nothing but a cur. A feral dog that will bite the hand that feeds him. I'd expect no less from you. Still, I would have thought you'd at least have the brains to properly manage your little 'pets'." He poured another drink for himself, tilting the glass and causing the ice to clink pleasantly. "Something you've managed to botch from the beginning. Tell me; did you choose their sons on a whim or are you that stupid?"

"They'd claimed no last name!" Teach snarled, defending himself. "There was no record of them even existing..."

"And you just overlooked the older brother looking just like his father." He tried a different angle, having nothing to say to that. "It will still work out for the best. The boys are completely broken. They'll do whatever I tell them to. All we have to do is get them back and the Resistance won't be able to touch us-"

"You Fool!" The glass slammed onto the table and shattered. "Do you think that Roger will let you get away with kidnapping his son again? Dragon?" The terrorist stood, "Their Allies?"

"They belong to me!" Blackbeard shouted back, "They can do nothing!"

"They could do nothing before, you stupid excuse for a criminal. The boys are with their fathers
now. You know the laws. If you so much as touch them, you'd be bringing down the wrath of the entire underworld on your head. On my head." Crocodile grabbed the front of his shirt, yanking him close and forcing him to look up. "Even now there are those that are calling for payment for the shit you've pulled. You have put me in a bad spot because of your indulgent behavior."

Teach gulped, worried for his alliance. If he lost that, he would have to rebuild from scratch. Not to mention he would be forced to lay low for a few years until things cooled down. Making the decision to salvage the alliance meant giving up getting his pets back. At least for now. It was worth it, though. Swallowing his pride, he put his own hand on the ringed fingers tangled in this shirt. "Help me fix this. Tell me how to make it up to you."

Crocodile looked down at him, calculating. His eyes glittered in the low lighting as he offered Blackbeard a cold smile. "I've got just the way to salvage this fiasco you've gotten us into, Marshall."
Ziva nodded to the woman sitting in the chair outside room 432. As Tony had said, for a criminal the woman wasn't bad. Makino was apparently a high ranking member in the Resistance, making her dangerous in her own right, but it was hard to see her that way after seeing her break down at the sight of Ace and Luffy laying in their hospital beds. Since then, the woman had refused to enter the room again, claiming that it was too hard to see them that way. The man sitting currently inside the room had no such qualms apparently. Before he even looked at her, he'd drawn a wicked looking knife. Much like the group's leader, this man also had tattoos on one side of his face around his eye. His were in green; a swirling twisting pattern that Wyper claimed was a part of his people's culture. It made him distinctive, with his head shaved into a tight mohawk showing off the ink. Ziva wondered if this man was the one who'd talked his leader into getting facial tattoos. She doubted it though. Wyper was a hard man to read and yet for some reason he got along great with both Tim and little Chopper. Chopper wasn't even afraid of him. When she'd asked how he got along so well with the child, he said he had a young cousin who was Chopper's age.

Ziva turned her attention away from the man and took in the room. Once again more get-well cards and gifts had appeared since the last time she'd been in here. The lone table in the room had completely been taken over by small potted plants, the largest being a small orange tree, and fruit baskets. Lots of fruit baskets. It seemed as if not a single one of the brothers' well wishers had sent flowers, instead sending food. Which, given how much the two of them ate, made a weird kind of sense. It also meant that there was little to no need for those on watch to order food. It wouldn't do for the fruit baskets and arrangements to go bad, after all.

Putting away his knife, Wyper nodded to her. "Ziva."

"Wyper." She glanced around the room, noticing that Tim was not there watching the lone TV. "Is Marco not here yet?"

"No, he said he would be late. If you want, I'll stay till he arrives."

"That is quite alright."

He stood, motioning for her to take the chair. "Then I'll leave you." Instead of exiting the room however, he made his way between the two beds and looked down at the two brothers with an intense expression on his face. It didn't look sad, but almost regretful.

Knowing the question was rude Ziva still found herself asking, "Did you know the brothers before?" Mentally she scolded herself. There had been an agreement to not pry into the past, not necessarily to protect the Resistance members but to not bring up memories that were obviously painful for some.

Wyper shrugged, apparently not minding the question as he moved away from the beds and opened the window a crack. "I'd seen them around, but not really. Makino, though... Roger kept dumping Ace on her when he was a baby and then Luffy came along. She was something like an aunt and older sister rolled into one to them I think. She took what happened very hard, and now with this..." He seemed to trail off before saying, "I'd say she's as broken up about it all as the Bosses."

There was a knock on the door, just a quick two taps, before it opened and a perpetually bored looking blond walked in. By this point Ziva knew better than to let herself be fooled by those sleepy blue eyes. The man saw everything. He looked over the room before offering a half-smile to the two of them. "I'm here, yoi. You want the room or the chair first?"
"I will take the-"

"Shit!" Wyper interrupted her, causing her to turn to see what the problem was. Her first thought was that something had happened to the two brothers. Instead, she saw a tall man with slicked back hair casually leaning against the window frame and drew her gun, not even questioning how the man had gotten into the room.

"Is that any way to greet a guest?" The man smirked before shutting the window. "Don't want it to get drafty in here. It's a sick room after all."

Wyper snarled at the man, tense and obviously ready to lunge at him. "CROCODILE!" He hissed, "How the hell did you get in here?!"

He still had that insufferable smile. "Come now, do you really think I'd tell you?"

Marco eyed the man with obvious distaste, but so far had not moved from his spot by the door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Me?" The smile became predatory while his words dripped with false sympathy. "Why I just happened to be in the area and thought I'd just offer my condolences to the family of these fine brave boys."

"Are you threatening them?" Ziva growled out, hiding the fact that she was hitting the button to the Nurse's station. She knew in only a few minutes backup would arrive.

"Hardly," he ran his lone hand through his hair. "The opposite in fact."

From underneath his ridiculously large coat Crocodile pulled out something and placed it on the already crowded table. When he stepped back, Ziva frowned at the medium sized stuffed animal and small bag he had left there. Did he just leave...presents? The door banged loudly against the wall, Roger standing in the opening with his gun drawn and instantly leveled at the intruder who offered a sarcastic smile in return, his arms up in front of him. "Crocodile!" The Resistance leader hissed. Behind him, Ziva could see Dragon as well as a now shocked Makino.

"Roger. It has been too long." The safety clicked off, "Or not long enough."

"What are you doing here, you snake?"

"As I was telling the Miss, I am just here to offer my deepest condolences for the tragedy you've suffered."

"Suffered because of one of your allies!"

Crocodile's smile shifted into a hard angry line. "That was none of my doing. The fool made his choices long before our alliance."

"You expect us to believe that you were against what he did to our boys?" Roger snarled.

"Hardly." The one handed man snorted. "Just know that if I were behind what has happened to your sons, you still wouldn't have them back. They would be my servants; loyal and well cared for."

"You're a monster!" Makino howled, trying to push her way into the room.

Crocodile grinned. "I know."

"So you're here to gloat, is that it?" Dragon cut in as he gently restrained Makino from lunging at
"If that were the case, I would not have brought them get well presents, now would I?" He gestured
to the overstuffed toy crocodile and the bag of dried meat, his expression annoyed. "Dragon, we
have been enemies for a long time in name only. I have no desire to fight your 'Resistance' right
now. I have enough to deal with, you know. The last thing I need is for you or your allies to turn on
me for something that fool did. Which is why I am here. Of course, I don't expect you to believe
me, which is why I have arranged a little token of my sincerity."

"What, more jerky?" Wyper snapped.

"Don't be foolish. It is much better than some strips of dried beef." The grin was back, but it was
cruel for some reason. "You'll have to forgive me; it was a bit too large to bring with us. You can
pick it up at One Water Street. It might not be perishable any longer, but I'd still hurry."

"'Us', yoi?" Marco spoke up, eyes narrowed.

"Yes. My associate is waiting outside for me." Crocodile smirked, making his way towards the
door like there weren't weapons pointed at him.

"So you think we're just going to let you walk out of here?" Roger snarled.

"I think," the man replied, "that you don't have much of a choice in the matter. Besides, I told you
already. I'm not here to fight. Not today at least. Tell the boys when they wake that Ivan sends her
love." With that the man pushed past Roger and strode out into the hall, leaving all of them staring
after him.

Roger immediately went over to the stuffed crocodile and started checking it over. He let out a
frustrated grumble as Gibbs pushed his way into the room, apparently finding nothing. "What
happened?"

"One of our enemies decided to pay the boys a visit." Dragon answered, still holding a distressed
Makino. "He left that, and said something about a present at One Water Street."

Gibbs just nodded. "Right. Ziva, get Tony and meet me in the car. Someone call Sengoku and tell
him what happened. I'll let Vance know. We need to lock this wing down tight." He turned to
Marco, "Get Abby to look over that thing."

"My thoughts exactly, yoi." The blond nodded, already pushing his way over to the phone as Ziva
squeezed out of the room.

*&*&*&BREAK*&*&*

At one Water Street there was an old motel. The thing was rundown and looked closed from the
front, but when they'd gone to the front desk a very seedy looking man had greeted them. He'd
blanched at the sight of the badges and stuttered that only one room was currently occupied before
shoving the keys at them and saying he didn't want any trouble. Tony had snorted at that, and she
found herself agreeing with the sentiments behind the noise as they made their way to the room.
The pace was obviously the location of more than a few illegal activities. When they'd reached the
room, room one hundred and twelve, they found the door unlocked but clicked closed. It sent a jolt
down her as every nerve tingled in preparation for trouble. Keeping her gun drawn, Ziva twisted
her body sharply, entering the room fluidly with the weapon level and ready to take out any
possible threat. There appeared to be nothing in the shoddy motel room, just an unmade bed and a
lingering musty smell. Like rotting dry leaves almost. "Clear!"
Tony and Gibbs entered the room with less trepidation, their weapons at the ready. It paid to be cautious when dealing with criminals. Systematically they moved through the room, checking behind the door before Gibbs spoke up. "On the bed."

Ziva looked. She hadn't noticed it at first in the tangled sheets, but there appeared to be a foot sticking out the bottom of the comforter. Nodding her understanding she slowly made her way to the bed and waited that split second until the others were ready before flipping back the scratchy looking fabric. The smell grew stronger. It took her a moment to process what she was seeing, but when she did her hand clutched reflexively around the gun and the other covered her nose. It was a body, but it didn't look fresh at all. In fact, it looked like it belonged in a museum display. Ziva found herself staring blankly at the empty eye sockets as her mind spun, trying to figure out what exactly she was looking at. The skin was the color of aged paper and drawn back tight against the bones, buckled and sagging in places. The few teeth the body had stood out sharply against the remnants of a sparse black beard that looked as dry and brittle as the hair on the top of the head. Rings hung loosely from skeletal hands that clasped at nothing. There was a nagging thought that she knew the person, but that was impossible.

"Huh." Gibbs grunted as he put away his gun and reached for his phone instead. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Well, gee Boss. I don't see why you would expect a mummy in a crappy motel in Washington." Tony snarked back, obviously a little shaken as well.

Gibbs ignored him as he dialed. "Hey Ducky. Got a body." He looked back at the body, a calculating look on his face, "Tell Vance we can call off the hunt. Yeah, it's Marshall. No, don't know how long he's been dead for."

Ziva looked back down at the body as Gibbs hung up the phone, shocked. "Are you sure?" The question was rhetorical, and he must have known that because he didn't answer as both she and Tony studied the body closer. Now that she looked, really looked, it did resemble the man known as Blackbeard. Just a lot...drier and thinner. Much thinner. "What has happened?"

"Donno." Gibbs replied.

"You guys need a hand?" All three of them spun, weapons once more at the ready, to face the door. Wyper eased himself into the room, hands held up to reaffirm that he wasn't a threat even as they put their guns down. Somehow Ziva didn't think any of them were surprised that they'd been followed. Still, it didn't make her happy to see the guy. The smirk on his face faded to a hard line as he took in the body on the bed and he gave an experimental sniff in the air before speaking. "Teach Marshal?"

"Think so."

"Damn. So that's what Croc meant."

Tony stared at him. "Are you saying that weirdo from before is responsible for this?"

"Probably." Wyper moved closer to the body but was careful not to touch anything. "Rumor has it the guy is a Devil-fruit user himself, but no one's exactly sure what his powers are. Bosses think it might be a logia type, but the only one we know for a fact that does know what he can do isn't talking. Still. He didn't sound too happy about Blackbeard getting him mixed up in this and he said he left a present. It'd be a nice way to warn people not to cross him and show the Bosses that he had nothing to do with this mess. Classic Croc."
"Wait. Are you saying the bad guy just got taken out by a bigger bad guy? One he was friends with?" Wyper nodded, agreeing with Tony's assessment. "That's messed up."

"No." Gibbs disagreed, entering the room once more with Ducky and Palmer in tow, "That's a lot of paperwork."
Loud silence. So loud it roared through Ace's senses and jarred him awake. *Awake? Was I sleeping?* His mind felt muddled; soggy like cereal left in milk too long...or maybe warm oatmeal. Food sounded good right now, but horrible. *Were?* He cracked an eye open, taking in the stark white walls and felt that he should be panicking. Ace didn't know where he was and Luffy... there was another bed. He turned his head slightly, ignoring the disconnected burning feeling. Luffy was next to him, tubes and wires connected connecting him to the machines that were beeping- he just noticed the sound and Ace felt worry push it's way past the now frightening detachment. His brother was hurt and he didn't know why but he should, and the light on the machines were such a pretty green but too loud and he wanted it to stop and go- cheese. He smelled cheese. His stomach rolled and Ace thought of fuzzy fruitcakes and flamboyant men in purple bathrobes. Part of him, the buzzing panicky part, screamed that he was drugged. He didn't care though. Chopper was there, cuddled on the bed with Luffy. Everything would be alright because Luffy trusted Chopper and so Ace decided he did too as he let the waves caused by his own breathing take him far away.

*'*&*&*&BREAK*'*&*&*&

The sound of the TV on low created a cool backdrop for his fuzzed brain. Ace drifted in a state of half-wakefulness. It was comfortable there; no thoughts, no worries... no pain. He knew with some certainty that he'd been hurt, but he couldn't remember why or how. His drifting thoughts were interrupted by the sound of people talking, drowning out the TV. He found the it annoying. People were talking with no respect for the fact that he was sleeping! Telling them was too much of an effort though. Leaving him forced to deal with their stupid nattering *Like squabbling birds...* as he drifted back to the place where nothing mattered

"-Luffy?" The sudden mention of his brother had him fighting his way back to semi-wakefulness.

"We're keeping him drugged for the next few days as well." He knew he'd been drugged. *Jerks.* "The swelling has gone down and his fever's broken." Ace knew that voice...

"His back?" *There's something wrong with Luffy's back?!* A spike of cold terror went through him, causing a machine to beep a little faster earning a pause in the conversation. "Is that normal?"

"Yes, it's nothing to worry about." The clinical voice replied. "He's just burning through his medication is all. I'll up the level."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? Don't we want him to wake up?"

"Trust me when I say Ace waking up right now would be unwise. He'd be in agony. He heals fast, give him a few more days and we'll try waking him then." Ace tried to tell them he was awake, but the words came out as a sigh, almost a huff. A cooling-minty-fuzzy feeling flooded his veins. He felt himself slipping back into oblivion "There we go. Where were we? Ah yes. Luffy's back. Obviously since he's yet to regain consciousness there is still the possibility he's suffered lasting damage."

"Luffy-"

*'*&*&*&BREAK*'*&*&*&

Someone was reading. It didn't sound like a magazine. Page flips hissed, not cracked. Ace wasn't sure how long he lay there listening to the soothing noise. It was a comfortable place, the slow
rhythmic beeping sounds a counterpoint that preventing him from falling back asleep. Giving up trying, Ace cracked an eye open, shutting it just as quickly as the light seared his brain. He wrinkled his brow before trying again. The sound of paper rustling stalled. "I see you're awake." The voice was soft, unknown. "For how long, I wonder?"

