Forbidden Fruits

by Reiki

Summary

Ace finds himself attracted to his sexy teacher while Law pushes the school bully a bit too far... Contains a lot of narcolepsy and insomnia humour, but mostly forbidden romance. High school AU involving Marco/Ace, Kidd/Law.
Chapter 1

“Remember the day we met?”

“Ace, let’s not take a trip down memory lane in *here.*”

“Aww, Panda, you’re such a spoilt sport.” The aforementioned Ace pretended to pout, his dark hair falling in curls around his freckled face. He cleared his throat forebodingly, then launched into a voice better suited to a narrator of a classic epic movie. “It was a sunny day, just like today, exactly three and a half years ago—”

“I thought I told you to *never* call me by that name in public.”

Ace, tall, muscular and a bit of an eccentric, stood up from his plastic chair. He spread his arms wide in an arc, indicating with this movement the vast emptiness of their current location. “No one’s here in detention today but us. The teacher on duty hasn’t even arrived yet. I could scream ‘Panda’ and nobody would hear me.”

“On the other hand I could make you scream ‘bloody murder’ and nobody would hear. Now sit your ass down and have a nap.”

With a snort, Ace fell back into his little plastic chair, slumping forward onto the wooden desk. Numbly he noted the gouges from pens and other sharp objects that defaced the wood grain. The notches in the wood reminded him off a prison inmate trying to keep track of the amount of days spent behind bars.

“Panda, that is a dirty, tasteless thing to say.” Ace straightened, grinning as his brain started to function and digest his friend’s words. He tapped his fingers on the desk, beating out a slow rhythm that he knew would begin to get on his friend’s nerves. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“Why would I be jealous of your narcolepsy?”

“Because you have insomnia.” Ace stated very matter-of-factly. He ceased his tapping for a minute to examine his nails, noting that they weren’t nearly long enough to make a super annoying clicking noise. Not like those preppy chicks he had in all of his classes, the ones who acted as if they didn’t want to be there and annoyed everyone with their constant tapping. Their long manicured nails were perfect for that. His were too stubby, unfortunately.

“Anyways, why’d you get detention on this fine day after school? Flip off one of the teachers again?” Ace’s friend remained silent. “Eh, Trafalgar Law? You did, didn’t you? Piss someone off.”

“No.” The blunt reply was so typical of this certain insomniac. Most days and with most people the boy named Trafalgar would be as blunt as a hammer, putting strength in his choice words but few details. But Ace, over the years, had gradually managed to kindly force Law into being a bit more expressive. At least with him.

Ace’s persistence had achieved this many times before when Law would clam up. All it took these days for Law to spill his thoughts was a cute pout, one which Ace had perfected over the course of their friendship. It was his ultimate weapon, one that he used now.

Trafalgar gave him a disgusted look but he opened his mouth to speak, if only to make Ace change his expression. He looked like a rabid donkey with that face, at least in Law’s opinion.
“One of the teachers caught me walking through the hallways this morning with a dead cat.” Ace snorted at that revelation, scooting forward in his seat to hear the rest of Law’s tale. “I was bringing it to the biology lab to dump it into that container of preservation chemicals so the corpse wouldn’t go bad. I found the cat by my house.”

“But you didn’t kill it, right?”

“It was road kill. I peeled it off the pavement because I wanted to dissect it later and look at all its innards but now the school confiscated the corpse and it’ll probably go to waste and I’m pissed off. So there. Now you know.”

Ace laughed at Law’s long-winded explanation. When he was clearly frustrated, he usually took more time to get his point across. Ace liked when Trafalgar was frustrated as it tended to make conversation livelier.

“Want to know what I did?” Ace asked as soon as Law made it clear he was done supporting the conversation.

“Did I ask?”

“I’m going to tell you anyway.”

A passive grunt separated their exchange.

“Last period I had one of my microsleeps, you know, those short sleep episodes where I don’t remember anything but I do normal stuff? Yeah, so that happened and I guess I fell asleep but I was still trying to do the daily chemistry experiment. I don’t clearly remember what happened but somehow when I came out of it the curtains were on fire and my experiment had blown up.” Ace paused in his ramble, grinning and laughing as he recalled the panic of everyone in the room at the time. He couldn’t help but find situations like that humourous. “Mr. Aokiji had to use his instant ice extinguisher to put it out, which was funny because everyone thought he was having a nap at the front of the room. Like usual.”

“And then?” Law drawled, grinning with amusement. If anything could make him genuinely interested, it was hearing about accidents or misfortunes. That was part of the reason Ace and Trafalgar got along so famously, despite their numerous differences. Ace had been born under an unlucky star.

“Well, we all evacuated and apparently someone in class had called 911 on their cell phone. Aokiji just told me to go straight to the detention room, so I was sitting in here for about twenty minutes before you came in.”

Trafalgar stood up in his seat, leaning over a counter to stare at the outside world beyond their jail cell. What he saw made him slightly puzzled. “So that’s why there’s a fire truck parked outside the window…but what’s with the police car? You’d think they could get a situation right and not send unnecessary backup.”

With a burst of sudden energy and finesse, Ace dove at Trafalgar, grabbing him by the hood of his favourite yellow and black sweater. Tugging him down to the dirty linoleum floor by this sweater that Law wore almost every day, Ace ignored the boy’s choking and sputtering. Frantically he whispered, “Don’t attract attention! That’s Smokey down there!”

“Smokey? The guy who’s always trying to arrest you? Smoker?”

“Yes Captain Blunt. Smoker. The police officer who’s hated me ever since that incident with my
prescription drugs, which just so happen to be illegal where we live.” Law rolled his eyes at this and detached himself from Ace’s claws, putting a bit of distance between them.

Law hauled himself back into one of the many empty plastic chairs scattered throughout the classroom. “Whatever.” He rubbed at his tired eyes, which had dark permanent circles under them from a lack of sleep during his childhood all the way up to present day. Usually the chronic insomnia didn’t bother him as he’d grown accustomed to it but at that moment, sitting around doing nothing productive, his eyes were starting to itch uncomfortably. “The teacher on duty had better not make us stay longer in this shithole because they’re late getting here.”

Ace slowly got up from the floor, peeking out the window at the proceedings down below. He recognized that patrol car as Smoker’s after a long string of personal interactions with its owner. The car had numerous dents in the side, as Smoker was a rough driver and took on most of the city’s dangerous nutcases. In his off hours, he seemed to enjoy arresting anyone who put a foot out of place. Ace thought it was because the grey-haired man just got a kick out of beating the shit out of people before throwing them in cages.

He had been in a jail cell thanks to Smoker before but never for anything too serious.

Just as he was thinking about being thrown into that patrol car by Smoker, another one of Ace’s longstanding enemies chose to make his entrance into the detention room.

“Portgas. It seems you have yet again made a mockery of this school. Perhaps, with all luck, this case will be enough to have you expelled.”

Ace spun around to face one of the vice principals, Mr. Akainu. The man was like molten lava in the sense that he consumed everything within reach in a fiery hot despair. Needless to say, the students of Ace and Trafalgar’s high school avoided the man like he carried a horrifying plague.

“Come with me to my office. Your grandfather is here to try and dig you out of your grave yet again.” Ace groaned at the impending doom that loomed just around the corner. Akainu, who took joy in seeing the suffering smeared across Ace’s features, tore his eyes away from the sight that brought him insane pleasure in order to address the other occupant of the room. “As for you, go home for today. You can serve your detention tomorrow.”