The question pissed him off a little bit. "Shut-" he coughed, throat dry, "Shut up." The sound of a chair creaking was loud and grating but finished jarring him into full wakefulness. A quick glance told him that he was hooked up to a beeping monstrosity before he closed his eyes again. Ace's eyes snapped open, looking wildly for his brother as he shoved himself up onto his elbows. His back exploded in pain and he let out a hiss as he fell back. "Fuck!"

"Shihihi! Ace is funny!" The laughter told him that Luffy was alright even before he turned his head to mock-glare at the teen.

"Shut it, dickwad." Luffy's eyes were closed as he lay on his back, hooked up to machines as well. A wide smile stretched his face though, detracted only slightly by the bandages Ace could see. As he stared at his brother in relief he wondered how they'd gotten there. "What happened? Where are we, Lu?"

Luffy shrugged, turning his head to look at him. "Donno."

"You are in a hospital." Both brothers looked over by the door. The man that had spoken was big. Tall and wide with long black hair that reminded Ace a bit of Usopp. Just the size of the guy was threatening, though the librarian-like glasses took away from it. "You are safe here. If you'll excuse me, I must let the others know you are up." As he stood, Ace decided the chair he'd been sitting on was much too small. Silence reigned as the strange man stepped out of the room and closed the door.

"He's HUGE!" Luffy gasped and Ace nodded his agreement. "You ok, Ace?" Luffy sounded worried so he offered him a big smile, despite the fact that his back hurt like a bitch and his head was full of cotton.

"Fine…" There was silence as both of them stared at each other. Ace trying to remember something... something important. "Hey Lu? Can you wiggle your toes?"

"Huh?" The look on his face was funny. "I think so…" Still laying on his back, Luffy lifted both legs, feet flat as he reached up with his hands and flexed his toes with them. "There!" Luffy grinned before wincing and letting his feet fall back to the mattress. "Owwww... That kinda hurt, Ace."

He blinked. I don't think that's quite... right. His head was too muzzy to figure out what exactly was wrong with the picture. Especially when seeing it had eased the worry constricting his heart. Still if it had caused Luffy pain… "Don't do that, then."

"Ok!"

The door opened with a squeal, distracting Ace again from the puzzle of what had happened. He thought he remembered a car accident, but how could they be hurt from that? He'd crashed his bike with both of them on it before and walked away fine, Luffy asking to do it again. The same guy from before returned, pausing a moment under the intense stare of the two brothers before shutting the door behind him. Ace had no clue who the guy was; for all he knew the man was a serial killer, but he couldn't bring himself to care. That fact was much more worrying than who the guy was actually. He glared at the man, thoughts chasing themselves in circles as he tried to figure out the blank spots in his memories. It didn't phase the giant in the slightest as he took his seat once more.
Luffy broke the silence. "Who're you?"

"I am Bartholomew. Bartholomew Kuma." He didn't look like a Bartholomew. "You may call me-"

"Teddy!" Ace smirked, easily following his brother's logic thanks to many nights watching Digimon.

"No, Bart." The now renamed man's face twitched.

"No," Luffy pouted. "Teddy! He looks like a Teddy too, right Ace?"

"Yep." He turned his head so he could offer up a cheesy grin. "Nice to meetcha, Teddy-bear."

This time the door opened without any preamble and the room became a crowded loud jumbled mess. There were too many people, people he didn't know, and Ace felt trapped. Unfortunately it wasn't like he could hide it, the beeping of the machine he'd been hooked up started to pick up. A man with what looked like what could have been a very impressive mustache if he hadn't seen Whitebeard's drew closer. There was something about his face, the worry in the blue-grey eyes that reminded him of something. He frowned, uncomfortable with both the gaps in his recent memories and the fact that a stranger was looking over him while he was on his back. It never ended well. Still, if the guy's attention was on him, it wouldn't be on Luffy.

"How are you feeling?" The mustache guy asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Ace snapped back in reply, leveling his best glare at the man. "What the fuck happened?" He silently cursed the heart monitor's increasing pace that gave away his nerves.

"I'm…" there was a pause, and Ace didn't like it. "Roger. You're in a hospital, Ace. There was an accident. You and Luffy were hurt." A flash of pain. Burning-suffocating pain. Luffy, cool and limp. A face with a mustache Luffy being pulled from his arms…

Ace narrowed his eyes. "You were there," he snapped out, his eyes sliding over to the man with the tattoos, recognizing both from his fragmented memories and the barbecue at Vance's, "him, too. Why?"

Roger seemed taken back before offering a tentative smile. "We were there to help."

"Bullshit. You've been stalking us. Got a problem with Teach and thought you saw a chance to pull a kidnapping smash and grab? Think we'd be grateful, maybe? Not gonna happen."

"Have you really fallen so low that you've given that monster your loyalty, boy?" Gon's tone was full of disgust.

"No." Luffy whispered, answering for the both of them. His face was a mask of fear and pain, telling Ace his brother was starting to remember what had happened. He wished Luffy'd never remember, wished he could forget the sight of Blackbeard punishing Luffy…It broke something inside him all over just thinking about it. Luffy spoke a little louder drawing attention to himself with his broken tone, "No. We're obedient…not loyal."

"He'll kill you for taking us, you know." Ace pointed out. "And he's gonna punish us for being caught."

"No he won't." Gon's eyes softened. "He can't hurt you anymore."
"Lies." He scoffed.

"He's not lying, Ace." Gibbs said, giving the over-crowded room a look that had everyone but Gon and the mustache-guy in a hurry to leave. Ace didn't care though, just seeing Gibbs again was a relief. The NCIS agent's presence telling him they hadn't been abducted by a different criminal group like he had thought. "How ya feeling?"

He ignored the two men still in the room, offering Gibbs a tight smile. "Crappy."

"Are... are you alright?" Luffy asked from his own bed, "Is Ducky?"

"Ducky's fine. So am I." The man stood at the foot of the bed. "Doc will be here in a few to check you boys over, see how long you'll have to stay here."

Panic rose again. "No. Gibbs, please." Ace begged, the heart rate beep took on an unsteady tempo. "We can't stay here. We shouldn't even be here... He'll find us and kill you this time."

"Ace- ACE! Calm down." Gibbs reached out to him and he flinched away. "I promise you he can't hurt you anymore, kiddo. He's dead."

Everything stopped. He's...dead? Ace stared uncomprehendingly at Gibbs. He....he can't be dead... "You're wrong."

"I saw the body." "But you didn't see him die, right? So you don't know for sure it was him..." Luffy sounded almost hopeful about that, his brow wrinkled in confusion. He knew how his brother felt. There was a tiny treacherous part of him that didn't want Teach to be dead. That needed him, as sick as it sounded. It disgusted Ace that they'd become so depended on the monster.

"It was him." The way Gibbs said it told Ace that he understood some of what the two of them were feeling even as the other two men in the room bristled. It didn't make him feel better.

He found himself asking again even as he hated himself for it. "Are you sure?"

"Your medically inclined friend did the autopsy himself." His head snapped to the side at the sound of Law's voice. "I, of course, assisted. It's not everyday I get to examine the corpse of someone killed by a Devil-fruit power."

"I didn't do it." The brothers chorused, earning an eye roll from the young doctor as he came over between them.

"I never said you did, ya." He didn't specify which brother he was answering so Ace assumed he meant both. "I can assure you that it was the body of one Teach Marshall. I double-checked the findings myself. Now, lets see how you are doing." Deft hands kited over his chest and arms before moving to his head. "Any dizziness? Blurred vision? Trouble focusing?"

"No. Not really. I feel a little... cottony though." Ace dutifully replied, recognizing the questions for a concussion even though he was a bit thrown off.

"That would be painkillers." Law offered, followed by an evil looking little smirk. "I need you to sit up so I can check your back." That explains the smirk. Sadistic fuck knows this is going to hurt. He glared dully at the doctor who smiled a little wider before turning his head. "Roger, if you'll help him up."
Ace most definitely didn't want the wacko with a mustache touching him. He growled in protest, trying to lever himself up through the pain. Gibbs reached past Law to pop him upside the head, startling him. "Stop that. Let him help."

He thought about protesting before catching the look of amusement in Law's eyes and decided he wouldn't give the doctor the satisfaction. The man- Roger- had warm, dry palms. Getting into a seated position was tough despite the guy's surprising gentleness and Ace involuntarily let out a hiss of pain. His back was a giant lump of agony even with the painkillers. He couldn't think of a single time that he'd been in more pain, which was impressive in a way.

"Is he going to be alright?" Roger asked, voice laced with something that he refused to believe was worry even as he leaned harder into the strong hands. He twitched when he felt Law's hands poke and prod him. "How's it look?"

"Not bad for someone who lost a fight with a cheese grater." The man was entirely too happy for Ace's taste. "No signs of infection. You must be running too hot for that. So long as you don't rip the stitches doing something stupid, you'll be fine." Law sounded like he didn't think Ace was capable of not being stupid, which was insulting. But if he was honest with himself, only a little. He heard a motor going and felt the bed shift under him. "You can lean him back. Now that he's awake, he can sit up." The relief of not being forced to just lay on his back while people were standing was palatable. Roger carefully eased him onto the raised mattress and Ace offered him a small smile in thanks, surprising him. Tentatively, Roger offered a smile of his own, patting Ace's shoulder.

"What happened to your back, Ace? Did you really fight a cheese grater?"

He looked over at his brother and snorted, "Really, Luffy? Yes, after you passed out we were attacked by the evil Giant Cheese Grater of Doom." Luffy's eyes started to sparkle. "You're so gullible, idiot. I got hurt... during the accident?"

"You were tossed from the trailer when it flipped." Gon elaborated, grim faced. "We found you quite a distance away. Thought we'd lost you two for a while there."

"And you care... Why?" was Ace's caustic reply. He didn't give the man a chance to answer though. Instead he turned his attention to Law, attempting to slap the man's leg and failing. "Go check Lu out already."

Law glared down at him before turning his attention to the teen laying in the bed. Luffy shifted under the gaze, obviously uncomfortable with the close scrutiny. "Dizziness? Blurred vision?" Law barked out, earning a head shake. "I'd ask if you had trouble focusing, but I don't know how you could tell."

Luffy pouted up at him. "Hey!"

"How about your back, ya?" The doctor asked, serious in a way that he hadn't been before. Dark brown eyes blinked up at the doctor in confusion. "Wiggle your fingers." In typical Luffy fashion both hands were thrust up into the air as he wagged the digits in Law's unamused face. "Now your toes."

The reply was instant. "I can't."

Gon looked devastated as Luffy let his arms drop back to the bed, and Ace for the life of him couldn't figure out why. He could understand the disappointment on Gibbs; the man probably thought his brother was paralyzed or some shit like that. But this Gon guy... they had barely met
the guy. His reaction was interesting. He almost jumped when he felt a hand on his leg followed by
a gentle squeeze. Ace's eyes darted to the offending appendage and traced it to Roger just as the
man looked at him, face tight with concern which confused him even more.

"It'll be alright Ace." Roger said, patting his thigh in what he guessed was supposed to be a
reassuring manner. *Again, why the fuck does he care?*

He was so distracted trying to work out what was with the two men that it didn't occur to him to
mention that his brother could in fact move his legs. Instead, the moment stretched on in silence as
Law continued to stare intently down at Luffy. His brother naturally was unaffected by the mood
and instead started to clean out his ear vigorously. Trafalgar narrowed his eyes before walking to
the foot of the bed and pulling off the covers, drawing all eyes back to him. Without a word he
unpinned his name tag and after straightening it jabbed it into Luffy's right foot. The reaction was
instantaneous as the teen yelped more in surprise then pain or fear and he recoiled while lashing
out with his left.

"OW! What was that for?!"

"You were lying to me." Law replied, repining his name tag.

"No I didn't!" Lu protested, "You asked if I could wiggle my toes! I can't, because it hurts when I
try and reach my toes."

Everyone just stared at him even as Ace began to snicker, earning a dark look from the doctor.
"You knew." He nodded and Law ran a tattooed hand across his eyes as he sighed. "Roger, your
son is an ass and Dragon's is a moron."

Ace saw red. He didn't see how the two men tensed at the doctor's words, didn't care. "Fuck you,
that's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

He snarled, flicking a finger at the man in an attempt to warn Trafalgar with a little flare. Nothing
happened. "Why can't I use my powers right now?" Ace growled out, glaring at the smirking Law
who stood just out of his reach.

"Do you know what doctors typically give a patient after surgery? An IV drip. A saline IV drip."

"Saltwater. You're pumping me full of SALTWATER?" Ace gaped at him, "What the hell?!

"Relax, it's not doing you any harm. Quite the opposite, in fact. You lost a lot of blood, and I
couldn't risk another transfusion." Something about the way he said that made the younger man
pause for a second. "I'm very surprised it's actually working at suppressing the more... obvious
uses of your power. I'll admit your reaction is quite humorous."

"That's not funny." Luffy whined. "You're mean. This IV is mean, and that joke was mean."

"Luffy-ya, what makes you think I was joking?"

"First off, Luffy is not a moron." He snapped voice getting louder as he went, venting. "And
secondly, our fathers? Seriously Law? Is that the best you can do? Our sperm-donors never gave a
shit about us before, so why the hell would they be here now? And assuming that
they did suddenly decide to care, they sure as hell wouldn't be here in the same room with Gibbs
who works for NCI fucking S!" He didn't see how the way his words hurt the men in the room.
How Gon clenched his fist, or Roger bit his lip. He didn't see, and he didn't care. All he cared
about was the old hurt; the way Luffy looked like someone had punched him in the gut and he wanted Law to pay for bringing it all to the surface. "They're shit Law, but you're an asshole."
Heart Pain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ace might not have seen how his words affected Roger and Dragon, but Gibbs did. He knew he should be angry or at least annoyed at Law for saying anything. They had all agreed just the day before to allow Garp to gently break the news to the two boys that their fathers were there and in fact cared. Ducky had said it would be for the best after the trauma they'd just gone through if the news waited until they were out of the hospital and had had a chance to get to know 'Gon' and Roger first. Law had disagreed, claiming it would only draw out the shock and possibly compromise their mental health as well. The two medical doctors had argued back and forth almost the whole time the boys were out. Finally Kureha had stepped in. Her opinion was that it didn't matter when the boys were told, or how. They'd react badly. Garp, she'd said, they could accept because they had left him in the end. But they wouldn't accept their fathers as easily. The fact that the two men had given them over to Garp was the problem, even if had been to protect them. Kureha bitterly reminded them that after years of physical, mental and emotional abuse both Ace and Luffy had been badly damaged. Their view on self-worth was how useful they were to Teach. What Dragon and Roger had done, even if Blackbeard didn't know of it, had most likely been twisted in their minds as being 'Thrown Away' like trash. Because on some level, that's what they believed they were. So Ace would lash out verbally and physically at them. Because obviously the only reason they'd show up now was because he and Luffy were useful tools now. Useful and in need of a new Master.

Dragon had not liked what she was implying or the way she'd looked at them. Ace apparently wasn't the only one who might think that they were going to use them. Gibbs wondered if Ace and Luffy knew how much even their harsh doctor cared. The woman had all but threatened to poison the most wanted terrorists in the world. Not for what they'd done, but to protect their sons from them. After a lot of yelling over the two unconscious boys, she had finally admitted that they most likely weren't there to just put her young friends in the same position again. Not before Abby had dubbed Kureha her new hero though. So the matter had been solved, and they'd all agreed to wait until the brothers were out of the hospital before even suggesting their fathers were around. A plan Law had just shot out of the water with one flippant remark. Gibbs knew he had done so deliberately; it was all over his face. Still, he couldn't fault him since he was of the opinion that telling them now would be safer. After all, hurt as they were they couldn't run which meant that they had time to convince them of Dragon and Roger's sincerity. Plus he could fob the bill for their care and expenses off on the two fathers. Vance had said to at least get compensated for the food bill.