Trafalgar leisurely walked out of the room, grumbling under his breath about how much time he’d wasted sitting around after school hours. He bade Ace a good-bye in the form of a disinterested wave over his shoulder. Ace knew he’d see his friend later on in the day and didn’t bother to say anything. He was too caught up in Akainu’s infectious misery.

“Well? Let’s go, Portgas.” Reluctantly Ace got to his feet, taking his sweet time walking around to the doorway where Akainu stood, a permanent frown decorating his ugly face. His beefy arms were crossed over his impeccably white suit, nothing inviting within his pose. Slowly Ace began his death row walk.

Impatient, Akainu prodded the teenager down the hallway towards the school’s offices, gaining speed quickly. The rough treatment made Ace long to have somehow gotten the other, much more Zen vice principal, Mr. Sengoku, rather than the irritable Akainu. But as luck had it, the entire student body was split in half between the two vice principals according to last name and Ace’s surname happened to be in the latter part of the alphabet, lining up with Akainu’s list of tormented souls.

He hated his luck, really.
They arrived at the office and Ace felt his heart sinking lower than physically possible. The principal of the school, who had kindly bailed Ace out of trouble before, was not a part of the small gathering in Akainu’s office. Instead, his adoptive grandfather Garp and the often-brusque police officer Smoker sat in chairs with their backs to Ace, waiting for the teenager to arrive. Ace wanted to try and escape, he really did, but he had the dragon from hell behind him and two very violent people in front. Escape was futile.

As he approached, he finally saw a third person in the room, half hidden behind a wilting floor plant. That person was a beacon of hope for Ace and he instantly breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe he wasn’t going to die today after all.

Heads turned as Akainu and Ace entered the small space. Immediately Ace sat his butt down in his usual seat, the one he was always shoved into when he visited this cavern in hell. Akainu sat across from all four parties behind a large desk, clearing his throat to get Garp’s attention. As soon as Ace had appeared, he’d immediately gone to glaring daggers at his grandson.

He had probably been called off work to come down here and bail him out. Ace didn’t feel guilty but he knew he was going to get a brutal talking to later.

“Let’s get this started,” Akainu said with a tired sigh. Ace grimaced; he knew the cruel man was secretly enjoying himself across the desk and would prolong Ace’s torture for as long as possible. “Explain yourself to us, Ace. Tell us about how the fire in Mr. Aokiji’s chemistry lab occurred.”

“It was an accident,” Ace grumbled. He spoke the truth but he could see doubt appearing on the faces of not only Akainu but Garp as well who knew his grandson had slight pyromaniac tendencies. More than once Ace had caused damage with fire in their home. Ace could hardly blame the man for not wanting to believe him.

“If you don’t have a satisfactory explanation Mr. Smoker here is going to charge you with arson causing damage to school property.”

Suddenly, Ace’s beacon of light spoke up. “I’m sure he has a viable explanation, Mr. Akainu.”

Cautiously, Ace peered past both Garp and Smoker’s hulking bodies to see his laid-back mathematics teacher, whom most of the students simply referred to by his first name, Marco. Under heavily-lidded eyes, Marco caught his gaze and gave a small encouraging half-smile. Ace felt his ears redden and hurried to focus on the most disgusting thing in the room in order to keep a blush down.

Akainu did the job nicely.

“Get on with it boy, I don’t have all day,” Smoker suddenly barked. Normally Ace would have made a snide comment to further piss off the police man, but today even he knew the thinness of the eggshells he was walking on.

“I had a sudden sleep attack and when I came out of it the fire was there.”

“Magically,” Akainu stated dryly. “Witnesses that I spoke to earlier today say that you seemed perfectly conscious when you added an obscene amount of chlorides to some chemical mixture the class was working on.”

“I wasn’t conscious,” Ace argued, a slight hint of anger entering his voice. Akainu always knew how to spark his anger. “I was asleep, just for a very short amount of time. And sometimes I continue to do things even when I’m asleep.”
“He has narcolepsy, as you know,” Garp said. This wasn’t at all reassuring to anyone, as Garp himself sounded unconvinced by Ace’s story. Garp had never really been one to heavily research his grandson’s case, not since Ace’s part-time nanny Dadan had dealt with Ace’s disorder when he was being diagnosed, keeping Garp out of the loop. Now that Dadan was gone, since Ace could stand on his own two feet without her constant mollycoddling, Garp was left to try and make sense of his grandson that he only sparingly knew.

“Yes, we all know, some of us quite well.” At this Akainu stared pointedly at Marco, who just shrugged and continued to sit calmly, arms crossed over his chest. “Mr. McLeod here decided to come today since he’s concerned over Ace’s mark in his class. It seems that it’s only the beginning of the year and already Ace is failing spectacularly.”

“I guess I find it hard to concentrate in class.”

“Then perhaps you’d benefit from a change in scenery. Say, a different school where distractions could be minimal.”

Ace sucked in a gulp of air, the dank office atmosphere making him want to retch. This was always what it came to, ever since the day he first irritated Akainu during his freshman year with his ‘special condition’. Akainu made it no secret that he detested Ace, often trying to make his life miserable in hopes that the boy would want to pursue an education at a different high school. So far he’d been gradually working his way under Garp’s skin, slyly suggesting supposedly ‘better’ alternatives for the teenager.

“Maybe you’re right,” Garp said with a disinterested shrug. “But I’m already planning on sending Ace to marine boot camp after he graduates, so uprooting him with barely a year of high school left might be too much trouble.”

Ace couldn’t decide whether he wanted to jump for joy at the prospect of being able to stay put at his high school with all his friends and his brother or jump off the highest point in the city to his inevitable death, since Garp was still planning on sending him to hell on earth.

He slumped down in his chair to further contemplate his waning future.

“If that’s all we’re going to talk about, I have to get back on duty.” Smoker stood abruptly, pushing his chair out his way to clear a path to the exit. A flash of panic caught in Akainu’s eyes as one of his key pawns made for the doorway.

“But the charge for arson–”

“Sort it out yourselves. The police are no longer involved in this if the brat is claiming that it was an accident.”

Akainu grit his teeth but forced his voice to remain steady, “But there’s no proof it was an accident.”

“I have seen Ace subconsciously do things like take notes in my class during a sleep attack. Of course the notes are completely illegible, but the fact that I’ve seen with my own eyes his narcolepsy at work makes me confident that Ace is telling us the truth. Besides, Mr. Aokiji told us both that Ace was exhibiting strange behaviour when the lab caught fire. When everyone around him screamed and ran, Ace just stood there, transfixed by nothing. If that isn’t proof enough of something unnatural occurring, I don’t know what is.”

Ace’s mouth hung open slightly long after Marco had finished his lengthy rebuttal. Smoker bought
Marco’s words and even seemed to nod gratefully at the man before dashing out of the office, intent on finding more interesting things to do with his time. Like beat up his already pathetically dingy patrol car by chasing unruly teenagers.

Akainu turned his steely gaze on Marco, who didn’t flinch as any normal man would. “I guess this brings us to the problem at hand, doesn’t it Mr. McLeod?” Ace thought he saw Marco tense up and open his eyes a bit wider as if to prepare himself. “Your class is mandatory for Ace to graduate. If he doesn’t pass he will have to spend another semester here.”

Garp grunted at that disclosure, his arm and hand twitching on the armrest next to Ace. Seeing this out of the corner of his eye, Ace flinched at the muscle spasm, knowing that if they weren’t in such a professional setting Garp would be beating his ass at this particular moment.