So Gibbs watched and did nothing as Ace ranted at Law. He saw how both men flinched at the harsh words and knew that they were about to back out and deny everything. As much as he understood where they were coming from he wasn't going to let that happen. Ace and Luffy needed all the support they could get, even if they didn't want it at first.

"Really, ya?" Law baited the fiery younger man.

"Yes! I'd be happy if I never saw those bastards again!"

Gibbs caught Roger's eye before the man bolted from the room and raised an eyebrow. When the man made no move to do anything he jerked his head in Ace's direction, the message clear. It was hard to say if that or Law's challenging smirk is what finally did the man in. Roger placed a hand
on his son's shoulder which Ace immediately attempted to brush off as he continued to shout obscenities at the doctor. "Ace. Ace, look at me for a moment."

"What?" The young man snapped, finally turning his attention to the man.

"Ace. I am your father." Ace just stared at him with an expression between shock and unrelenting anger at the sincerity of the statement.

The moment lasted only a split second before Luffy burst out laughing. "Shi-hihihi! Star Wars! I love that movie!"

"I'm being serious!" Roger snapped. "Ace," Roger began, turning back to his son. "I know you don't have any reason to trust me-" He gestured at Dragon, "us. We weren't there when you needed us, and for that, I am so sorry-"

"You weren't ever there! You two just ignored me and Lu until you dumped us off on the Old Man! What kind of parent does that?" Ace ranted, "For that I hate you. What happened with Bl-Teach, that's on me. I failed Luffy-"

"Ace! No! I'm the one who got caught, Ace! If I wasn't so weak and useless…" Luffy cut him off, eyes watering.

"Easy there, kiddo. I thought we were over this before. What Teach did to you two was Teach's fault." Gibbs was quick to reassure both of the brothers.

"I almost got you k-killed!" Luffy wailed. "I couldn't e-even do anything…"

"No Lu, I couldn't do anything! I just stood there while he beat you and-" Ace's voice broke, his bravado vanishing. "I thought I'd lost you, Lu. I can't... If I'd lost you…"

Luffy sniffed, nodding his head in agreement as he curled into himself. The boy didn't even flinch when Dragon sat on the bed and hesitantly rubbed his back. Their reaction was worrying to Gibbs. Part of him wanted to speak up and remind them both that their actions had saved the lives of both him and Ducky, but he knew it would be pointless. They'd all been afraid of this; even with the man gone Blackbeard had truly hurt them badly with his last act. Now it was just a matter of time to see if it was just the shock and drugs talking. Still, Gibbs was confident that they'd be able to eventually recover. Especially when all those people who were obviously there to help them, including himself.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Standing with her head poked through the opening was Makino, biting her lip. "I'm sorry... I just… may I come in?"

"Of course." Dragon smiled back at the woman before once again turning his attention to his son. "Luffy? You have a visitor. I'm not sure if you boys remember her, but Makino here used to watch you two all the time."

"Makino?" Luffy perked up immediately, looking over at the door as Ace sat a little straighter. As she drew near his face lit up and he attempted to throw himself from the bed only to be stopped by a quick move from a surprised Dragon. "Makino! Ace! It's Makino!"

"Yes, I can see that." Ace grinned at the woman, obviously happy to see her at least. "Yo. Been a long time, huh?"

Makino's smile faltered slightly. "Actually... once I was out with Shanks... I swear I didn't recognize you Ace! You and Luffy had gotten so big." She sounded proud, "Even Shanks respected
you two, and you were so young. I'm very impressed. I just wish I'd recognized you. I could have reported to your fathers and we could have done something."

Seeing how Ace froze at her words, Gibbs prepared to intervene before the kid did something he'd only regret later. He was proud of the woman for coming clean before the two figured it out for themselves and for not flinching under the harsh glare Ace had leveled at her. In the end, the young man shrugged, surprising everyone in the room. "Maki, huh?" She nodded. "Well, I'd be pissed, except we didn't recognize you either, so Lu'd get mad at me. Besides, Teach'd've killed you before you left the city if he thought you were going to 'steal' us-"

"Or that the Resistance was making a move on his turf." Luffy put in before grinning again, "Does Shanks know? OH! Does that mean I get to give him 'the talk' Ace?"

Dragon raised an eyebrow, "The talk?" Gibbs felt sorry for the man, knowing what he was in for as he shared a look with Law.

"Yeah! You know, the talk! I'd get to threaten to beat him up if he, er...inhinged"

"Impinged" Ace supplied with a grin.

"Impinged her honor and knowing Shanks..."

"Ok!" Makino cut him off, bright red, "That's quite enough out of both of you. Obviously you both have had quite the shock, and you're still recovering, too. So off to bed with you. Don't give me that look, Luffy, Sleep is the best thing for you. Right Doctor?"

"Yes, at this-"

"There. See? We'll all be here when you wake up, and you can have a nice chat with your fathers-you are going to talk, Ace- later. Now, sirs, I think it best if you'd all leave so the boys can get some rest. You, too, Mr. Gibbs." Somehow she managed to herd them all out of the room efficiently while she spoke, and before he knew it Gibbs found himself staring at the door that had been soundly shut in his face with a bemused smile.

*&&*BREAK*&&*

Gibbs didn't bother to knock as he let himself into the room. Grey and brown eyes froze on him with an instinctual flash of fear before it was quelled and both brothers went back to what they'd been doing. The look had hurt, but over the last week he'd come to expect it. Gone was the cocky attitude that had been in the forefront of any and all interactions. Now it only showed in a quick grin or a sly look. Maybe a joke before the poor kids would be overcome by a panic attack. The worst part was how much the change obviously bothered them. Ace and Luffy were not meant to live in fear, and they struggled.

"Sorry." Ace shrugged, gingerly buttoning the shirt. "S'all right."

"You boys about ready?" He asked, noticing the bare tables and the stuffed crocodile sitting on Luffy's lap as he tugged on his sandals.

"Mmmm." The teen nodded, not looking up.

With a sigh, Gibbs swung the duffle onto his shoulder and held the door open for them. He was careful not to touch either boy as they passed. As Law and Kureha had weaned them off the painkillers, both had become increasingly flighty about physical contact. And sudden movements, loud noises, people they didn't know, people they did know, and the feeling of being trapped.
Ducky had said that it was PTSD. Gibbs just thought it was a nice way of saying that Teach had broken them with that last stunt and told his friend as much. Ducky didn't deny it, and both knew how long it would take for them to get better. If they ever truly recovered.

What was even more worrying was how clingy the two had become. Gibbs hadn't noticed it at first, mostly because it was only with select people. Namely Makino and himself. Makino he understood; she was their long-lost mother figure. *She* was the one who'd realized that Ace and Luffy had started doing anything he'd so much as suggested they do. It had been cause for alarm when he'd mentioned it to Ace and the young man had flinched like he'd been caught doing something wrong before asking if it was a problem. It didn't take a genius to realize that for some reason they were using him as a substitute for Teach. Something that had to stop right away for everyone's sake. Except, every time he told them to knock it off, Luffy gave him a kicked-puppy look that had him wishing he could either kill Teach all over again or drink in the hospital. Preferably both. As much as Gibbs wanted to help them, he knew that the best thing for them was for him to keep away for a while. At least until they recovered in as stress free an environment as they could manage. Hopefully it would help them regain the self confidence and independence they'd had violently ripped away from them.

He glanced over his shoulder, attempting to banish the mental image of ducklings. "You two glad to be getting out of this place?" *Puppies aren't much better..."

"A little bit."

"The food sucks." Luffy offered. After a moment of silence he spoke up. "Why can't we stay with you and Ducky?"

"Because your fathers have custody of you boys." He explained even though Luffy knew this.

He was saved the inevitable argument when they rounded the corner and found Robin waiting for them at the Nurses' Station. She was still Ace and Luffy's lawyer and it had fallen to her to finish the paperwork to discharge them. A job that everyone but Ace had been happy to let her do. Gibbs could understand where the kid was coming from, however. The woman had gone to a judge and filed the necessary paperwork to give both Dragon and Roger Power of Attorney over their sons. Ace had been livid, seeing it as a betrayal when he'd been told. He’d shouted that he wasn't incompetent, and he could take care of himself and Luffy just fine.

That had started a huge argument on where they were going to live. Dragon and Roger both wanted to take their sons back with them to their base, Garp wanted to have them move in with him in Washington, and Ace and Luffy wanted to go back to New York. The sad truth was that they were in no condition to be on their own. Even Ace had begun to have night terrors, waking up the whole floor screaming some nights only to remember nothing come morning. Even with their two friends more than willing to step up and do whatever necessary, Roger and Dragon had so far been quite adamant against letting their two sons go back to the city where they'd been through so many hardships. Gibbs suspected that it might also have something to do with Marco and Thatch's line of work as well. It was only natural for them to be concerned that the two would take advantage of the boys' current state and convince them to join up with their own group. Not that he thought for a minute that they would. Robin had actually laughed when Dragon had accused Marco of such a plan, instantly relieving the tension that had been building.

Gibbs himself thought that if the two wanted to go back to the city then they should be allowed to. Under close supervision, of course. They might have had a rough time there, but even though he and his team had only tailed them for a little more than a day, it was obvious that they had strong ties to the community. Many that were in no way related to Blackbeard. He might not know a lot
about psychology, but it didn't seem to be a good idea to uproot them from all of that.

"Well, I'm all finished up here." Robin smiled at the three of them, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. Neither boy responded. "Shall we go? I believe your fathers are waiting outside for us."

"Don't call them that!" Ace hissed.

Gibbs nudged him to get him to start moving again. "Like it or not kid, that's what they are. They just want what's best for you."

"No they don't." Luffy pouted a step behind his brother, voice soft. "They want to take us away from our home."

It broke his heart to hear the kid say that. Gibbs looked over at Robin, hoping that she had an idea. The woman raised a manicured eyebrow before smirking and turning her attention to Luffy. "I forgot to congratulate you for graduating high school, Captain. Do you think you are going to college?"

"I don't think that's possible..." Luffy muttered. "Teach..."

"Is dead." Gibbs cut him off, "It doesn't matter what he wanted. You know, I bet if you asked your fathers, the both of you could enroll in college. Maybe in the city..."

Ace stopped and stared at him, a slow grin transforming his face into something similar to what it had looked like just a few weeks ago when they'd first met. "You think?" He nodded. "Yeah... Yeah, I think I'd like that. Thanks, Gibbs."

"Anytime, kid. I mean it. If you ever need someone to talk to, or to just get away for awhile, I got a boat I could use some help putting together." He offered, "But first you have to give your fathers a chance, alright?"

Both young men pouted but nodded in agreement before setting their shoulders and once more turning their attention to the two figures that could be seen at the end of the hall by the exit. Gibbs just hopped that it wouldn't be too soon before he heard from them.

Chapter End Notes

*Just a note. There's different types of Power of Attorney. In reality, it's hard to get someone LEGALLY appointed (though there is FINANCIAL POA, which is insanely easy in comparison and leads to fraud) and chances are they'd be granted legal GUARDIANSHIP over a WARD instead. Basically, both come down to saying someone is in someway incapacitated I went with POA to suggest that Ace and Luffy were mentally compromised (incompetent, in Ace's words) as well as a few other reasons. One of which is Luffy is still technically a minor.
"Ray…" Shanks whined into the cool air of the bar as the man forced him to pick up his glass in order to lay down a tablecloth. He wasn't even sure what he was protesting.

"Shut up and drink your beer." Rayleigh replied, moving on. "You should be thankful I'm letting you have your damn meeting here today. You know Bonney's party is today too, so don't make any trouble."

Shanks only half paid attention, knowing it to be an empty warning since he was invited to the party. Instead he let his head fall forward onto his folded arms with a heartfelt moan, "Two months! I can't take it anymore, Ray."

"You heard what Newgate's boys said. They're in good hands." The older man sighed, pausing in his task, "and you know they wouldn't have come back if they felt otherwise."

"Bah. They wouldn't really say anything though, would they? Or that harpy and her bratling... and Robin won't return my calls either. I'm worried dammit!"

"You act like you're the only one, Shanks. We're all worried about the brats. How do you think that kid Zoro feels. He let Luffy go, Shanks. Finding out that Teach went after them there? You know how close he is to the idiot- he's a mess. I've heard Smoker's threatened to suspend him. Worse, now there's talk about sending him to another precinct."

He sat up at that, surprised. "I didn't know that."

"No, I don't suppose you would. Honestly, when you haven't been working, you've been holed up here drinking yourself to death or off in your own little world."

"I've been that bad, huh?" Shanks sighed ruefully, feeling slightly ashamed and guilty for being so selfish. "Right. I'll work on it. Call Smoky tomorrow and have a talk with him."

"Because a Mafia boss calling the local Chief of Police isn't odd or suspicious at all." Rayleigh snorted as he finished setting up.

"Not at all. When the two get together for poker Tuesday nights, that's suspicious." He grinned at his friend cheekily, earning a hearty laugh and lightning both their moods. Just in time, too. Edward Newgate smiled, obviously not sure why they were laughing but happy to join in at a time when such things were fleeting at best. "Whitebeard! Come! Join me." Shanks called out respectfully.

The much larger man gave Rayleigh a slight nod and a raised finger to let him know he wanted a drink as he sat. "Am I late, Red-hair?"

"Nah, I just came early, Newgate."

"Drunkard." Ray coughed as he placed two new glasses down and whisked the old one away.

"Hey!"

"Well my boy, if you are a drunkard, you are in good company." Newgate laughed. "Mind if I order, Shanks?"
"Not at all. In fact, I'm starving."

"Silvers! Two plates of that fantastic cod dish of yours, please."

"I'll take a double order of chicken strips, Ray."

"Coming right up."

Shanks leaned forward, "So, what's the word?"

"Those punks are still coming out of the woodwork." Whitebeard sighed, looking twice his age. "I'm beginning to think that every one of the fools that followed Teach were as cut-throat and conniving as he was. The whole Blackbeard organization is crumbling because none of them are willing to work together."

"You're kidding."

"They're taking each other out before my sons and daughters can even get to them. Convenient, but annoying."

"I'll bet." He shook his head. "We're having mixed results shutting down Doc Q's drug ring, I'm sorry to say. Damn cockroach has wormed his way into the good graces of a few mid-level gangs. Just enough that killing him outright might be a problem. Luckily the dumb bastard managed to somehow piss off Arlong and Buggy at some point, so they might be willing to help."

"Buggy?" Whitebeard's tone said he didn't think much of the odd man's help.

"I know he's kind of, well… pathetic… but the common street people listen to him. Hell if I know why. That would cut Doc Q's clients by half at least." The down side was asking him to help would give Buggy an even bigger ego than he already had. "Gotta make Buggy ask us to let him help though, or I'll never hear the end of it." He mused out loud, earning an understanding nod. Buggy was very loud about their supposed rivalry.

"I leave it to you." Newgate shifted, taking a swig of his drink, "So tell me; is everything else well with you?"

"Oh-ho? Planing on making a move against me now that our mutual enemy is gone?" Shanks joked, not serious in the slightest. He'd come to trust the other leader implicitly though he didn't share the same ideals. The easy way Edward laughed with him told him the other felt the same way. "Not to worry, old man. I can hold my own against any and all challengers."

"Big words." Whitebeard grinned. "It's nice to know you can back them, pup."

"Think you can keep up, old dog?"

"Ga-hahaha! Cheeky! To the future!" He raised his glass right along with his ally, taking a deep draught.

Which he promptly choked on when he heard shouting coming from the kitchen. Both of them tensed and looked towards the doorway behind the bar, ready to spring into action when two people flew through the door and froze quivering like deer caught in headlights. Dark disheveled hair whipped back and forth as the two looked around the room wildly before heading towards the tables covered with the deep burgundy tablecloths... heading towards them. Both wore loose fitting button up t-shirts, the top few buttons undone. Shanks thought it odd that the shorter guy had what looked like a turtleneck under it, but kids these days were weird. The taller of the two turned and
glanced at the door, shirt sliding slightly to reveal a slightly red bandage on his upper bicep, before dragging the other over to them. Shanks just stared in shock, not believing what his eyes were telling him as Ace- Ace! Why is he bleeding?!- shoved Luffy towards their table.

"Hide!" Ace snapped, shoving his brother again as the teen skittishly eyed them. "Hurry! They're coming!"

Instantly his protective instincts flared and he was on his feet reaching for his youngest friend. "Who's coming?"

"Don't touch me!" Luffy yelped, flinching away in honest fear as he pressed against his brother.

Shanks felt his heart clench painfully at the sight. Both of the brothers were breathing fast now, watching his hand warily as he lowered it. He had to fight the urge to shake them and tell them to stop messing around, they were scaring him. But his denial couldn't change the fact that Ace was bleeding, or that what he thought was a turtleneck was actually thick bandages. He knew that and was at a loss for what to do.

"Here boys." Whitebeard called gently, raising the edge of the tablecloth, "You can hide under here."

Ace stared at the man hard for a moment before looking at the door again. "Thanks." A gentle nudge had Luffy slinking past him.

The teen paused for a split second before looking at him, not quite meeting his eyes. "Sorry Shanks… I just…"

"Hey, don't worry about it!" He forced a smile. "You can tell me later, alright? Now hurry up!" In seconds both were hidden away and he was seated once more, mindful of the stowaways.

It was awkward at first, sitting there in silence across from Whitebeard with the two boys that had been the cause for their alliance hiding under their table. Even more so when Luffy tentatively leaned against his leg, trembling slightly. Shanks had to hold onto his glass with both hands to stop himself from offering the kid a reassuring pat on the head. Instead he looked up at Newgate, wondering where the hell Ace was squeezed. The older man lightly tapped the table to the left of him before raising his hand and flexing it rapidly, suggesting Ace was breathing heavily if he was reading that right. He held up his hand and pointed straight down before shaking it back and forth frowning. Both men shared a look, wondering what the hell had happened even as the trembling slowed with a few shaky deep breaths.

Naturally it didn't last long. When the door swung open with a bang causing Luffy to jump, he had to bite back a curse. Instead he turned his head with feigned casualness to see who'd come into Rip-Off. His mouth dropped open and he turned to Edward to see if he was seeing what Shanks saw. Judging by the man's narrowed gold eyes, he wasn't imagining the infamous leaders of the Resistance standing there looking vaguely annoyed. What the hell are Dragon and Roger doing here of all places? The two men either didn't notice the scrutiny or didn't care as Roger sent a text while Dragon grumbled about something. It was only after they were done did the two men seem to notice them, and much to Shanks' dismay they came over.

"Dragon. Roger." He felt Luffy tense against his leg. "What are you two doing here?"

"In the city, or this bar in general?" Roger quipped.

"Both." Whitebeard's smile was predatory. Shanks thought he remembered something about them
being rivals in some parts of the world.

Dragon rolled his eyes, arms crossed. "Chasing down two wayward brats before they get themselves into trouble. Roger thought they might have gotten hungry from all that running and ducked in here. Obviously he was wrong and we're just wasting time. Again."

"Hey! I'm not the one who messed up this time, Scales!"

"This time!"

"Woah, woah, Woah! Back up a second!" Shanks had to practically shout to be heard. He had a very good idea who the 'brats' were- the way Luffy was plastered against his leg was a good clue- but no idea why. "Who are you looking for?" He played dumb, looking for answers.

"Ace and Luffy. Hey, Makino said you know they, right?" Roger asked.

"Damn, he nodded. "Oh, good. When they've calmed down, they might come find you. If they do, call me." He held out a card with his number on it.

Whitebeard intercepted the card, stone-faced. "Why should we? Don't you think those boys have been through enough?"

Dragon leaned forward and hissed, "More than enough. I'm asking you as a father to keep an eye out for our sons."

Shanks snorted, feeling anger coil in his stomach at the man's audacity. "Ha. Their 'Uncle' said shit like that too, you know."

"That man was NOT their uncle! He was a monster who took our boys from us!" Roger snapped, shocking Shanks with the venom in his voice. He took a deep breath before continuing. "Look, believe us or not. Fine. Just... Blackbeard- that bastard- hurt them. He hurt them really badly before he was killed, and it did something to them." The man looked so tormented for a moment that Shanks found himself believing his claim even as his mind supplied the 'something' with ease. Broken. The bastard finally broke them...! Suddenly the flinch and jumpiness made sense. He met Newgate's eyes and the man nodded, reaching the same conclusion. "They're doing better," God, that's better? "really. Just... be careful with them."

Dragon spoke up. "They get spooked easily. That's what started this whole mess. Ace was being a smartass and 'ran away' across the street with Luffy. And I just saw the cars and danger and when I shouted at them... they were gone." he let out a frustrated sound, "Again."

Other than the blindly bolting part, it sounded very typical of the two brothers when they were annoyed at someone. Shanks had to fight to keep a straight face, since he'd been caught flat-footed more than once that way. "Sounds rough."

The two dragged chairs over, and he felt Luffy tense slightly once more. This time he nudged him slightly with his knee and felt the boy relax. "It is." Roger bemoaned. "Not in a good way, if you know what I mean."

"I do, brat." Newgate nodded.

"Well," Rayleigh began, placing an order of cod in front of both Shanks and Newgate, "you two want food as well or just booze?" he picked up the used glasses and met Shanks disappointed pout with a shrug, casually tapping the glasses twice on the table. *They ate my lunch, huh?*

"Just booze." Dragon replied. It always amazed Shanks how Rayleigh never took orders for drinks.
He just bought you something and damn if the man wasn't spot on. The look on Dragon's face when the old barkeep didn't bother to wait to see what he wanted was almost as good as the one he wore when the bottle of Mike's hard lemonade was placed him front of him. Mike's hard Iced tea for Roger. Weenies, he scoffed good naturally to himself. "So, what are you two doing here? I'd have assumed the death of Teach would have ended your alliance."

"You knew about that?" Whitebeard asked.

Roger took a sip of his drink, "Yes. Surprising, honestly."

_Crap, think fast. Don't mention their sons... can't believe they're their sons! "Well, actually, it's a little embarrassing, to tell the truth." he hedged, thinking fast._

"Oh?"

Great, now everyone was staring at him. Even Rayleigh from the bar. "Yes. You see, we discovered we shared a common interest." He held up his glass of Grey Goose, "Beyond drinking, that is." Still, his mind was blank.

Dragon seemed intrigued. "What is it?" Newgate's look asked the same thing.

_All I can think of is the boys! Shit! "Dogs."

"Dogs?"

"Chihuahuas, to be exact." He went to take a sip of his drink, not expecting the hard punch to his thigh as someone under the table figured it out. He started to choke and cough on his drink.

"Are you alright, Red-hair?" Shanks waved off Roger's concern, and the man looked to Whitebeard instead. The man had a fantastic poker face. "Seriously?"

"I greatly admire the tiny dogs."

"Tiny but mighty!" He wheeze in agreement.

Newgate's eyes twinkled, "Why, I've seen one stand up to a Great Dane and win. A true underdog, if you'll forgive the pun."

The two Resistance members just stared at them like they were nuts. Luckily they were saved from digging the hole any deeper. "I knew I'd find you two here." Zoro bitched, coming in from the kitchen as usual and grabbing a beer before even looking at them. "We've got trouble. Word has it that the Resis-" he finally turned around and saw Dragon and Roger sitting with them. "Fuck. Just fuck. They don't pay me enough for this kind of shit."

"But it's fun!" Shanks waved him closer. "Zoro, Roger, Dragon."

_Not a pleasure."

"Dirty cop?" Dragon guessed and Zoro's eye twitched.

"Hell no!" He snapped.

Roger eyed the young man, "but you are a cop. Talking to the mafia."

"To clean up the mess! This slimeball Blackbeard had his fingers into everything. I'm an undercover agent. Only a few people on the streets know, and I don't work their turf. So when the
shit hit the fan, I got stuck being the go-between to weasel out the cops and shit working for Teach. Pain in the ass." He chugged half his drink. "Now I hear word on the street that some Resistance shitheads are looking for a place to set up shop in the city. In our neighborhood, or close by."

Now the attention was on Roger and Dragon. Whitebeard spoke for all of them. "Is this true?"

"In a way." Roger nodded. "We're looking for some apartments. Just for a few years, hopefully."

Zoro snorted as he finished his drink and putting it down before crossing his arms. "Yeah, until you take over."

"It's not like that." Dragon wouldn't look at them, though. "We just want to set up a few of our men here is all."

Sanks glared at him, "Were you even going to ask us first?" Roger muttered something about looking further uptown. An area that was out of everyone's territory and thus free game. He shook his head in disgust.

"That's it." The young cop threw his hands up in the air. "I'm out. I'm taking that job in Detroit."

"NOOOOO!" Luffy burst from under the table, almost knocking it and the two chairs Roger and Dragon were sitting on over. "Don't leave!"

"L-Luffy?!" Zoro caught the teen with the ease of long practice as the kid launched himself at his best friend. "What were you doing under the table?"

"Hiding." He pulled away, obviously uncomfortable with the contact and Zoro let him despite the fact that Zoro had always been one of the few that Luffy had never had a problem with before. "You can't leave! Well, you can...but don't! Cause Ace and me got our dads to let us go to college, cause Ace wanted-to-and-I-thought-it-wouldbefuntoobutifyourone I'll miss you!"

Shanks had almost forgotten what it was like dealing with Luffy. Zoro didn't miss a beat. He held up a hand. "Slow down. Breathe. Let me see if I got this right. You and Ace," he pointed to the space between Newgate and Shanks where Ace now sat eating their food, "are going to college?" A happy nod. "Here, in the city." A very happy, enthusiastic nod. "Ok. So...those are your dads?" He pointed at Dragon and Roger, glaring.

"Yep! Dragon's mine, and Roger's Ace's, but our mom's the same."

"Uh-huh?"

"Long story." Ace said.

"Right." Zoro immediately dropped it, like it didn't matter at all. "So then you two are actually looking for a place for them to stay, then?"

"Exactly!" Roger beamed, "And a place for some of our men to keep an eye on them."

"I don't need a babysitter!"

Dragon just looked at Ace for a second, giving the impression that they'd had this conversation before, since the young man didn't flinch away like Shanks had expected him to. "If you want to go to college, you do. And you'll both go to your sessions, or I'll put a stop to this whole thing right now, Ace." Sessions? Both Ace and Luffy pouted, making him even more curious. But now wasn't the time.
Zoro finally broke the tension. "Alright, I'll stay if Luffy's going to he here."

"Yay!"

"Just one question. Has anyone warned the college about Luffy yet?"
As he waited for the elevator to finish making it's decent, the Sabo reflexively checked the scrap of paper the waiter had handed him. The man had seen him going over the classifieds and had mentioned that his friends were looking for a roommate. He'd said that the rent would be affordable, and that there was some sort of built in security, something the waiter had insisted was important in the area he was looking at. The only problem was that his friends were still in the middle of moving in and didn't have a phone line. So, despite slight misgivings, he'd taken the paper that the waiter had jotted down the info on thinking that it couldn't hurt to at least look. It did make him a little uneasy when the man had wished him good luck, though. Now two flights down from the place that could very well be his new home it occurred to him that this might be a bad idea. It was just outside the slums, after all, and he was taking the word of some guy that served him lunch that the place was safe. These friends could be murders, or drug dealers. Or murderous drug dealers. Even if he had come all the way from London to get away from his parents and see the other side of life, this wasn't what he had in mind when he pictured it. It make him a little uneasy. The elevator dinged, interrupting his thoughts before he could lose even more nerve.

"-ucking cheat!"

The blond could only gape at the man ranting in the elevator, oblivious to the open doors. He wore a heavy denim jacket with faux fur trim open to show off an impressive six-pack as he shouted at the other occupant, a hand running through his red hair. The other had a long shaggy blond mane of hair with a hockey mask on top of it like a hat for some reason. His T-shirt was so tight it might have been painted on, but at least he had one, unlike his friend.

"I warned you not to play against him, Eustas." The hockey mask wearing guy sighed.

"How the hell was I supposed to know he was a fucking pool shark?" Eustas snarled. "He's a dumbass!"

"Except in physics. And pool is a game of physics."

The other glowered. "I thought that was billiards. Could have stopped me before I lost six games!"

"It was funny." He gestured for the taller man to leave the elevator, and Sabo was quick to get out of the way. Still, Eustas glared at him.

"What the fuck you lookin' at?" He snarled as he shoved past. "When you putting your mask on?"

"I'm not." The other replied as Sabo quickly got onto the elevator "Last time I wore it for your amusement, I was nearly arrested on the streets. I have no desire to be shot over a cup of coffee."

"Chickenshit!" The redhead cackled, door closing and cutting off whatever else he was going to say.

Sabo just hoped they weren't the 'friends' the waiter was talking about as he pressed the number two and felt the hydraulics kick in. He was impressed. He'd been expecting a cheaper elevator. The hall the elevator opened onto wasn't anything that impressive. With tile floors and fluorescent lighting, at least it was clean, which was more than Sabo could say for some of the other places he had checked out. Still, the apartment could be a tiny rat-hole for all he knew. Even if his possible
roommates weren't axe murders. Cautiously he knocked on the door. When the voices within made no indication of having heard him, he shrugged and knocked harder, almost pounding on the wood.

"Door!" A voice shouted.

"No shit, idiot." Someone retorted, "Answer it!"

"Don't wanna. You do it!"

"For the love of... Put that back, you dork. And you, book away. Now. I'll get the door." The voice on the other side of the door sighed before the door opened, revealing a man with reddish brown hair coiffed forward and a small goatee. The man stared down at Sabo blankly for a moment before grinning. "Ace! Luffy! Got another guy who might want to be your roommate!" He called over his shoulder before turning back to him and gesturing for him to enter. "Good luck kid." Because that didn't sound ominous at all.

The apartment was spacious with a generous sized main room that seemed to be a combination of a dining area and a living-room. Next to the windows stood a desk with two laptops on it, a bookshelf against the wall. School texts already lined the top shelf, though classes didn't start for another week. The place felt...unlived in to him. Everything was still very new. When Sabo noticed he was being watched, he startled, looking at the dark grey eyes that observed him a guarded amusement. The guy had to be about Sabo's age, messy hair, tank top and a text book closed on the counter in front of him as he ignored the pompadoured man's nudge. He just sat and stared at him.

"Uh. Nice place?" Sabo offered, earning a snort.

"Better than the shithole we used to live in. That's for sure." The dark haired young man walked over to the fridge and pulled out four old fashioned bottles of sarsaparilla soda. After slapping two into the palms of his friend he walked over to Sabo. "Our...family," he grimaced, "insisted on this place though. So, whaddya gonna do? Name's Ace." He popped the top off a bottle while still holding the other before passing it over and then tackled his own.

"Sabo." The drink was really good, especially with how warm the apartment was.

"Wacha in town for?"

"College."

"And you don't want to live on campus?" Ace's eyebrows went up and Sabo felt that he was suspicious.