“Ace is bright. He can pass my class as long as he stays awake. He’s told me that it’s hard for him to sit for such a lengthy amount of time and that he can learn material best if it’s taught in short intervals.” Marco kept his eyes firmly locked on Akainu’s, a silent but stern challenge blossoming between them.

Ace, meanwhile, blushed heavily at the praise and confidence his teacher seemed to have in him. He remembered the first time he’d told Marco about his daytime sleeping episodes after he had woken up only to find himself alone in an empty classroom with only the teacher sitting behind his desk with his feet propped up casually. The sight had brought a smile to his face, but he felt bad that Marco couldn’t leave after the bell rang to signify the end of classes for that period. He couldn’t exactly lock the classroom behind him with an unconscious body lying on a desk in a puddle of drool, could he?

Marco was the only teacher that could tolerate him with some humour and for that alone Ace liked Marco a great deal.

“The fact is that Ace isn’t learning the material and is failing,” Akainu restated firmly. “If he is to graduate, something needs to change. Earlier you suggested he have extra tutoring outside of school, but to hire someone with the knowledge in that field will be expensive, not to mention it will be hard to find someone with that knowledge in the first place.” Akainu was calm and firm, yet hidden under his tone was a reproach to the challenge Marco had extended towards him.

Ace could tell those two didn’t see eye to eye. Dimly he wondered what Marco had done in the past to make Akainu dislike him so strongly.

All through high school Ace had been fortunate enough to have his math classes with Marco. But he had never been able to figure out how Marco’s mental clock ticked. He would kill to know what Marco really thought about him.

“Sounds like a deal to me,” Garp said gruffly. “And I’ll pay for the damages Ace caused; just send me the bill in the mail. As for this tutoring thing, I’m sure Ace and Mr. McLeod can work out a schedule tomorrow in school.”

At Garp’s words, Akainu slunk back in his seat, his diabolical plan fizzling out. “Fine,” he snapped, “Mr. McLeod will tutor him and you will pay for Ace’s accident.”
“Yep,” Garp said, standing and reaching a large meaty fist down to pull Ace up from his chair by a shoulder. “Then I suppose this meeting is over. Time to go, Ace.”

Ace didn’t protest to being dragged out of the office by an impatient grandfather that couldn’t stand to sit still for more than two seconds. He threw one last look over his shoulder to see Marco smiling at him and, without any hesitation, Ace smiled back shyly.

That exchange kept him smiling stupidly to himself all the way home, even when his grandfather whacked him unceremoniously over the head the moment they drove off of school property.
Ace ended up getting the house to himself after Garp raided the refrigerator and headed back to work. He trained future naval soldiers on the other side of the city, something that he’d been doing for years. His tough love towards his two grandsons had come as a result of his job.

Speaking of grandsons, Ace found the house eerily quiet without his rambunctious little brother home. Often his brother hopped back and forth between his friends’ houses and Ace was increasingly becoming left to his own devices, which was nice and relaxing sure, but at the same time rather boring.

He’d gotten himself a puppy recently to combat this boredom.

“Come ’ere, Spade!” Ace called out into the depths of the house. “Where are you boy?”

The sound of clicking claws on wooden flooring came echoing into Ace’s ears before he caught sight of the mass of awkward limbs. His puppy, brown white and black all over, came crashing around a corner, slamming into the adjacent wall. He recovered from the impact, then raced, tripping over his oversized paws, towards Ace’s open arms.

He didn’t quite make it, instead his little black nose and the rest of his body took a dive to the wooden flooring. The puppy slid along the shiny floor before coming to rest just short of Ace’s reach.

Like Ace, this particular Saint Bernard puppy was prone to sudden fits of uncontrollable sleep.

“Shit, you almost made it this time too,” Ace muttered sadly, sitting back on his haunches. He waited a second then fully seated himself on the floor, cross-legged. He watched his comatose puppy for any sign of movement besides rapid breathing, but none came. This was a longer episode than usual. Most of the time his dog was only out of it for a few seconds, as his sleepiness was characterized by more frequent attacks that weren’t long in duration.

Or at least that was what the brain researcher who had possession of the puppy previously had told him. Ace had gotten the dog after Garp somehow heard about how the lab that Ace was visiting for his more recent narcolepsy check-up (he needed to switch medications) was going to give their dogs away as they had moved on to studying only people. Dogs were more work to keep and Ace suspected his sleep clinic couldn’t afford the Doberman Pinchers, Labradors or Saint Bernards anymore.

Since Ace knew the chances of a narcoleptic puppy being adopted were low, as most people thought the condition to be too sad to see every day, he convinced Garp to bring one home. Surprisingly, his grandfather had instantly agreed. But that was only because Garp liked dogs; he hadn’t any intention to make Ace’s life brighter. That would be spoiling him and not building him up to be a respectable navy soldier.

Ace sighed just as Spade spontaneously leapt to his feet, shaking out his fur. Spontaneous awakenings were a common thing both man and dog shared.

Spade quickly made his happiness to see his master known by licking every inch of Ace that he could reach. With a snort at his canine’s enthusiasm, Ace stood up, scooping Spade into his arms to cradle him against his chest. The puppy was still small, only half a year old, but was quickly gaining weight and starting to fill out. Pretty soon Ace wouldn’t be able to comfortably lift Spade
up into his arms anymore, so he was making the most of carrying Spade around in his arms like a baby while it lasted.

“Want to go on a walkie?” Ace asked childishly. Spade convulsed with excitement in his arms. “Walkie, walkie?” The dog’s tail was flying back and forth, smacking into Ace’s left arm, then back to his right. He liked getting the dog all riled up. It was amusing.

He found a nylon leash and Spade’s dog collar, which he only wore when they were out and about. With the situations a narcoleptic puppy could get into, it made Ace uneasy to put a collar around his dog’s neck when he wasn’t around. He knew from his own experiences that narcolepsy wasn’t a disorder that would kill you by itself like cancer but rather it was the environment during a narcoleptic attack that could end a life. He didn’t want Spade dying from asphyxiation.

Before he began his attempts at snapping the collar and leash on Spade, Ace pulled out his cell phone and sent a quick text to Trafalgar. ‘Meet me at the corner?’

As he attempted to get Spade ready (the dog wouldn’t sit still long enough for Ace to get the leash on him) Law sent him back a message.

‘Fine,’ was all it read. Ace snorted and Spade stopped squirming, blinking at the obscene noise his master just made. Ace took advantage of the distraction to clip the leash onto Spade’s collar. The dog sniffed at the attachment but soon became preoccupied with trying to get out the front door, which Ace was trying to open with the dog in the way.

“You have to move if we’re going to get out!”

Spade barked, jumping at the door with his tail wagging. He obviously didn’t grasp the situation at hand. Ace ended up picking the puppy off the floor and throwing him over his shoulder before going outside. He carried the dog down the front steps and set him on the lawn, as he didn’t trust the puppy to make it down the steps safely, not with his oversized paws and lack of coordination.

Why does he remind me of my brother? Ace wondered, watching his puppy try and eat a pinecone that had fallen off of one of the trees in the front yard. He tugged on the leash to try and get the dog’s attention and managed to get the dog to drop his treasure. It took an excited chicken dance however to coax the dog into leaving his pinecone behind to begin their walk.

Their progress down the street was minimal, choppy, and filled with Spade’s happy yips at being let outside. The dog barked at anything that moved, be it a passing car or a bird sitting in a tree warily eyeing them up. Much to Ace’s amusement, the dog was having a grand time peeing on everything as well, including someone’s fancy sports car. At that point Ace had picked up the pace to a jog, Spade bounding beside him to keep up, tugging at his leash to go off the sidewalk and investigate every little smell.

Trafalgar had made it to their meeting spot with plenty of time to spare and was sitting on a park bench by the time Ace got in sight. Beside him, acting oddly like a human himself, was Law’s large white Samoyed. In Ace’s honest opinion, Bepo looked like an oversized marshmallow.

“Yo, Panda,” Ace called out when they were within hearing range. “And you too, Bepo Bear.”

Bepo gave a short high pitched bark in greeting while Trafalgar simply rolled his eyes at the name calling he was subjected to all too often. At the sight of Bepo, Spade’s periodic barking became frantic and he practically hauled Ace over to the bench at a speed that Ace didn’t think the rather obese puppy was capable of with his large paws.
Spade jumped half-way up the bench towards Bepo before falling to the ground in a jelly heap. Bepo stared down at the puppy with cold coal orbs, indignant that Spade was ignorant of the rules of hierarchy.

Bepo had always been a shy dog that didn’t like other mutts getting into his face so Spade’s introduction had been shocking to the big white fluff ball. Bepo had immediately tried to dominate Spade, if only to make the puppy cease his roughhousing but the dog had failed to make any lasting impact. Law joked that no dog would ever be Bepo’s subordinate.

Ace chuckled as Spade picked himself up and threw his little roly-poly body at the bench again, trying to scramble up to meet Bepo. “He must think that big marshmallow is food or something.”

“Don’t insult Bepo, you know he’s sensitive about his weight.” Trafalgar couldn’t help but chuckle a bit, unable to be serious when it came to his huge Samoyed. “Anyways, what’s the verdict? I see you’re not black and blue all over.”

“Naw, Gramps said he’d give me a ‘proper’ beating later, after work. But anyways, that’s not important. Get this; Akainu tried to kick me out of school again and Marco totally stood up for me and offered to give me tutoring in his class. Isn’t that awesome?!”

Trafalgar frowned, but his eyes held amusement. “You sound like a rabid school girl when you fawn over that old man.”

“He’s not that old,” Ace protested, placing his hands on his hips and a pout on his face. “You’re just jealous.”

“Of unrequited love? No, I think you’re sorely mistaken.”

By this time Spade had made it up onto the bench and was mauling Bepo with enthusiastic kisses. Trafalgar reached across and gave Spade a shove that sent him back to square one, the puppy squirming and whining on the grass. “Your dog’s really touchy-feely. You’d be amazed at how many things you two have in common besides the narcolepsy.”

Ace’s pout deepened for a second before he burst into a fit of laughter. “Wouldn’t it be funny if Spade fell in love with Be–”

“No it would not,” Law interrupted hastily. “I’m gay, you’re gay…it would be weird if we had gay dogs to match.”

“You’re no fun,” Ace said with the remnants of a chuckle. “So, want to walk the Grand Line today?”

Trafalgar sighed and stood up, Bepo jumping off the bench to the grass below. He started walking away, Bepo trotting obediently beside his master. Spade on the other hand tore after the pair, nearly making Ace loose his balance and fall to the ground. Yes, Bepo was well behaved compared to Ace’s puppy.

“Hey, wait up,” Ace called, darting after them with Spade in the lead. “I have more stuff to tell you!”

“If it has anything to do with our math teacher, I don’t want to hear it.” Law yelled back, eyeing Spade as the St. Bernard collided with Bepo, startling his old dog into crashing against Law’s legs. “Control your dog.”

Ace laughed and tried to rein Spade in, tugging at the leash in his hands and shortening it some.
Ace’s leash was decorated in a flame print, as was Spade’s collar and Law had made it no secret that he thought Ace was fashion-challenged. Bepo’s blue and white leash had a oriental look to it, much more sophisticated but Bepo’s collar, which was a bright vivid orange didn’t exactly match. Ace had used that collar to support his argument that Law wasn’t walking a fashionable dog either. Law usually argued back with something along the lines of needing the collar in order to find Bepo at night, to which Ace usually answered that with a luminously white pooch it would be nearly impossible to loose him.

Then Trafalgar would usually turn the conversation to winter and how hard it was to find a white dog in a snowbank. He usually won with this trump card as Ace would be too busy laughing to make a rebuttal.

Their different tastes in fashion were an ongoing, never-ending argument. One that was always brought up anytime they went near the Grand Line, the hub for everything in the city including a plethora of fashions.

As one may guess the Grand Line was located in the centre of the city, in between the four main districts; the North Blue, the East Blue, the South Blue and the West Blue. These four Blues made up the city and each district had its own unique properties. The North was where Trafalgar lived whereas Ace lived in the East. Their meeting ground was in fact along the invisible border between the two districts.

From there, the duo and their canines walked towards the heart of the city, buildings and people becoming more frequent as they neared the Grand Line, their city’s long avenue full of shops. It was a teenager’s paradise or hell, depending on who they ran into walking down those streets. Every city had a few red areas in it, usually located in the North or West Blues but in the Grand Line nobody knew what would happen or what gangs would show up there.

But that was all part of its appeal. Adventure.

“You going to buy anything today?” Law asked suddenly as Ace became side-tracked by a window display. Spade meanwhile was busy peeing on the side of said shop, making passers-by give them all dirty looks. Not like the dog could help himself or anything.

“No, just looking. Actually, I wouldn’t mind getting something to eat,” Ace said, a bright smile appearing on his face. Trafalgar merely shook his head, following Ace as he made his way towards a restaurant.

“You don’t have any money, do you?”

“Not a penny,” Ace quipped giddily. “Guess we’re going to have to make this a quick affair.”

“I’m not hungry, so you can go in and do your thing. I’ll meet you down by the canal. Bepo’s overheating and wants to go for a swim.” Law looked down at his dog panting in the heat, lying flat on the sidewalk with drool coming out of his maw. It was early autumn, but today had turned into an unprecedented heat wave. Law himself was feeling rather sweaty already and didn’t find sitting in a stuffy, noisy, smelly restaurant while his friend stuffed his face very appealing.

“Suit yourself. They don’t have a ‘no pets allowed’ sign on the front so I’m going to take Spade in. Besides, even if they don’t normally allow animals inside I’m sure Spade’s flaming cuteness will prevail over any icy hearts.” Ace snickered a little as he hoisted his puppy up into his arms. Spade barked happily and began to assault Ace’s freckled face with his floppy wet tongue.

Ace being Ace thought this kind of affection to be adorable, not disgusting.
Seeing this, Law simply shook his head morosely and left with Bepo padding along beside him. He’d let Ace do what he wanted. Law didn’t feel like committing a petty crime like dining and dashing with a slobbering puppy involved. Not today.

Bepo picked up his pace when he scented the refreshing tang of water, eager to arrive at their destination. Law didn’t pay any mind to the shops and their bright colourful displays, instead watching the crowd of evening shoppers all around him warily. Even though Law hadn’t a single coin on him he didn’t want to be caught unaware by a possible mugger. It was getting later in the day and pretty soon the sun would set and a shadier crowd would gather on the streets.

Law wasn’t afraid of fending off some random gang member but he knew when to fight and when to flee, something that Ace wasn’t very good at distinguishing between. He would never admit it but Trafalgar worried about Ace biting off more than he could chew. Ace never ran from any confrontation.