"I've had a bit of a...falling out with my mother and father. They'll pay for my education, but not for room and board. It's complicated."

"What, didn't want to go to Yale?" There was venom in Ace's voice.

"No." He snapped back, "I didn't want to be Daddy's little clone. A puppet that did what it was told."

Ace said nothing to that, just looked him over as he seethed. Finally the man turned, gesturing for him to follow him with a shrug of his shoulder and a nod, a decision apparently reached. He didn't bother to see if Sabo followed as he padded over to the long couch, bare feet making almost no noise on the hardwood floors. "Rent's cheap. Basically non-existent, really. Our family's working out some guilt issues by paying for the place. So all that needs to be paid for is food, internet and cable. Or in this case, Verizon Fios. You've got your pick of two rooms. Master bedroom is ours."
"Ours?" He found himself asking.

Ace slapped a pair of feet that Sabo noticed were sticking over the back of the couch. "Yeah, me and Luffy."

One of the feet wiggled. "Hi!"

He walked around the side of the couch, noticing for the first time that there were two more people in the room. One was working on the television, a bag of tools next to him. The other was the owner of the feet. Sabo's first impression was the guy was weird. He sat on the couch with his head hanging off the front, legs resting on the backrest like it was the most comfortable thing in the world as he watched the man working on the television. The pompadoured man from before must have handed him a soda which now sat next to him on the floor. As for the pompadoured man, he was sitting on one of the two chairs idly flipping through a magazine but obviously paying attention to what was going on.

Ace had walked around the other side of the couch and plopped next to the inverted kid, ignoring the feet that were eye level. "This is Luffy."

"Er. Hello, Luffy." Sabo hadn't thought he'd be rooming with a gay couple. Not that he had a problem with that. Not at all. It was just a little... unexpected is all.

Luffy had been staring at him intently. Finally the young man, possibly older teen, sat up; swinging his legs around in a way that made Sabo a little envious of his flexibility. "Ace 'n me are brothers." Suddenly he felt really foolish, but the way the youngest grinned at him told Sabo it wasn't a big deal.

"The weirdo with the hair"

"Hey!"

"Is Thatch. You can ignore him, he's not going to be rooming here." Ace explained, blocking the pillow that was playfully thrown at him. "He's just a friend."

"So, college, huh?" Thatch leaned in like he hadn't just pelted his friend with a pillow. "Which one?"

"The New York City College of Technology."

"Really? City Tech? That's the one me n' Ace are going to, too!"

"Ace and I." Ace corrected rolling his eyes. "I know he doesn't look it"

"or act it"

"but Luffy's going to be a college freshman."

Sabo stared at the kid who now was balancing the mostly full bottle on one finger. "You're kidding, right?"

Thatch laughed. "Sadly, no. Not sure what to classify Ace here as. Maybe a parasitic infection, since he leaves this burning se-" Ace lunged at him, causing the man to yelp in mock-fear as he tried to avoid the other's grasp. Sabo looked on in amusement as Ace forcefully dragged the other halfway onto the couch and made as if to give him a noogie. "Not the hair! Not the hair!"
"What he means to say," Ace released his friend with a smile that was suspiciously innocent, "is that it's my first year attending a college. Took some classes online for a while, though, so I've got the requirements out of the way. Probably around a sophomore. You?"

"Well…" He fidgeted, "I went to my father's Alma Mater, but I dropped out after a year." Sabo made a face. "It was all about the money; how much your family had, what you would inherit. There was no real learning. So I left. My parents...didn't like that." Understatement of the year, he snorted, thinking back on the harsh words and threats. His parent's had tried locking him in the guest house. When he'd gotten out, it was to discover all his accounts had been frozen and all 'socially unacceptable' things had been 'donated to charity'. That had been just the start of it, too.

"Shiihihihi!" A warm weight flopped into his lap causing Sabo to almost jump in surprise. He blinked, clearing away the memories to see Luffy making himself comfortable across both his and Ace's laps. "You get into a fight?" Luffy grinned up at him.

"Something like that. Took a year off to get my head straight and told them that if they didn't want pictures of me in the tabloids sullying their precious reputation they'd let me go to a school of my choice. A real school. So, here I am." Sabo held up his arms, before letting them drop. He knew it sounded stupid, turning his back on his family like that over school, but it was so much more than that. College had just been the last straw for him. But if these guys didn't get it, then this was obviously not going to be the place for him.

Silence met his statement before Ace grinned slyly. "You know, if you ever need a hand ruining your family name Lu and -" Thatch slapped a hand over his mouth and Luffy started to laugh.

"Alright." The pompadour'd man groused, "Sabo, kid, you didn't hear that, ok? Your folks are assholes, but trust me. You don't want their help for something like that. Next thing you know, you'd be up on a stripper pole."

"That only happened once!" Luffy pouted, sitting up again.

Thatch made a horrified face and pulled his hand away from Ace's mouth, "Did you just lick me?"

"It got you your money." Ace ignored the question.

"... I don't even want to know." Sabo grinned, trying really hard not to think about it. He really hoped that they were joking, but with how red Thatch was it wasn't likely. Ace was looking downright smug and Luffy was gleeful, but neither were maliciously so. He liked the easy camaraderie between the three, particularly Ace and Luffy. He knew he was going to take the room. Even though he'd just met the brothers, being with them just felt so… so right. Like hanging out with someone you've known forever. Sabo saw a lot of good times and a lot of troublemaking in their future. It really made him wonder "What the hell have I gotten myself into?"

"Nothing good, Kid." he jumped slightly, having forgotten completely about the man who had been working on the TV. The guy stood, pulling a bandanna off his blond hair as he tossed some sort of pliers into his bag. "Done."

Thatch went from hanging half on the couch to standing between it and the man. He looked relaxed, but there was something about the way the other man tensed slightly. "Watch it, Enel."

"What? Don't want the new meat to know what he's signed on for?" he played with an elongated ear lobe, glaring at the other before looking away with a muttered curse. Enel sneered at the three of them as he bent to pick up his bag, leaving Sabo very confused. More so when he realized how tense his new roommates were. "Tough shit, 'Shadow-sword'. He's going to hear about it sooner or
later; how your little friends" he said the word like it was a slur, "would do anything for their master. Teach's pets." It happened in a flash. Thatch closed the distance, wrenching the taller man's arm roughly, fist drawn back. Sabo was sure he was going to punch him until Thatch glanced behind at the couch. The anger didn't leave; if anything, Sabo thought the guy looked a lot scarier. But he put his fist down and yanked Enel almost off his feet as he manhandled him towards the door.

"Kept boys now-"

"That's ENOUGH out of you. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure I don't-"

Another rough shove, "So SHUT your trap before I shut it for you. Permanently." Thatch snarled, now at the door. He looked again at the couch, his expression softening before meeting Sabo's confused- and slightly afraid- look. "Watch them? I gotta take out this piece of shit." Sabo thought there was probably going to be a beating involved with that. He glanced over at Ace and Luffy. Ace was holding onto his bottle so tight his knuckles were white and Luffy had curled in on himself. Both were shivering, eyes scrunched shut. They were like completely different people; he didn't like it.

Sabo didn't know that he had gotten a smile that was overly polite and brittle as broken glass. He didn't know how frightening it sounded when he said "Of course. Take your time." so calmly with that smile. So Sabo didn't understand the glimmer of approval in Thatch's eye as the man nodded and left the apartment.

He turned his attention back to Luffy. The kid seemed to be the worse off, curled up as he was. Chewing his lip he tentatively reached out, hand pausing a scant inch from touching the trembling shoulder. Sabo was at a complete loss for what to do, and it was obvious that Ace was in no condition to help. Not with the way he'd gone sickly white. He was pretty sure Ace was having a panic attack or something. He just about fell off the couch when he heard a loud shout coming from the hall. It sounded like a fight had broken out right outside the door. Luffy let out a strangled whimpering whimper and hid his face in Ace's side, which finally got a reaction out of the other guy. He looked surprised at first. Like he wasn't sure what was going on. Sabo watched with morbid fascination as anger and despair warred on his face before Ace gently dropped an arm around his brother's shoulder.

"So…” Ace sounded bitter, "I guess you'll be leaving then. Nice knowing ya."

Sabo stared at him in shock for a moment. He had expected Ace to attempt to comfort his brother right away, not talk to him. Then again, he glanced at Luffy. The kid was still shaking and making a keening whimper. I don't know if talking to him would do any good yet… He turned his attention back to Ace, who was studiously not looking at him. It didn't take a genius to see he honestly thought Sabo was going to leave. Something told him no one was blame him if he did; no one but himself, that is. Sabo sighed, knowing in an abstract way that this was one of those BIG decisions that change your life forever and irrevocably. One that, in a book, the protagonist agonizes over for a whole chapter. Hell, it takes a person a whole movie to make this kind of choice. Or, it's supposed to. Too bad I've always been a spur of the moment kind of guy.

"Well, I'll have to go get my stuff later." He replied, stretching for the TV remote and turning it on before cranking the volume in an attempt to drown out the ongoing fight outside. "It would be easier if you could give me a hand. I only have four suitcases."

Ace turned and looked at him, mouth agape. "You can't be serious."
"No, really." He grinned, pretending to misunderstand. "I'm going to have go go shopping for just about everything. My folks, er, gave away just about all my stuff."

"Wow, that really sucks... But I mean, you can't be seriously staying, can you?" Ace waved his free arm towards the door, "You heard him, didn't you? We... we were..."

Sabo held up a hand, "I'm going to stop you right there, Ace. All I heard was a fart; lots of noise, stink, and hot air coming from an asshole." He saw Ace's lips twitch slightly. "I don't listen to assholes."

The ghost of a smile was gone. "Even if it's true?"

"One thing I've learned is to judge people for myself, and I think we'll get along fantastically, don't you?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, there you have it!" He waved the remote in Ace's face, "I didn't come all the way over here on the suggestion of a waiter who may or may not have spit in my soup because I might have asked if his friends were axe murderers to turn back now. ...You're not an axe murder, right?" A half snicker from Luffy, and Sabo felt like he'd won some sort of battle.

"Axes are hard to keep sharp. We prefer chainsaws." Ace replied, trying to keep a straight face before he started to laugh. "Seriously, though... there are some things you should probably know about us. If you really wanna stay here."

"Eh. Don't care." Sabo shrugged, flopping against the couch and sliding till he rested against Luffy. The teen squirmed for a moment before settling down. Soon Ace and Sabo were using the coffee table as a footrest and leaning companionably against each other while Luffy used them as his own couch. Idly, Sabo changed the channel, no longer hearing the sounds of a fight outside.

"I like this show." Luffy spoke up when he switched to Toddlers and Tiaras.

"You really like this show? Why?"

"Yeah. Have you seen how much those dresses are worth? Think of all the meat you could buy! It's crazy." Luffy shook his head. "Hey, Sabo? You really don't care?"

"Mmm." He thought about how he wanted to say it. "It's more like... I want you to tell me when you feel ready to. Not because you think you should. " He looked down at Luffy's wide eyes, "Get it?"

"Yeah, but what if you get hurt?"

"Then it's my own fault, not yours." He offered them a grin, well aware that it was a hollow look. "Look, I got secrets of my own, too. I've done shit I'm not proud of, and I know how to protect myself. So don't worry about it."

"Hey. Sorry that took so long." Both he and Ace turned their heads to glance at Thatch before turning back to the TV. "Is that Toddlers and Tiaras?"

"Luffy likes it."

"Alright..." Thatch made his way around the couch, taking a lot longer than Sabo was expecting.
When he got there, he just stood and looked at the three of them for a second and shook his head before joining them. "I take it Sabo's still moving in?"

"Yep!" Luffy chirped. "We gotta go get his stuff later. OOOOHH! Then after maybe we can take him to Rip-Off and introduce him to Shanks!"

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea, kiddo. Didn't Makino catch you in there last night after ten?" Thatch elaborated, "Rip-Off is a bar. No minors or anyone under twenty-one after ten. And Makino's, well... she's sort of family."

"I see. Well, I'm twenty, so I'd have to leave at ten." Sabo offered a grin, "If we get caught, that is."

"Like that ever stopped me before," Ace shoved against him, "know how to mix a drink? No? I'll teach ya and you can work the bar some nights. Shakky usually needs the help."

"Yeah, when you have an attack! Shihiihi-el! Ace has got me!" Luffy flailed as his brother scooped him up and rolled them both off the couch, tickling him.

Sabo ignored the plea for help for now, figuring Luffy would be alright for a while. Instead he turned to Thatch. "Huh?"

"Ace is narcoleptic." The man explained. "He's taking medication for it." Luffy let out a loud squeal and took off with Ace hot on his heels, both laughing. Thatch rubbed the back of his head, "Since Ace doesn't like talking about what's wrong... I should probably warn you that Luffy's got some issues with night terrors and sleepwalking. You know, before he wakes you up in the middle of the night."

"I take it he's on medication?" Thatch nodded. "This have anything to do with what that guy was saying?"

"Look, Enel was talking shit. The crap Teach did to tho-"

"Don't tell me." Sabo cut him off, earning a surprised look. He shrugged, "I'd rather hear it from them when they wanna tell me. It was bad, right?" The expression on the older man's face said it all. "Then I hope you beat the crap out of that lying sack of shit. Hey! Ace! Luffy! Come on, I wanna get my crap moved in before we go eat!"

"Be right there!" Ace yelled back.

As the two of them stood, Thatch held out his hand. "I knew there was something about you I liked, kid. Any time you need something, give me a call. I mean it. Not that I think you'll need help. Now let me go call Juzo and get his van. Make this nice and fast so we can feed the two bottomless pits."

Sabo grinned, running a hand over the back of his head as his stomach rumbled. "Er, three bottomless pits, actually. I'm starving."

Chapter End Notes

And you all thought I forgot about Sabo! I've had him in mind since chapter 12 (Breaking and Entering) and the chapter actually plotted out completely since 20 (Spider Solitaire).
Lily

Lily, wife of one of the world's most renowned criminals, was pissed. Boy, was she pissed off. Normally, it took quite a lot to get her so worked up, but her dear husband and his friend really knew how to push her buttons. She was going to start taking care of Ace again, and they were not going to stop her! Not this time! She had a doctor's note and everything! A half amused snort escaped her as she thought about how ludicrous that sounded. It was true, though. After three years of following the doctor's very restrictive regimen of exercise, the man had declared her fit for light duty. That had meant a year of having her young friend Makino take Luffy to the park because his own mother was too unwell to even keep up with a two year old. True, she'd spent the time with Ace- giving him all the love she could- but it still hurt.

Logically Lily knew it was her own fault her body had betrayed her like that. When Rogue had come to her with the news she was pregnant, she'd been so happy for her friend. Happy, and horribly jealous. It hadn't taken Rouge long to realize something was bothering her, either. Not when they were as close as sisters. So she'd told her friend how she'd been diagnosed with Premature Ovarian Failure, and couldn't have children. But, oh, how she wanted a little one of her own. So when Rouge had offered to donate her own ovum, she'd leapt at the chance. Neither of them had thought about the dangers it could pose. When Lily had even stopped to think about what a risk it was, it was too late; Rouge was gone. Her vibrant, amazing best friend was gone. So she'd badgered, nagged, and bullied Dragon until he'd agreed to let her try at least. She owed it to Rouge. She was happy with over 10 years of living with the painful condition, and had made sure she was in peak condition all while caring for poor Ace. Even after the procedure was done, she continued on seeing Ace as her belly grew, along with her husband's concerns. Concerns she ignored, because what else could she do?