Still, Ace could take care of himself. Except for that one time when he picked a fight with a huge lummox who went by the name of Teach and had the stuffing kicked out of him; that time he’d needed medical attention. That turnout been surprising as Ace rarely lost a fight but his friend had been quite drunk during the exchange of blows.

At any rate, Trafalgar was a bit hesitant about splitting up. It couldn’t be helped though; Bepo was overheating in his long white coat. Sometimes Trafalgar wondered if he had accidentally bought a miniature polar bear all those years ago.

“Almost there, Bepo,” Law muttered. Bepo’s ears flicked back at the sound of his master’s voice and they quickened their pace to a lope. Soon the canal’s bank was right in front of them and Law was bent over with his ass in the air, unclipping Bepo’s leash.

The second Bepo was free he bounded like a crazed beast towards the water, leaping head first into the canal. His large white form submerged completely under the surface and when he came up again he reminded Law of a giant wet rug coming out of a washing machine. It was a pretty grisly sight but at least Bepo was happily swimming along, refreshed and ready to go.

“What the hell is that thing floating in the canal down there? It kind of looks like the head of a giant mop.”

Trafalgar froze up at the obnoxious voice that drifted into his ears. On the bridge that went over the canal, two people stood peering down at Bepo. It wasn’t long before they figured out that their mop was indeed a dog. Seconds later they began to jeer at poor Bepo.

Though it was questionable as to whether or not Bepo could understand the insults these two teenagers were lashing him with, the harsh tone of their voices scared him into slinking out of the water and back to Trafalgar. The pale dog looked utterly dejected and for a second Law debated going over there and beating the stupid kids up.

But, when Bepo came back to his side, those two kids had turned towards him and Law felt his stomach drop. He recognized them, two rogue morons from the South that harassed him at school. Recognition flooded their faces and before Law could get a leash on Bepo they bounded over, guffawing brusquely and sharing snide comments with one another.

“Funny how that ugly mutt belongs to you, huh?”

Law glared spitefully at the bigger of the two boys, whose spiky red hair had bore some semblance to a Coke can. “What do you want, Eustass?”
The teenager chuckled darkly and Law felt an unwelcome stirring in his groin. Mentally he reprimanded himself. No, he refused to admit he liked Eustass’ body. Not when the man’s innards were so revolting and vile.

As if sensing his master’s change in emotions, Bepo let out a menacing growl. Law looked down at his drenched dog, noting that the canine had pulled his lips back to expose pink gums and sharp white teeth.

“You should teach that mutt of yours some manners,” Eustass’ best friend said, his face expressionless. This man had long flowing blond hair that obscured most of his face and a build much like Trafalgar’s own. He was muscular, but more tall and lean with the look of an agile jungle cat. An ectomorph’s physique.

Eustass, well he was certainly more of a mesomorph and definitely Law’s type, much as that brought bile to his lips.

“What, you think my doggy’s rude?” asked Law jokingly.

He could see the two, who stood a scant fifteen feet away exchange irritated looks. Clearly they were expecting him to be less snarky in the face of a formidable fight. After a minute of uncomfortably tense silence, broken by another warning snarl from Bepo as Eustass took a step towards them, Trafalgar became aware of a crunching of twigs behind him.

He knew who it was without turning around but both teens in front of him were too preoccupied with the growling wet marshmallow to pay any attention to their surroundings. Eustass was the first to make a threatening move, rolling up the sleeve of his coat, a wicked grin spreading across his pale face. Trafalgar stiffened, knowing from experience that Eustass packed a punch when provoked. He steeled himself, not letting a trace of fear cross his face.

“Hey, so this is where you’d gone off to,” Ace’s voice said as he fought his way through the trees surrounding the canal. Spade was sound asleep in his arms, probably in the midst of an episode. “Thought you’d left.”

“No, I’m here,” Trafalgar said flatly, his eyes not leaving Eustass’ for a second. He could see a flash of disappointment appear in them and perhaps even respect for Ace, who was known around the school as one hell of a fighter. Aside from Teach, there wasn’t a record of losses for Ace.

After a few seconds of glancing back and forth between the two parties, Ace finally caught on to the situation. He grinned cheekily. “Well if it isn’t Eustass and Killer. Evening gentlemen. And how might the two of you be today?”

The blonde man, who most only knew as Killer due to the rumours of his supposed psychotic personality, grunted but didn’t feel inclined to answer. Eustass on the other hand growled, “Real fucking great, thanks.”

Ace nodded enthusiastically, seemingly immune to the tension between everyone present. At last Eustass stepped back, Killer following his lead as usual. As Eustass snorted in farewell Killer gave one last disgusted look toward Bepo. There was no doubt in Trafalgar’s mind that Killer was an animal abuser. Just by the way he looked at Bepo like something less than the dirt beneath his feet made this apparent. Law grimaced at this but he held any anger that threatened to boil to the surface in check, watching the two teens head off across the bridge that would lead south of here, back to their own neighbourhoods.

Before the two could disappear out of sight Eustass cast a rather vicious, toothy grin over his
shoulder at Trafalgar, one that promised that come tomorrow he’d better watch his back in the hallways at school. That was always how it was though and Law wasn’t any more anxious than before.

Sure Eustass wasn’t exactly full of hot air but neither was Trafalgar.

“Annoying little shits, aren’t they?” Ace spat, his smile fading from his face to be replaced with a sneer.

Law laughed lightly, “Little? They’re only a year younger than you. They’re the same age as me. Does that make me little too?”

“You’re an annoying little something, but not a shit.”

“How very eloquent of you,” Law said with a bemused snort. Beside him Bepo had released all of his former tension and was busy sniffing at various patches of grass, water droplets dripping off of his sides. Law went over and clipped Bepo’s leash on him, then started off back the way Ace and he had come. It was getting dark outside and he wanted to be home before he couldn’t see his hand in front of his face.

“Seriously though, I will mess them up with my fists if they go near you or Luffy.”

Trafalgar snickered a bit at the brotherly concern Ace was exhibiting. Luffy, Ace’s daring younger brother who often got himself into trouble, made Ace fretful beyond all belief. “I don’t think you need to worry about either of us. Luffy’s constantly surrounded by strong people and I can take care of myself.”

“You sure? You looked kind of tense back there facing those two.”

“It’s not like I’m scared of them or anything,” Trafalgar snarled. He crossed his arms across his stomach defiantly. “I just know dealing with both of them at once is risky. If it was just one of them I could give a good fight.”

Ace sighed contemptuously, “Fine. Whatever.” He moved off the main drag of road, to a less densely packed side street. “When I made a dash for it the waiter came after me and created a memorable scene, so let’s take the long way home today. I have an odd feeling in my gut that tells me Smoker’s nearby.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Law grumbled. He pushed into Ace playfully with a shoulder, causing the other to nearly fall into a store window. Contrary to popular belief, Law could pack a punch just as well as his heavier counterparts. “Who has a built in police radar?”

“Troublemakers,” Ace informed him with a laugh, shoving him back good-naturedly.
Tuesday afternoon found Ace staying put at his desk while all the other math students filtered out of the classroom, heading towards their next class, including Trafalgar who shot him a sly look with his tongue playfully hanging out. Ace knew it was Law teasing him about his attraction to their teacher, so he only snickered in acknowledgement.

Marco waited until all of his students had left, with the obvious exception of Ace, closing the classroom door behind them. He took a seat behind his desk and motioned for Ace to come closer. Ace obliged, pulling up a chair and sitting in it backwards in front of Marco’s desk, leaning his weight on the backrest.

This was his best attempt at a sexy pose.

“Time to work out a tutoring schedule,” Marco said, pulling out a scrap piece of paper from one of the drawers under his desk. He brandished a black ballpoint, ready for work. “What days are good for you?”

“Any day, I guess. I mean, my personal agenda is pretty flexible.”

Marco hummed softly as he sifted through a pile of papers to find his little calendar that listed when he was to appear at school meetings after hours and miscellaneous things like that. Ace peered closer at the little planner, noticing that Marco seemed to have a relatively busy professional life.

“What about if we did Thursdays after school in the library? Would that work for you?”

Ace bit his bottom lip, gently kneading the soft flesh there. “Directly after school?”

“Yeah.”

“Um, I might fall asleep by then.” Marco’s eyes widened and he gave a curt nod as a signal for Ace to continue. “I usually go home and take a nap, so I can be more awake later. I take a few periodic naps throughout the day. Usually after I eat lunch and before I eat dinner. It...uh, helps decrease the amount of attacks I have. Usually.”

Marco sat back in his chair, contemplating this and twirling the pen around his fingers. Ace couldn’t help but watch as the pen moved from one deft finger to another, feeling a stirring in his nether regions as his imaginative mind gave him examples of better things those fingers might be able to do.

“Okay,” Marco said at length. The pen stopped its rotations and Ace snapped back to attention. “You also told me you find it hard to focus when you’re in school, so maybe we should move our study location to somewhere else. To tell you the truth, I don’t really want either of us to have to pay to rent a space, so how about Thursday evenings at my place? After dinner.”

For a minute Ace was speechless, having not expected this turn of events. Marco took this display of a slack jaw as contemplation and didn’t ask if there was anything wrong. Finally, Ace managed to squeak out, “S-sure. S-sounds good.”

Marco turned to his planner and began to circle the first three Thursdays of the month. “What time? Does seven sound alright for you?”
“Yeah, that’s fine,” Ace answered quickly, watching Marco’s hands glide across the calendar gracefully. That was another one of the things he liked about Marco; his grace when he did things. It kind of reminded him of a bird floating on updrafts of air. Marco made things look effortless.

“Okay, guess we’ll start the day after tomorrow then. Based on your last test I have a fairly good idea of the topics we’re going to be covering.” Ace grimaced, remembering how much of a flop his last test had been. Not only had he been unable to concentrate due to a lack of sleep the night before, but he hadn’t been learning much of the material during the week leading up to the class because he’d been having an unusual amount of sleep attacks after lunch. This in turn was due to not being able to nap during lunch for some odd reason or another.

Marco passed him a slip of paper and Ace looked down at it, noting that it was an address. “My house isn’t too far from here, in the East Blue district.”

“Oh, really? I live in the East Blue too.”

“Maybe you’ll find it easy to find my house then,” Marco said with a wry smile. “It’s in a quiet little suburb.”

“I don’t think I’ll have problems, not with today’s technology,” Ace said cheekily. Marco snorted and went back to scribbling something in his elegant handwriting. Ace peered closer, trying to see what else Marco would produce.

“Here, take this with you to your next class so you don’t get in trouble for being late.”

Ace took the offered piece of paper, read the words on it, and grinned. Yes, he really did like Marco. There was no way Aokiji could be pissed at him with such a fancy, formal note.

“Thanks for all of this. I’m really grateful.”

Marco just smiled kindly, though Ace thought he could see a tinge of pink dusting the older man’s cheeks. His teacher waved him off and Ace headed for the door, figuring he took up enough of Marco’s time already.

“See you tomorrow.”

Ace echoed Marco’s words as he headed to his next class, giddy and full of energy.

--oOo--

On Wednesday morning, Trafalgar Law awoke to two very different noises; his cell phone beeping with a load of text messages and his grandmother, his only living relative, screaming like a banshee. He rolled over, happy despite these interruptions that he’d actually slept through the night and decided he’d deal with the first disturbance. He blinked tiredly at his cell phone’s screen and waited for his eyes to adjust to the brightness.

Ace had left him several excited texts and he skimmed them, disinterested. Something about their math teacher, sexy fingers and studying at a house. He switched his phone off and tossed it carelessly on the bed before untangling himself from his blankets and stepping down onto the floor.

His feet touched something quite hairy and he wondered vaguely why he was feeling carpet when his flooring was hardwood. A yelp alerted him to the answer.

“I am so, so sorry Bepo!” Law cried as his Samoyed whimpered and rolled out of Law’s path. The
Hanging around looking stuffed animal firmly fixed in his mouth and his whimpering were faint, but still present. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

His dog rolled over onto his stomach and spat out his favorite chew toy – a polar bear plushie that had seen better days. Then he wagged his tail and Law breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re tough; don’t let anyone tell you differently.” Law smiled, as that was a mantra he often told himself when in doubt of his capabilities. It worked to get him fired up on days where he’d rather just sit on the floor spread-eagle thinking about nothing.

Bepo stood, tail wagging leisurely, and yawned. Law knew the dog probably didn’t understand any of the words he’d spoken, but the events of the past few days had been annoying him.

Eustass Kidd. That bastard was going to pay for calling his dog a mop. Even if there was some truth to that statement.

Trafalgar grumbled a malicious hex intended for Kidd that he’d learnt from a book and started pulling on clothes for the day. He didn’t have a lot of choice as to what to wear since he didn’t really own all that many outfits. He settled for his usual creepy smiley face sweatshirt over a black tank top, the soft fabric a comfort in the chilly autumn morning. That heat wave they’d had earlier on in the week had tapered off.

He stumbled around his tiny room, gathering his school bag and everything else he would need for the day. Bepo padded along after him, seemingly glued to his leg. It was a wonder Law didn’t step on him more often than he did.

All ready for school, Law left his room to deal with the second disturbance of the morning; his grandmother. He could hear her in the kitchen, chanting as if to raise the dead. And, knowing his grandmother, she probably was trying to do just that.

“What are you doing?” Trafalgar asked tiredly as he rounded the corner and spotted the old woman standing on a stool in front of the stove with a large cauldron-like pot bubbling away in front of her. She could compete in a competition of thinness with her broom body. Her age left her wrinkled and sun-spotted, and she had a permanent hunch to her spine from slaving over her cauldron all day back in her old country. Truthfully, she reminded all of the kids on Law’s block of a stereotypical witch, minus the pointy hat and the black cat.

She gave him a disdainful look, the kind a mother might give to a child that was misbehaving and Trafalgar felt himself retreating. His grandmother was demoralizing him and it was only early in the morning.

“What does it look like I’m doing, dearest one?”

“Raising the dead,” stated Law. He went about his business as usual, feeding Bepo his kibbles first and then popping two pieces of toast into the toaster. “I believe they call it necromancy.”

His grandmother scoffed and shakily got down from her perch on the stool. Then she grabbed a ladle from a drawer and Trafalgar thought she was going to hit him with the device since she held it in her hands like a weapon.

“I’m making breakfast,” his grandmother said, her voice raspy. She shook the ladle at him threateningly. “And you’re going to eat it.”

She brandished the ladle and filled two bowls with the contents of her cauldron, setting them on the table. Trafalgar’s toast popped out and he grabbed the two slices, attempting to make a dash for it.
only to find one very dangerous weapon barring his path.