At six months pregnant she was put on complete bed-rest. Doctor's orders. Things just went downhill from there. Her water broke two months early and she almost miscarried. She got sick, so very sick… Dragon stayed by her side the whole time, never once saying 'I told you so', even as his worry screamed it at her. When her darling son, Luffy, was finally born, she'd thought-hoped, really, things would get better. They did, eventually. It had just taken a long time. Much longer than she had wanted. Lily couldn't deny she'd almost died. Or how weak she was after Luffy was born. There was a small part of her that called herself stupid and foolish for even trying to do what she'd been told her body couldn't handle. It was the same part that ignored the resentment she was in Dragon's eyes sometimes when he looked at their son. But then, she'd look at Luffy and she knew it was worth every risk, every moment of pain and heartache.

If there was one thing she regretted, it was not being there for Ace as much as she wanted to be. Now, though, now there would be no stopping her. She had her 'all clear' from the doctor. At this point, Dragon and Roger could go crying to Garp if they didn't like it. She was going to take care of the boys- with a little help for Makino of course. She was finally going to introduce Ace to his little half-brother. In fact, as long as she was out she was going to get a nice big chocolate cake! Both boys did love chocolate, after all. Maybe after dinner today, she and Makino could have a quiet play-date between the two. It would be better to introduce them calmly, right? Nothing too exciting, maybe a family movie night. Yes, that sounded perfect! Dragon and Roger couldn't say that was too strenuous; not when they'd be right there, too…

IVA
The night was no longer young, and Iva couldn't be happier about it. It had been a long night, and even if Ivan didn't take customers anymore, it was still stressful waiting to make sure those who did made it back safely. There was a knock on the door. No one ever knocked on the door. Worried it might be one of her Candies, Ivan put down the mug of hot coffee and brandy and strode purposefully to the door just as there was a second knock. The third knock was more insistent, rude even, causing Ivan to yank the door open and glare out into the lightning darkness. At first he saw no one, but then looking down slightly there was a kid with dark hair and a scowl on his face. The brat, Ivan noticed with a practiced eye, was going to be quite the looker when he got older. Now he just had an unfinished awkwardness about him.

Dark eyes looked up at him warily. The kid opened his mouth, brows wrinkled before closing it like a fish. He blinked, then finally spoke. "This the, er, 'Candy Shop?'"

"Vyes," Ivan confirmed, shifting the robe on his shoulders, "it is, vmy place."

"Cool. Let me in."

His blood went cold. Ivan might cater to some clients with weird tastes, but he never took on an apprentice younger than sixteen. The thought repelled him. "No. Vwe do not hire children. Go home, boy."

"Ain't got a home."

"Zhen go to the shelter."

"Without protection?" The kid glared at him, "I'm not fucking stupid. Listen, it's freezing out here. Just open the damn door. I can pay ya." The kid shoved his hand into his capris, pulling out a was of mixed bills. It was then Ivan noted the kid was shivering slightly. "Just leave me enough for some food."

Ivan stood there, warring with himself for a moment. He didn't want to give the brat the wrong idea, but… It IZ cold. He is not dressed warm enough, what could one day hurt? Finally he stood to the side. "Fine. Come in, boy. Keep your money. Use it to buy clothes, yes?"

The money vanished like it had never been there. Instead of hustling inside like he'd expected, the boy walked away, over to the two cans by the dumpster for recycling and knelt. "Luffy... Lu, time to wake up..." The kid huffed. "Idiot, too cold to sleep out here." Ivan expected a dog or a kitten maybe. Not a bundle of oversized shirts on a painfully thin young frame.

"Are there two of you?" He almost shouted, causing the younger to stir groggily.

"Mmmmm...Ace..." came a whine, "Cold...'en'll find Bonbon's friend?"

"I found...him...Just gotta get your skinny ass inside." The elder now scooted past Ivan, settling the bundle in his arms down on the recently vacated chair. Ivan poured him some coffee, pulling over a stool as he gestured for the boy to sit. "Thanks."

"Who iz this... Bonbon who sent you to me?" The boy sullenly looked away. "Zat is what you said. I can not have someone sending me children. Iz bad for business."

Ace stared at him, snorting in shock. "Really? It's a whore-house. Don't you cater to pervs?"

"Do not insult me! This is no place for brats like you or ze little one."

"Whatever, lady." The kid dug around in his shoe, pulling out a battered scrap of paper. "Name's
Ace, and that's my brother, Luffy. Anyway, met this guy in Florida...." he handed over the paper. "Weird guy. Name was Bentham, but Lu keep calling him Bonbon.

"Oh?" Vaguely he remembered his friend saying something about Florida and a new name.... but at the time Iva'd only been half listening. "And he told you to come to me?"

Ace shrugged. "Made me promise to come find you if we were coming this far north." he huffed, "Got to the point he bribed my brother with candy so he wouldn't forget to find the 'candy-man'. Asshole. Do you know how hard it is to keep a ten year old from taking candy from strangers when you live on the street?"

"Hard?" he hazarded a guess as the pre-teen yawned.

"Very." Another yawn. "Got to town yesterday. Asked around, now here we are. Be out of your hair by tomorrow. Just.... needed... a place... to w-warm up...." The kid was half-asleep, eyes closed as he slid sideways to lean on his snoring brother. In moments he was snoring as well.

Ivan looked at the note. My friend! This is little Ace and Luffy! I'm sure I told you about them. Ah, but where you listening to me when I did? His eye twitched. Bentham knew him well. They're mes petits amis. Runaways, no? They would not tell me why, of course. They are funny. Luffy especially. I would not wish to see them hurt, they are too cute. So I send them to you. Maybe you can help them. Even if not, the connection won't hurt. Connections are important. Your friend Bentham (Bon Clay~)

"Sneaky bastard." He sighed, folding the note. He owed it to "Bon" to look after them a little bit for introducing him to Croco-boy. with that in mind he went to move the snoozing duo in his own bed. He'd take the couch just this once.

Picking up Ace, he noticed how light the kid was; definitely under-weight. He was still shivering slightly too. Frowning, Ivan placed the boy on the bed after tugging down the covers. Ace was slightly flushed- he hoped it was from the temperature change. The little one, Luffy, was lighter still. With the rags he was in, the boy looked very young and dirty. Ivan decided tomorrow good long baths were in order for both of them. And she might just burn her sheets, just in case. Luffy snuggled close against his brother, the elder throwing an arm over him as Iva pulled up the comforter. Gently he carded a hand through the matted hair, sighing. She paused, hand against Luffy's forehead. The child had a definite fever.

"Looks like I'm stuck with you for a while." She muttered, turning the lights down low. "I'll send one of the Candy-boys for medicine later." Yawning herself, she settled on the couch, planning on a few hours of shut-eye.

The next thing Ivankov knew, there was sunlight streaming in, and someone was staring at him. Intently. It was enough to wake Iva up. Rolling over on the couch, Ivan opened one eye to find the small boy watching him intently. It took a moment to remember where the kid had come from, and then Ivan worried about the fever the kid had. Luffy's eyes, wide dark brown and innocent, were glassy looking. A sure sign of the boy being unwell, if the flush wasn't a dead giveaway.

The boy smiled at him, noticing he was up. "Is your hair a'posta be purple?"

"Yes."

"Is it, um...dyed?" The grin got wider. "'Cause, that's be So cool if it wasn't!"

"It's dyed." Ivan sat up, feeling all the cricks from sleeping on the couch.
"Oh…” The boy seemed to think about that for a moment. "Are you a boy or a girl?" Well, the kid was blunt.

"Sometimes I'm a boy, and sometimes I'm a girl." He honestly replied, wondering how the boy would react to the truth.

"Oh, ok. Mr-Ma'am, Ace wanna't know if you were hungry. But you were asleep, so's he left me to watch you while he got food."

"He did what?"

"Left to get food. Don't worry, Ace'll be back soon! And….and he said it would be warm and there'd be lots, caus he'd buy it!" Luffy sounded so excited, and Ivankov was saddened to realize how the two had obviously been living. Most likely eating out of dumpsters, flitching food when they can…

"Luffy?" A mop of slightly cleaner black hair popped around the door frame. Grey eyes immediately fixed on Ivan.

"Ace!" The boy shouted, rushing his brother. "Food!"

"Yeah, food. You up?"

"Yes." Ica stood, following the boys into the kitchen and watching Ace put styrofoam trays down. It looked like a lot of food, but given their unsteady diet life very well might be feast or famine for them. Eyeing Luffy's dirty arms, his hands were clean at least, he pointed at the boy. "You, bath after breakfast."

"M'kay? Oh! Ace, isn't Mr-Ma'am cool? Purple hair!"

"It's Ivankov."

"That's a mouthful." Ace said, mouth ironically full of sausage.

Ivan tried not to smile and failed. "Most call me Iva or Ivan, depending."

"Depending on what?" The preteen was suspicious.

"On if you're a girl or a boy, right?" Luffy smiled turning to his brother while bouncing in his seat. "Like Bon-Bon!"

"..." Ace stared at his brother, finally blinking. "Oh." He looked at Ivan, "So, like how Bon Clay did that cline-face-thing….a, er Devil-something?"

That was a surprise. "You know about Devil-fruits?"

"Only a little. Bon said they gave people weird abilities, but… I donno, he said it was dangerous or some shit." "Zhey are. If anyone offers you one, think carefully about it. You could lose your life."

"Bon said the same thing." Luffy said, food mostly gone.

"Good, now. Bath then bed- both of you. You are flushed. I Vwill not have sick little boys running around. You make my vworkers sick, is scrubbing the floors for you. We work something out when you feel better."
Ace glared at him. "I ain't taking no handouts. Lu, either."

"And I will not let you boys work for me. You are too young." Ivan glared back until Ace petulantly looked away. "I find you something to do. Not to worry. A…. business arrangement, yes? But first, sleep. Sick people work less, make, less."

**Marco**

"You think you bought enough food?" Thatch moaned as he hefted the bags in his arms again.

Marco just looked at him. "It's Ace and Luffy, yoi."

"Good point. We should go back for more." His friend joked good naturedly as they squeezed out of the elevator.

Marco wasn't worried; between the two of them they had ten bags of groceries. He hoped he had room in his fridge for all of it, since he'd gone out last night and bought enough drinks for everyone. Luckily the food was only needed to keep for a few hours before the arduous task of cooking began. Thank God two of his guests were the most indiscriminate eaters he knew. Then there was Thatch, who'd volunteered himself to help cook, so of course he'd like everything they'd make. That just left the new kid, Sabo. Marco had only seen him in passing, but his brother in-arms spoke well of the brat. Said he was a good fit, both for the brothers and for their world. Wouldn't say anything else, though. Naturally Marco was curious; Thatch was very judgmental about people who were in Ace and Luffy's lives now. If by judgmental you meant telling anyone who tried to get close to them that he could hide a body where no one would find it. Not that Marco had room to talk, so far he only approved of Makino. He definitely didn't like that Hawkins guy, even if Ace said that the young therapist was helping. So he wanted to meet this Sabo character that seemingly became an inseparable part of Ace and Luffy's lives.

"After you."

"Why thank you. You're such a gentleman." Thatch paused for a moment before continuing on into the kitchen. "You moved some stuff around or something?" He asked as he quickly unloaded the bags and started sorting everything.

"What do you mean?" He nudged his friend so he could get past him into the pantry. "You live right down the hall, what would have changed since yesterday?"

"I don't know, Marco. The place just looks different, alright?"

Marco rolled his eyes, "Whatever yoi." The two worked in companionable silence for a while, knowing to enjoy it while it lasted. Picking up the stack of pre packaged ground chuck he toed the fridge open, already planning out what needed to be cooked first. "I'm going to put the noodles on in a minute. We can always reheat them, right?"

"Sounds good to me." Thatch had already started to rummage under his counter for bowls, a box of cake mix held in his hand. "Got any wooden spoons?"

"Third drawer on your left." He absently replied, moving aside the CORES to make room. He froze. "Thatch?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you by this?" He turned, holding up a four pack of Guinness.
The brunette just stared at him. "Why the hell would you buy that crap? I thought you hated that."

"I didn't, yoi." He stood, putting the beer back in the fridge. "I'll be right back."

"Yeah yeah. Trying to get out of work." Thatch snorted good naturedly. "Let me know if you need a hand prowling."

At first it didn't look like anything was out of place, just a general feeling of something being off. The mail from the day before caught his attention. Marco was sure he'd left it face up on the endtable, but it was facedown. Something about it reminded him of Ace for some reason. Something about upside down... It said something about his trust in his young friend that before he'd even finished processing the thought he had his cell out and called Thatch.

"Ye'llo?" Wherever his friend was, it sounded noisy.

"Ace, were you at my place, today?"

"Get down from there! LU! Sabo, don't encourage him. What was that, Marco?"

"Did you stop by my place yet?" He tried again, frowning as he turned on the TV to find the NASA channel was on. He didn't even know he had the NASA channel.

"I thought we weren't supposed to come by till later, like five, right?" The other replied, sounding a little annoyed, which instantly put Marco on alert. "Look Marco, I've be-" raucous laughter could be heard, undeniably Luffy's.

"Ace?"

"Hello? Are you still there?" The person who spoke had a slight accent.

"Yes." Marco sighed, guessing what happened. "He have an attack? I'm Marco, by the way."

"Sabo. But I guess you knew that." The kid sounded like he was grinning. "Yeah, conked right out. First time this week, too. Hope it's not a long spell; he's the only one with your address."

"Is that so?" Marco once again felt the tickle of suspicion.

"It is. Luffy, can you move him instead of watching people walk over him?" There was a muttered reply. "He'd kill you. I don't care if you think it would be cool."

Marco sighed, not even wanting to know what Luffy had suggested. Reluctantly he decided he'd just have to get answers from Ace that evening. If he was behind all the small changes. There was still the possibility that Thatch was playing a trick on him, but he doubted it. "Right then. I'll see you guys at five. If he's still not up, call me and I'll send Thatch to get you guys."

"Fantastic. I've got to run, I think Luffy might be trying to sell his brother for a hotdog again." The line went dead.

"Everything alright?" Thatch called from the kitchen.

"Yeah...."

"Good, then get your ass in here and help me. I'm not doing all this cooking by myself!" His long time friend griped.

The rest of the day was spent cooking. The sense of disorder just grew stronger as time passed. It
was little things, his glassware was reorganized, with the mugs being on the top shelf. They
couldn't find the tablecloth at all or the placemats. When changing his shirt after Thatch had gotten
spaghetti sauce on him he noticed that his bed, while still made, had all the loose sheets firmly
tucked in. He knew he didn't do that, and the whole thing was making him twitchy.

Finally five O'clock rolled around and right on time there was a knock on the door. Marco was
there even before the second knock sounded, opening the door to a surprised Luffy who just
grinned widely at him. "Marco!"

"Hey, yoi."

"What's for dinner?" The teen got right to the point.

"Food." Marco smirked, knowing it didn't really matter what it was as long as it was eatable.

"Awesome! Ace, Sabo, did'ya hear that? FOOD!"

"No duh, idiot." Ace snorted, shoving his brother in and offering a cocky smile of his own, "Marco
knows better than to not feed you at dinner time."

"Says the other bottomless pit." A blonde put in, following the two dark haired brothers in. Marco
assumed it was the new roommate. "I'm surprised that we have anything in our fridge half the time,
the way you two eat. Sabo." He held out his hand, a wide friendly smile on his face.

Marco reluctantly took the hand, looking the kid over. He didn't look like much, but his clothes
spoke of a life of comfort. Something that was completely at odds with how the two brothers lived.
He wasn't sure if he liked the kid, but he'd promised Thatch he'd give the brat a chance. "Marco."

"Good to finally meet you." The smile came off as a bit smug for his taste.

Marco followed the younger blonde as he trailed behind the other two, making a beeline for the
kitchen. The sight of Thatch wielding a wooden spoon as he valiantly defended the salad from the
two black holes with legs was very entertaining. "Back! Back, I say!"