Damn, for a creaky weather-beaten lady she could move quickly.

“Sit down,” the woman growled, moving the gleaming sword that had appeared out of nowhere threateningly close to Trafalgar’s stomach. Seeing this, and knowing how sharp the family heirloom was, Trafalgar resigned himself to his grandmother’s connotation, bringing his toast to the table.

“Would you put that thing away?” Trafalgar asked, making his voice as polite as he could despite feeling the inert desire to want to throttle his old lady. “I’d like to eat breakfast in peace.”

His grandmother obliged, placing the nodachi back into its scabbard and shuffling calmly over to the table to take a seat opposite him. Law looked back and forth between the elderly who had begun to eat her stew-like creation and the creation itself in question. It was a dark, indescribable colour and he could see bits of unidentifiable objects floating around in the bowl.

“What is this?” Trafalgar asked, knowing from past experiences to be wary of anything that came off the stove in their little shanty they called a house.

“This,” his grandmother started with great deal of pride evident in her tone, “Is one of our culture’s sacred dishes. It promotes good health for those living in the arctic climates. I used to have this all the time when I was a girl, long before I came to this country.”

Hearing this made Law even more suspicious, but he took up his spoon with a hearty amount of broth in it and threw it back into his mouth, trying his best not to taste it with his tongue. Unfortunately, the taste was overwhelming no matter how he attempted to eat. Much as he thought it would, the stew tasted like nothing he’d ever had before and would hopefully never have again. It had a metallic, almost earthy taste to it but he continued eating regardless, his grimace deepening with every mouthful. He was able to discern that there was meat mixed in with it, but he couldn’t tell much more.

Finally he decided to ask, “What is actually in this? And don’t say anything about blessings and incantations because I mean ingredients.”

“Ingredients? Well, the broth is rabbit’s blood, of course, but the meat is a combination of rabbit and some very scrumptious caribou intestines that my friends in the north shipped down to us. That was what was in that big box I had you put in the cellar yesterday.”

Trafalgar stared at her, debated whether or not to try and retch up everything he’d eaten, then decided to place the bowl on the floor. He walked out of the kitchen to the sound of his grandmother cackling and his dog slurping up the breakfast meant for him.

Bepo was the only one that enjoyed that old hag’s cooking.

Law brushed his teeth twice, then after some serious consideration, brushed them a third time and gargled mouthwash. After that he let Bepo out into their little fenced yard until his return after school and left home.

He continued down his street, eying the debilitated houses that dotted the area. He lived in the North Blue of course, which was choke full of different ethnic groups as it was the hub for most low-income families like Law’s own. However, Law lived on the outskirts of the district and the invisible border that crossed into East Blue was a mere hop and a skip away.

For the past couple of years Law had been meeting Ace and his little brother Luffy to walk to
Both brothers amused him to no end but even though he and Ace got along fine, Luffy could sometimes be too immature for him to handle for prolonged periods.

He saw Luffy approaching first, running towards him like a rhinoceros bent on trampling everything in sight. Law narrowly got out of Luffy’s path and caught snippets of screamed words. He continued to watch as the boy in blue shorts and a red sleeveless shirt ran well into the horizon, scaring the daylights out of people farther up the road.

He heard frantic panting behind him and turned to see Ace sprinting towards him. Thinking that this time he really would be hit, Law braced himself.

No impact came.

Instead Ace had keeled over, panting and failing to form a cohesive sentence.

“Your brother ran by here screaming about something just now,” Law said, pulling Ace up by his shaggy mop of brown hair so he was vertical.

“Y-yeah,” Ace heaved. He took in copious amounts of oxygen before continuing. “Gramps tried to kill us this morning. We narrowly escaped.”

“Oh, I had a similar experience this morning with the old hag.”

When Ace recovered enough to walk without toppling over they started in on the relatively long walk to school. Not much time passed before the silence melded into a one-sided conversation.

“Today, I’m totally prepping for tomorrow! I swear Panda, I am going to smack a bitch if anything goes wrong.”

“No impact came.

Instead Ace had keeled over, panting and failing to form a cohesive sentence.

“Your brother ran by here screaming about something just now,” Law said, pulling Ace up by his shaggy mop of brown hair so he was vertical.

“Y-yeah,” Ace heaved. He took in copious amounts of oxygen before continuing. “Gramps tried to kill us this morning. We narrowly escaped.”

“Oh, I had a similar experience this morning with the old hag.”

When Ace recovered enough to walk without toppling over they started in on the relatively long walk to school. Not much time passed before the silence melded into a one-sided conversation.

“Today, I’m totally prepping for tomorrow! I swear Panda, I am going to smack a bitch if anything goes wrong.”

“Then could you go smack Eustass for me?”

“If you really want me too,” Ace said in all seriousness. Law smirked and shook his head, declining and showing he was just kidding in that morbid way of his. Besides, if anyone was going to beat Eustass Kidd, it would be him.

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”

“Then could you go smack Eustass for me?”

“If you really want me too,” Ace said in all seriousness. Law smirked and shook his head, declining and showing he was just kidding in that morbid way of his. Besides, if anyone was going to beat Eustass Kidd, it would be him.

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”

“Anyways, how does one go about seducing an older man? I tried pretty hard yesterday but he didn’t really seem to notice me any more than usual.”

Law sighed deeply. How could it be that his friend had fallen for someone he couldn’t have? “Ace, do you even realize what you’re saying? If you and Marco got together it would be incredibly damaging to his professional career and not to mention your own life.”

Ace grinned and tossed his hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head. “It’s not like anyone has to know. I imagine he might want to keep it on the down low for a while too. At least until I pack on a few more years.”
“I know. But it’s fun talking about what could be in a perfect world, isn’t it?”

Law said nothing; he could only say the truth and what he’d say would make Ace even more depressed. So he walked along silently, waiting for Ace to pull himself together and get over this rough patch.

At last, when they neared the school grounds Ace spoke up again, “He’s probably got some unknown girlfriend, hell, even a wife and kid we don’t know about. I have a feeling that I’ll find out today at his house, so I’m kind of regretting agreeing to meet there. I mean, I guess it could have been avoided if I’d thought of some other place for us to go. At least then I could have my blissful ignorant dreams still intact.”

“You’re talking like a complete drama queen, moron.”

Ace stopped, his already droopy frown becoming more prominent. “Excuse me?”

Law halted too, knowing that this was the opportunity to turn Ace around. If he didn’t do this now, chances were good that Ace would be depressed all day and end up annoying the hell out of him later.

“You heard me. You’re being so unlike yourself that it’s making me sick,” Law plainly stated. This kind of thing needed to be said, if there was ever going to be a turnaround. “Now, I want you to go back to being the hopeful idiot I know instead of this sappy wannabe queen because you’re not going to be able to win any older men over with an attitude like that.”

Mouth gaping, Ace could only stare. Trafalgar continued his ranting, knowing he hadn’t quite turned Ace on his head yet.

“Honestly, when there’s a will there’s a way, right? If you don’t have a will then how are any of your dreams going to come true? So just go in there with your sexy on and seduce that motherfucker.” Law didn’t know where that last part had come from, but he mentally shrugged and ran with it. “And don’t come whining to me unless you’ve been utterly rejected by that man.”