"FEEEEEEEEED USSSSS….Braiiii- I mean Saaalaadd!" Ace fake-moaned as he fended of the
wooden fork that had appeared to nearly slap him in the face while the spoon smacked away
Luffy's stretching roaming hands. That answered the question of if this Sabo character knew about
the boy's abilities. Or Luffy's at least.

Sabo wasted no time in snatching the whole bowl right from under Thatch's nose while he was
otherwise occupied. "Got it!"

"Traitor!"

"Never said I was on your side, Thatch!" The blonde laughed, flopping down onto a chair and
digging into the bowl with his free hand even as the two brothers descended, doing the same. In
that, he fit right in. "Luffy, leave some tomatoes, yeah?"

"S'rry…"

"Well, there goes the salad. D'ya think that'll hold them?" Thatch laughed, handing Marco a beer
as he came around the counter.

Marco didn't even bother to answer such a stupid question. It was a salad after all. It looked like
everything else would have to wait until after dinner. So after taking a long fortifying pull of his
beer and putting it down on the table as a placeholder for himself, he scooped up two of the side dishes. Luckily, the human-piranha were still crunching away on carrots and lettuce and didn't notice at first. The moment Thatch put down the salisbury steaks that changed. Sabo pitched the empty bowl with unerring accuracy into the sink as he was flanked by Ace and Luffy. Marco could only look on in amusement as the kid he'd thought was cut from a much different cloth dove into the food with the same gusto as his roommates; defending his own plate from a roving fork while stealing a few vegetables with his own knife. Luckily for him and Thatch, the three of them seemed to be too distracted by each other to try snatching food from them. Still, dinner was a relatively quiet affair as he and Thatch ate quickly. Better to be safe then starving, as Thatch would say. It was only after dinner when the five of them relaxed in the livingroom that conversation began again.

"I'm telling you Marco, my chemistry teacher is out to get me. A quiz every week! Every week! All those equations to balance… my checkbook was easier to figure out."

"You have a checkbook now?" Marco mused, only to have a pillow chucked at him.

"Yeah… the 'parental figures' insisted on it. But you're missing the point." Ace whined, "Professors are evil!"

"Like… Mob boss evil." Luffy pouted.

"Uh, you do realize that you're…" Thatch glanced uneasily at Sabo as he trailed off.

Sabo made a vague hand gesture, "If you're dancing around the whole Fathers-On-The-Most-Wanted-List thing, don't. A loudmouth let the cat out of the bag ages ago."

The pompondor'd man leaned forward, "Who?"

"Kidd." Three voices answered.

"Ah. Still, don't you think you're being a bit dramatic, Luffy?"

"No. I know they're that evil! Maybe even eviler!"

"Luffy has a five page paper due in English next week, and we won't help him." Sabo explained, half hugging the teen to stop his random flailing. "Still, I have to agree; some of the Professors are a little too eager when it comes to pop-quizzes."

Ace stood, kicking his roommate's leg out of his way. "Psychology quiz. Einstein here only scored an eighty-five and killed the curve."

"Jealous."

"Hardly." Ace snorted. "I'm going to grab another beer, anyone want anything?"

"Nothing for me, thanks." Thatch held up the bottle he was still working on.

"I'll take one, yoi."

"Sure, no problem. Sab, Lu?"

Luffy squirmed a bit, reaching for the remote, "Mmmm…nah…."

"I'd like something. Luffy, change the channel already, I'm not watching some show on… meteorites of the 1900's? What the hell?"
"NASA channel, good stuff when you can't get to sleep." Ace grunted as he plopped back into his seat. "Here you go, Coers for you...and Guinness for you, right Sabo?"

Both noticed the way Marco glared at that very can and they grinned identical cheshire-cat like smiles. Sabo popped the tab on the can and took a long drink. Holding out his can he nodded to Marco, "Did you know that there's a hollow plastic ball inside each can of Guinness called a widget?"

"No." He bit out, "I didn't know that."

"Ah. Well. Might be because you don't drink it." The grin was back as he held out a hand to Luffy who reached behind the couch pillow he was using and pulled out a block of….

"Fruitcake?"

"That is not fruitcake. It's green." Thatch oh-so-helpfully pointed out.

Marco wisely ignored his friend and the mystery thing in favor of more pressing issues. "You were the one that did this?"

"Got no clue what you're talking about."

"I think he's talking about the, you know." Luffy waved the remote wildly around.

Ace nodded, "Probably. How long'd it take ya?"

"What the hell did you guys do?"

"Avoiding the question… so not that long, but he didn't notice right away." Sabo sighed, "looks like I lost the bet."

"Pay up." Luffy's smile was blinding as he placed the thing on the table. "We got ya good!"

"Got you well- and this is why you do bad in English, Luffy… We were in here from about the time you left to go buy more stuff till right before you came back. Took forever to re-arrange your music collection."

"You touched my cds?"

"And the records." Sabo put in.

"Relax, will you? Change is good. Isn't that what you keep telling me?" Ace laughed, "Anyway, we left out the bedroom window and down the fire-escape. I'd say we were only about a block away when you called. Almost had heart-failure right there."

"Which is why I took the phone away. Where's the fun if he gives it away so quickly?" the younger blonde laughed as well.

Marco just shook his head. Thatch was right, Sabo more than fit right in with his young friends. In fact, it was entirely possible that he was a bad influence on them… or possibly the best thing to happen to them in a while. Either way, something in those three happy faces told him Sabo was going to be around for a very long time, so he might as well give in and admit he actually liked the kid. "Fine, you got me." He waited a moment while the three congratulated themselves. "BUT! I'm still not eating that. I think I just saw it move, yoi."

Sabo
"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Sabo managed to grunt out as he helped Zoro heft the new box-spring into Luffy's room.

"'Course it is." his roommate, Ace panted from his spot behind him where he and Marco were fighting a losing battle with the mattress.

"Luffy, for the love of God, get out of their way. If you you get paint on the mattress, I'll kill you." Thatch snapped. "Keep going, Zoro."

"I want a beer." The green haired man grumbled.

"We all do," Thatch agreed, "Shanks and Maki will be here soon with food and drinks."

Sabo flipped his side of the box spring and eased it onto the frame that they'd put together that morning before helping with the mattress. He, Luffy and Ace had painted the room the night before and now with the furniture finally in it, the spare room did look like Luffy's room. Granted, the dresser was only half finished and most of his stuff was still in the master bedroom, but with all of them working on it they'd be done soon. Maybe even by tonight, which was great news since they'd gotten word that their fathers would be visiting this weekend. Thank God for Making, Sabo silently prayed again, covering all that had to be done in the three days that they had left on top of classes.

"Food's here!" Makino called as she and Shanks let themselves into the apartment. She carefully picked her way into the room, handing out containers.

"Looking good, boys!" Shanks grinned, passing out beer. "None for you, short-stuff. I got you a root beer instead."

"Aww, Shanks!"

"Don't 'Aww, Shanks' me, Luffy. You're not drinking." The redhead held out the bottle of root beer which Luffy reluctantly took.

As everyone paused to enjoy their meal Sabo glanced over at the two he'd come to think of as brothers in the short months that they'd been living together. He knew he should tell them that his mother and father had given him an ultimatum, but he didn't want to add to their stress. Besides, he knew what he was going to do, and he knew what the brothers would say. So there was no point in even thinking about it when they really should be working on this ridiculous plan.

"They're never going to buy this." He pointed out ruefully.

"Yes they will!" Luffy protested.

"Probably not."

"Not at all."

Ace pout at Zoro and Thatch, "They might…"

"Really, yoi? They're smarter than Luffy."

"Makino!" The freckled young man wailed, "They're picking on Luffy!"

The woman just laughed, leaning against her boyfriend. "I'm sorry, Ace, but they're right. I don't think your fathers are going to be fooled by this."
"He doesn't always sleep in the same bed as me, you know." Ace snapped, pointing at an oblivious Luffy.

"Ace, we all know that before... before the Accident, you two shared a room." Shanks hedged, eyes full of worry. "Hell, you two were practically inseparable as it was! But this constantly sleeping with your brother in the same bed isn't healthy for the both of you, and you know it. It's gotta stop."

"Sometimes I sleep in Sabo's room." Luffy pipped up, causing everyone to look at the blonde, "He's not as warm as Ace," I should hope not "but he's got more blankets. N' sometimes Ace falls asleep on him when they're wrestling, so we all sleep together." the teen grinned widely.

In any other situation, with any other group, he'd be worried about how it sounded. Instead Sabo reached out and pulled Luffy into a half-hug. "It's like sleeping with an octopus." He explained to the curious looks.

"That's wonderful!" Makino beamed, causing Ace and Sabo to share a look. The woman was a bit of a mother-sister-aunt to all three of them after having taken Sabo under her wing as well, so it admittedly sounded weird that she was happy Luffy was sleeping with him. She saw the look and scolded them. "Oh stop that! You know what I mean! Boys!" They started to laugh, which of course got Luffy going. Not that he knew why he was laughing.

"That is great, though." Marco spoke up, looking pleased."When'd it start, yoi?"

"Eh, about a month and a half ago?" Ace shrugged, rubbing the back of his head. "I have a night class on Tuesdays, and Lu was having trouble staying up till I got back because of his schedule."

Sabo took over, "So after staying with him on the couch a time or two I figured why not? Next step according to Hawkins is short naps alone. Preferably in a bed."

"Preferably his own bed." Makino smiled in a way that said it wasn't a suggestion. All three roommates pretended to be fascinated with their now empty containers so they wouldn't have to meet her eyes. They all knew an order when they heard one.

**GIBBS**

The alarm Gibbs had brought down into the basement started to blare, causing the former Marine to pause in the smoothing of the bow of the boat he was building. It took him a moment to recall why there was an alarm down there in the first place, given that it was a Saturday morning and he didn't have work. "Right. Company." He mused, looking down at the woodchips that covered his pants and the sawdust on his hands before dropping the tool on the table and making a passing attempt to brush off the remnants of his morning activity. Heading up the stairs he stopped by the fridge and grabbed a beer since he'd already been up for the last four hours working on his boat. His guests had called the day before to more or less tell him they were coming. They didn't ask, but knowing them, he guessed he should be happy they called at least.

He settled in on his small porch to wait for them, knowing that he could be sitting out there for a while for the distinctive motorcycle to arrive. Luckily it was a gorgeous spring morning. The sun was out with a few clouds in the sky, and there was a gentle breeze keeping everything cool. He figured it was probably a nice day for a long ride, so long as the driver could stay awake. A small blue compact turned onto his street and slowed down to a crawl before turning into the driveway. Gibbs curiously raised an eyebrow, wondering if the person had made a wrong turn somewhere and maybe needed directions. The driver side door opened just as a gangly young man pulled himself up through the sunroof and waved, a wide grin stretching his face catching him off guard.
Gibbs found himself waving back even as a blonde stretched after getting out of the car.

"Don't kick Ace in the head, Luffy."

"Shihihihihii, I won't!" The dark haired teen slid off the roof of the car and practically bounced over to Gibbs. "Hi!"

"Hey there, kiddo. Who's your friend?"

"That's Sabo. He drove. Got anything to eat?"

Sabo by this point had come up behind the other and lightly cuffed him on the back of the head. "Go get the bags, you idiot. You might as well wake up Ace while you're at it."

"Right!"

"Don't burn the car!" He shouted belatedly after him before shaking his head ruefully. He offered Gibbs a hand. "As you've heard, I'm Sabo. Sabo Gent, Luffy and Ace's brother."

"Brother?" Gibbs looked him over. He looked nothing like the other two as he ignored the shouts from the car.

"I'm adopted. Recently, actually."

"Oh?"

"Our F-fa-fathers," Ace began yawning as he lugged two duffle bags up the steps, an enthusiastic Luffy trailed behind him, "adopted him after his folks disowned him for rooming with us."

"I see." In a way he did. At the very least it explained Tony's cryptic remark of 'They're multiplying' at Christmas. "So which one adopted you, Dragon or Roger?"

"Both, it was the only way to get everyone to stop fighting over me." Sabo grinned. "Miss Robin handled the paperwork and the legality. I think the judge was afraid to say no to her."

"You think?" Ace rolled his eyes. "I know he was afraid." He turned his attention back to Gibbs, "So you gonna invite us in, or are we just gonna camp out on your porch all spring break? Because we'll do it. You know we will."

Gibbs snorted and opened the door. "Why aren't you staying with Garp again?"

"Because it's a break. And the Old Man would make us work. Or he'd spend the time crying. Maybe both." Luffy whined as he pushed his way in. "Hawkins made us tell him we were coming down though. Stingy."

"Hawkins?" The man questioned as he followed the trio into the house. "First door on your left. Sorry, wasn't expecting three of you."

"That's fine. We brought sleeping bags and a blowup matriss." Ace waved him off, tossing the bags into the room indicated. "Therapist everyone insisted we go see. Guy's a bit…. odd. But Luffy likes him alright."

"Mmm! He and Zoro helped me get my licence, Gibbs! I can drive now!"

"NO!" The other two shouted at him. Sabo shook his head, "Luffy, you are NOT driving my car. I happen to like my car."
"He that bad?"

"He's worse than you." Ace shuddered. "Worse than Ziva, I bet. Zoro thought it was a good idea to train him in 'Defensive Driving' when Hawkins mentioned it would be good for Luffy's...er...independence...." He sounded unhappy about that, and given how close they were Gibbs fully understood why, though he thought the therapist might have the right idea. "which would have been fine...."

Sabo took over, "But then for some reason the guy got a stunt driver to teach Lu. So, well." The blonde shrugged helplessly. "He doesn't crash or anything, but it's scary as hell riding with Luffy behind the wheel. Just going downtown turns into an action-movie chase. Could you imagine what it would be like on the highway?"

Honestly, the man could almost picture it. It sounded interesting to him, and he wondered just what it would take to get the two older brothers to agree to let Luffy drive them all into NCIS on Monday. Of course, he should probably call Vance and let the man know so the back lot could be kept clear for the most part. Just in case....

Omake 1

The noise was what woke him up. Ace was too used to falling asleep in weird places to be very uncomfortable, despite the fact that there was something digging into his back. Groggily he thought he heard one of Luffy's friends shouting and he groaned in annoyance. It sounded like his little brother had let everyone into their apartment again, and he was not in the mood to deal with this shit. He was pretty sure that he'd been up way too late watching Pirates of the Caribbean with his brothers, and he had a test this afternoon. Speaking of college... didn't his brother have classes? No...no he was not going to get up and find out why the little idiot was at home. He was going to ignore the noise and the light and go back to sleep for a few more hours.

"Luffy! Look out! Pop green: Devil's snare!"

"Shihiihihi! Thanks, Usopp!" His brother shouted.

Ace groaned, "Luffy..." he threw a hand over his eyes. "Too loud."

"S'rry Ace...." Came the sleepy response from his right. He heard his brother yawn and shift around. It sounded like his little brother had kicked him off the bed again. Felt that way, too.

Wait a second... Ace was sure there was something wrong with that thought, but he wasn't quite sure what it could be. He rolled over on his side and went to push himself up a bit only to have his hand hit open space. Surprised, his eyes snapped open as he felt himself start to fall. Ace was so shocked by his surroundings he didn't even ignite as he plummeted straight down. He had to be seeing things, because there was no way someone had stuck a mast in their apartment. When he slammed into hard wood with enough force to knock the air out of him he blinked up in confusion at the sky. A sky that was partially eclipsed by sails. Rolling onto his side as he wheezed for breath he took in the wide deck, the smell of the sea, and a bunch of people running around.

"I've got to be tripping." He muttered, frowning. There was a shout, drawing his attention. His brows wrinkled at the sight of Marco airborne, held aloft by a pair of flaming wings in place of his arms. "Thatch. He must have slipped me something last night..." Because Marco flew about as well as a turkey. He was his blonde friend circle higher before dive bombing towards the deck, aiming for a short guy with dark hair, a red vest, and a straw hat. Ace stood, instantly annoyed as he recognized Luffy right before the idiot got out of the way of a powerful kick. Marco wasn't fooling around, and that pissed him off. Quickly he stormed across the deck, ignoring how it
shifted under his feet slightly as it rode the water. "HEY! MARCO!" He shouted, getting the other man's attention, "What have I told you about going easy on Luffy?!"

Blue eyes narrowed as the blonde stared down at him. He crossed his arms, glaring right back. He'd shoved back his confusion over the whole situation as his friend hovered in front of him. "I thought I said not to interfere, yoi."

"Since when do you order me around, bird brain?" He snapped back. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Luffy take advantage of the blonde's distraction and rush him in typical fashion. Marco saw him coming however and dodged, letting the teen's momentum take Luffy past and back onto the deck before he closed his wings and dropped, aiming a heavy kick at Luffy's back. Ace saw red, his body reacting out of years of instinct, he darted forward, bringing up both his arms in an over-the-head guard as he stood between them and took the blow. It was strong enough that his knees almost buckled. Glaring at his friend he snarled, "I can forgive you guys for sticking me on a boat somehow. I can overlook the fact that I'll miss my test, too. But one thing I can't forgive is you attacking my brother!"

Marco's eyes widened in shock as he jumped back and landed on the deck. The man warily watched him as Ace looked down at Luffy. His little brother looked a bit… off. He couldn't quite place his finger on it, but it went beyond the weird clothes. The kid was giving him a strange look, too. Ace ran a hand through his hair as he huffed in annoyance, noticing for the first time that there were a lot of people watching them. He glared at them all, feeling the urge to let his flames free to let them all know just how annoyed he was.

"A-Ace?" Luffy choked out at his feet, staring at him with wide eyes.

He looked down at the teen, "What, Lu?"

"No, it can't be, yoi." Marco sounded shocked, "Ace is dead."

Ace turned to glare at his friend, "Fuck you, Marco. I was sleeping. You know I still get attacks sometimes."

The blonde glared at him, "You're an impostor. You're good, but not good enough."

"What is this? Some weird-ass hazing ritual with Pops?" He turned back to his brother, "And you! I thought we agreed you would wait until you were at least eighteen before even thinking about joining up, so what the hell are you doing, Luffy?"

The teen blinked at this, a slightly wary expression on his face. "I'm nineteen."

"Good try, idiot, but in case you forgot, I'm three years older than you and I'm twenty, so that makes you seventeen."

Luffy just looked confused as he pouted before turning to Marco. "What's going on? This isn't funny, pineapple."

"No it isn't, yoi." Marco shot him a deadly look. "Explain yourself."

"I don't have to do anything," Ace crossed his arms. He almost didn't notice Zoro stomp up to him while carrying two swords. The man paused right in front of him and gave him a penetrating look. He just snorted, "What's with the eye, Zoro? Trying a new look?" The man said nothing in response, instead he swung a sword at Ace's chest which barely avoided slicing skin as it cut his shirt. "HEY!" The second sword came whipping at his side and Ace prepared to let it pass through him.
He didn't have to, however. The arm holding the sword was stopped by a tight grip just below the wrist. The next thing he knew, Luffy was between the two of them, his red and white tank top brushing against Ace's arm, giving Zoro an annoyed look even as he settled into a fighting stance.

Zoro blinked before the look in his eye hardened. "You're not Luffy."

"And you're not Zoro! Zoro would never attack my brother like that! Who the hell are you, you fake?"

"Is- is that me?" Luffy turned his head slightly just as Ace realized why his little brother had looked different. Luffy, his Luffy that is, stared in shock at the version of him that was in an open red vest and he felt his brother tense.

"Ace… I think I'm having a mystery dream."

"I think it's more of a nightmare." Someone else quipped, but he couldn't see who.

"There's two of me!" Both Luffy's shouted.

Ace winced at the sound as he turned part of his attention to his ripped shirt. "You don't have to yell, I can see that."

"What the hell is going on, yoi?"

He shrugged, "Hell if I know. I thought someone might have spiked my drink last night and I was tripping."

"Tripping?"

"Yeah, you know, seeing things. I mean, last thing I remember I was watching Pirates with Luffy and Sabo, and the next thing I know I'm here." With a frown he gave up on his shirt, the thing was ruined. "I liked this shirt…" He sighed, tugging slightly and causing the rest to rip off and fall to the floor. He had to admit, the sun felt nice on his back as he rolled the kinks from his fall out.

"Shihihihi! Does this mean we're skipping classes today?"

"Well, I don't see a way back to campus, do you? Man, Sabo's gonna be pissed as hell." He turned his attention back to Marco, feeling the man's eyes boring into the center of his back. "What?"

"Who the hell are you and why do you look like Ace and me?" the Luffy-that-wasn't-his asked, voice hard as he now stood before them.

Luffy looked up at him, eyes full of questions, and Ace shifted ever-so slightly, cocking his head to the side as he did so. Nothing needed to be said about not trusting these look-alikes, that was a given. Still, he wondered if letting his brother take the lead was a good idea when Luffy opened his mouth. "I'm Luffy! Luffy D Marshall-I mean Monkey. Sorry 'bout that, Ace, shihihi."

"Marshall?" Marco was right in front of him now, gripping his arm tightly. "As in Teach? Did Blackbeard send you?" The look he was giving both brothers promised pain. Ace couldn't help the slight flinch he gave even as he told himself Teach is dead; he can't hurt us anymore. He doesn't own us- we're free… "Answer me, yoi!" The grip tightened painfully.

"NO! Leave my brother alone!" Luffy was between them, shoving Marco back even as the teen panted in obvious panic over the mere mention of that man… Ace didn't know if Luffy's action could be seen as progress at all.
Flames roared to life across his shoulders as he glared daggers at Marco, wishing he could hide Luffy behind his back. He couldn't, there were too many people, too many threats. He couldn't protect his brother like this, and he'd be damned if Luffy got hurt. Shoving Luffy down he lunged at the false-Marko with a snarl, wanting to kill him and let fly a powerful punch that connected with the man's jaw with a crunch. "Don't you ever mention that bastard's name around me again!"

He wasn't surprised when the blonde only rocked back slightly, eyes widening in shock before narrowing again. If the guy was anything like his Marco, a blow like that wouldn't even slow him down. "Where'd you get the Mera mera no mi, you bastard?"

"The mirror mirror…?" Luffy huffed from where he crouched at Ace's feet even as he swung around his leg like a whip towards their opponents shins. "I hate Snow White!"

"Hey! That's my devil fruit! How come fake-me has it?" came the shocked cry even as Marco dodged the blow with ease.

Luffy wasn't paying attention any longer, however, having turned and shoved his head through Ace's knees to stare at the people behind them. Of course, Ace hadn't been expecting his brother to do that, being braced to follow up the whip-like attack with a hard right hook, and nearly fell on top of his easily distracted younger sibling. "Luffy!"

"What?" Came the whining response from between his legs.

"Don't do that!" He snapped, not taking his eyes off of Marco and firmly ignoring the man's bemused expression. He'd pound it out of him soon enough.

Luffy pulled back, hands still holding tight to Ace's thighs as he looked up at the elder with a pout. "But he said he has the same Devil-fruit, Ace!" He rocked Ace's legs, demanding attention. "He can't, right?"

"WOULD YOU HOLD STILL?!" Ace snapped, glaring down at Luffy even as he thumped him in the head. "We're kinda busy, remember?"

"Ace, what are you and Luffy doing?" A yawning voice drew all eyes to what looked like a folded tarp. A second yawn and two arms were thrown into the air before dropping down dramatically. "Nosiest bro-mates ever…." Ace wasn't shocked when Sabo's head was the next thing to appear, a hand lazily scratching at his blonde hair. "Bro-mates… yeah, don't like that one either. What do you think, guys?"

There was dead silence as Sabo took in the scene before him. Blue eyes blinked, the mouth opened and closed for a second. Ace glanced down at Luffy and flushed, realizing what it probably could look like, even if Sabo knew better. Hell, it's not like he hasn't been caught like this before... Luffy, of course, didn't notice. "Sabo! Wanna join us?"

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Ace blinked, remembering that he'd kind of been in the middle of a fight. "Battling look-alikes that think they're sailors-"

"Pirates!" the shout was obviously automatic as it was bellowed from almost everyone else on deck.

"-er, pirates, apparently. Want in?" He offered his best grin.

His blonde brother just looked at them all in silence for another moment. Finally he sighed, "You
know what? Forget I asked. I'm just going back to bed." and promptly flopped back down.
Omake 2:

"Luffy!" Akainu was going to kill his brother.

Ace could see it happening in his mind's eye, and he knew it was his fault. His stupid, hot-headed, selfish fault. He'd known Luffy was at his limit. Felt the tremble caused by fatigue- and who knew what else- earlier. Seen him collapse not that long ago. And yet he'd put his pride before his little brother. Again. He knew Whitebeard would have wanted him to keep running and ignore the insults to the man he called Oyaji. He just had to be a prideful fool hough... and now Luffy was going to pay the price for it. Ace's heart had frozen in his chest when Sakazuki had side-stepped him completely and he's realized who the real target was. He'd hoped in that instant that Luffy would be smart enough to run as he turned. To see his body crumpled on the ground, a look of hazy shock telling him his brother couldn't get out of the way at all was the worst thing ever. He knew he was going to watch his brother die right then and something inside him snapped. He'd hoped in that instant that Luffy would be smart enough to run as he turned. To see his body crumpled on the ground, a look of hazy shock telling him his brother couldn't get out of the way at all was the worst thing ever. He knew he was going to watch his brother die right then and something inside him snapped. Ace had never moved so fast in his life. Still, it wasn't enough. He didn't have time to redirect the blow, or even block it for that matter. All he could do was pray that in taking the blow it would slow the man down enough to spare his brother. His precious baby brother who looked up to him and loved him unconditionally. He was a horrible big brother. Ace refused to close his eyes as he appeared in front of Luffy braced for the blow, back to his own doom. Was it really so selfish that he wanted his brother to be the last thing he saw? Marco would probably say something about his brother-complex if this wasn't going to kill him. Ace couldn't stop his back from tensing, waiting for the killing blow as he gazed down at Luffy. Part of him was annoyed that the boy has closed his eyes. How many times had he told him to never close your eyes when someone was attacking you? Still, it was better if he didn't see this. How he wished he could spare Luffy the pain and the blow...

"...and so then Marco said he would meet us at the bar so A-" The voice cut off before nervously chuckling, "Oh... hey, Ace! I uh, didn't hear you come in."

Luffy opened his eyes and stared up at him, obviously as confused as he was by the sudden silence that had been interrupted by the person talking. Ace knew that voice, but he refused to look up. It was a voice he knew he'd never hear again, so there was no way that person was there.

"What the hell are you two doing? Interpretive Dance?" A different voice asked, exasperation clear in the tone. It was vaguely familiar. "Honestly Ace, I expect stupid shut from Luffy, because well. Luffy. But you should know better."

"Now Sabo, give the guy a break. Maybe the stress of dealing with the knucklehead finally got to him." Sabo? There was no way that was right. He couldn't be there. Neither could Thatch for that matter. They were dead and gone and there was no way they could be talking to him. Afraid of what he'd see, he raised his head slightly. They were there, standing in a doorway and when had he gotten inside? Where were they?! just watching him with slightly bemused expressions. "S-Sabo?" His heart lurched. It had to be his brother even if he was ten years older than Ace remembered him. The young man still held himself the same way, the same stupid hat on his head. "Thatch?"

"Ace?" Thatch replied in the same tone before grinning. "What the hell man. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"You're dead."
The dead pirate looked hurt. "Hey! What'd I do?"

"No, you're dead." Ace clarified, "I saw you. Teach… Teach killed you."

Sabo's whole frame tensed even as he rolled his eyes. "I think he might be high."

Ace ignored the comment, still staring at the two in shock. He'd never seen Sabo's body, true. But he'd seen Thatch's body, cold and lifeless on the deck in a pool of his own blood. He remembered the feel of it, every detail standing out sharply even now. His friends, his brothers, were dead yet standing before him. He was in a new location, the battle he'd just been in missing. It all spelled out one thing to the pirate. He too was dead. That he had expected. Ace had known Sakazuki's attack was going to kill him. It was still strange that he had felt nothing, but not impossible. He glanced down at Luffy who's attention was still fixated on Ace and not the people behind him and he fought back tears. Sabou was dead, Thatch was dead, he was pretty sure he was dead… if Luffy was here as well he'd failed. Even in death he'd failed his little brother.

"A-Ace?" The teen almost whimpered. "I feel funny." He could understand that. Luffy looked horribly beat up on top of being dead. He actually looked worse than Ace, and he'd been imprisoned for months by pirate hating marines. Being dead definitely feel like he thought it would, either. He felt… normal. Hell, his cuts still stung, so he could only imagine how Luffy felt.

Sabo frowned, coming over. He knelt next to Luffy, a look of worry on his face. "What the hell did you two get into? No offence Lu, but you look like shit warmed over."

"Nah. Cold shit." Thatch added, eyeing Ace.

"There was a war-"

"Crap, there's a gang war out there?" Thatch reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Gang…? The marines, and Oyaji… Garp, he-"

"Your Gramps is here already? That guy is such a loose cannon." Thatch tisked, "He knows he's not supposed to start anything with Whitebeard."

Ace was getting annoyed at the constant interruptions and prodding hand. He shot his friend a dirty look, opening his mouth.

"Thatch…" Sabo spoke before Ace could, "These aren't my brothers." The young man shot Ace a glare, eyes focusing on his tattoo.

"What the hell! Sabo, you know me!" Ace snapped.

"You're right. I do know Ace." Sabo stood, glaring at him, "And Ace doesn't have an 'S' in his tattoo." He roughly grabbed his shoulder and practically turned him around, "Or a tat' on his back. Ace would never put someone else's mark on him."

Ace had to admit that as a child he would never have considered it. So in a way Sabo was right. Thatch though, Thatch would know about the tattoo on his back. "It's me! Thatch, tell him, please. You remember when I got this tattoo…"

"Watch them while I call Ace and Luffy. And maybe Marco. Something's not right here." Thatch gave him a look while he pulled a strange device pit of his pocket, "I don't know who you are but you picked the wrong person to impersonate. You'd better pray those two are alright, or I am going to more then beat you for pretending to be in Pop's gang."
"Wha- Thatch! It's me!"

"Whoa! Who's the new gang member?" A cheerful voice interrupted the staring contest followed by strange music.

"Gesh, Thatch. We're only a couple of minutes late. No reason to call." Ace heard his own voice gripe. He hadn't spoken though. "Luffy forgot to lock the door again. We had to go back."

"Goys! You're alright!" Thatch seemed relieved as he walked towards the people standing behind Ace.

Hesitantly he turned to see his friend greet a guy that had his face and a kind that looked just like Luffy. Except, these two were dressed differently, very differently. Hell, his double had a shirt on! Ace hadn't worn a shirt in over a year. Dark grey eyes met. "Who the hell are you?" Ace snarled.

"Ace. You?" His reply was in the same tone.

I'm Ace, Portgas D. Ace."

"Wow, Ace! He even knows your mom's last name!" The Luffy lookalike grinned.

"She's technically your mom, too, idiot." Fake Ace replied, a strange look crossing his face as he looked down at Luffy who was still huddled by his legs. "Well, he can't be Bonn Clay. There's two of them."

End Notes

A quick note: DiNozzo thinks Ace is older than he actually is because of how he acts. In reality, he's twelve, going on thirteen.

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