With that said, Law walked on towards school taking deep breaths to calm himself down, leaving Ace in his wake. Before too long he reached the school’s front lawn and made a point of stepping on the shrubbery to piss off the vice principals. Besides, everyone liked to see the normally passive vice principal Sengoku get worked up over his shrubbery. In his mind, he was doing his one good deed for the day by bringing excitement to all the little boys and girls.

He heard Ace’s footsteps approaching and prepared to get a fist to the head for overstepping the boundaries. Much to his surprise though, Ace grabbed him by the wrist and spun his much lighter form around.

“Thank you!” Ace cried, slightly breathless. “I’m going to do it! I’m not going to live with regrets!”

“That…is good for you. But, you know, I was just kidding with that pep talk. I really don’t think it’s a good idea to…”

But Ace had run ahead, bounding up the school’s front steps three at a time.

“…seduce our teacher. Shit, what have I done?”

--oOo--

The day was turning out to be unbelievably bad for Law. He had somehow altered the chemistry in
his friend’s head and had seen the results of that first hand in math class after lunch rolled by. Much to his horror, Law could see that Ace was watching Marco like a hungry cat might watch a bird. Waiting to pounce. It was incredibly unnerving to see his friend go from a relatively mild crush to a full on obsession. He had forgotten that Ace went after his goals without any traces of fear.

Him and his suddenly big mouth. Law knew there was a reason he preferred to stay blunt, but Ace tore things out of him unlike any other human being.

He just hoped Ace wouldn’t be let down. As much as Trafalgar liked a story with a sick, twisted, preferably bloody ending, he also played the role of compassionate friend. Ace had done a lot from him in the past, stood up for him when he was discriminated against because of his brainpower and because his ethnicity was always the object of a brutish joke. He didn’t really care what other people thought of him, but it was nice to know someone out there wasn’t a complete asshole. So, Law felt more than a little concerned about the wellbeing of one of his few friends.

After math class ended, Law felt exhausted. He kept wondering if Ace was going to say something incredibly stupid in front of the whole class to try and get to Marco. Every time Ace raised his hand to answer a question while smiling a very sultry smile, Trafalgar nearly had a heart attack. It was gruelling affair, watching his friend nearly overstep the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

During last period when he had a health care class, Trafalgar was sent out of the room to do an errand for the teacher. Discreetly he had gathered up his books and took off, not intending to return. He knew all of the material the teacher was making them learn, hell he probably knew it better than the teacher himself and Law didn’t feel like wasting his time listening to recycled garbage.

He walked down the hall towards his locker – which was located in the most unused hallway in the building where no classes ran at that particular time – intending to grab his backpack and get out of the suffocation that was more commonly known as school for the day. He got there, but not before a blinding red light appeared in front of his path.

This stop light’s grin bore down on his very soul. Law refused to falter and instead of turning tail and running as any sane person might do he smirked confidently.

“Eustass Kidd. A pleasure.”

“Likewise,” Kidd snarled mockingly. “And what is our dear little faggot boy doing wandering around when he should be in class?”

Law’s smirk grew wider. His sexual preferences were known to many and he’d been the subject of many cruel remarks from his peers. In time he’d built up an impenetrable shield, one that wouldn’t be broken by a guy who looked like a Goth tripping on acid. If anyone looked decisively gay it was Eustass, though Law didn’t think he’d be saying that to the teenager’s face. He wanted his body to be left intact by the end of the day.

“Little faggot boy is going home. And what is the walking, breathing Coke can doing out of class? Pray tell.”

Eustass’ face went from smug to downright pissed off in a matter of nanoseconds. “You’re too fucking cocky for your own good.”

“As are you,” Law answered. He decided now would be a good time to try and sidestep Kidd to get to his locker and book it home. But Kidd, who blocked his path yet again, had other plans.
“You need to be taught a lesson.”

Before Trafalgar could properly register Kidd’s ominous intentions, the other had grabbed both of his arms above the elbow and lifted him off of the ground. Then he barrelled forward and slammed Law into the lockers behind them, the sound of a body hitting metal ricocheting down the hallway. It didn’t matter how loud that sound was, nobody would come to save Trafalgar. Not in this area of the school that some students didn’t even know existed.

Yes, for Kidd to be here…Law was having an incredibly unlucky day.

The pain that flashed through his body from being thrashed against an unwavering surface fuelled Law’s anger. He writhed and squirmed, kicked at Eustass, and managed to land quite a few solid blows, drawing out pained grunts from his assailant. For a moment, it even looked as if Law might be able to escape with the damage he was dealing, but Kidd was not exactly a brute without a brain.

Before Law could kick a finishing blow to Kidd’s battered shins, the fiery assaulter pressed his body up against his victim. Then he let out a slow, dark chuckle that sent a shiver through Trafalgar’s body.

Just the same as any time before, that dark chuckle went straight on down to areas best not mentioned, effectively making Law go off on a tangent of self-loathing.

“I said I’m going to teach you a lesson and I will. What’s it going to be? Shall I stuff you in a locker or will you squeal and beg me for mercy?”

Law offered up another one of his spooky grins. He couldn’t help himself, despite knowing the consequences. He knew it would tick off Kidd further and, sure enough, the other lifted his smaller form off the lockers only to slam him against them again. The pain and jolt caused Law’s smile to slip away temporarily to make way for a grimace but through shear willpower he managed to keep tears from springing to his eyes.

Kidd only had two settings that Law had encountered: brutal and complete annihilation. Law knew that the brute soon be leaning towards the latter if he didn’t do something to get out of this mess. He was sure there would be a huge bruise on his back after this was over. The hinges that kept the locker doors on were ripping into his flesh despite his thick sweater and making unsightly indents.

“He’s an arrogant bastard, do you really think you can fight back against me?” Yet again Eustass laughed, his same dark chuckle that would’ve made babies cry. “You don’t stand a chance of winning.”

“Oh yeah?” Law challenged defiantly. He stuck out his tongue, wetting his chapped lips. “I can beat you.”

Genuine surprise crossed Eustass’ face and his forehead lifted only to come back down in wrinkles of confusion. Nobody stood up to him. Nobody except this brat he had so firmly between his taloned fingers. In his mind, once he crushed Law then nobody would dare to stand up to him again. It was only a matter of time and the past two years of taunting and torturing had to have been wearing on Trafalgar’s nerves. He ought to have been terrified of Kidd, yet here he was, snapping at him like a cornered wolf. “You better watch your fucking mouth. How can you beat me when I have you backed into a corner?”

“I can beat you,” Law repeated as firmly as before.

Kidd laughed morbidly, his hot breath shooting into Law’s face and making him uncomfortably
weak in the knees. Another wave of self-loathing washed over him. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Okay,” Law said bluntly, his smirk growing wider. Before Kidd knew what was happening, Law had wrapped his legs around his waist, surprising the other teenager into loosening his grip on Trafalgar’s arms. A quick movement was all it took for Law to regain the use of his arms, which went around Kidd’s neck in a vice.

This was the panda hug, as Ace had dubbed it.

For Kidd, more surprising than the panda hug was finding Law’s lips slamming down on his own. Those lips moved over him with frightening strength, something that Eustass had never felt before. The shock and sudden full weight on his body left him reeling backwards, the both of them falling to the hard linoleum floor. Law’s lips were jarred away upon impact and he quickly scrambled to his feet, looking down at the startled Kidd whose mouth had fallen open.

“I win,” Law stated audaciously before making a break for it, laughing riotously as he tore down the hall. Kidd’s livid, screeching voice bounced off concrete and metal, echoing in Law’s ears. But there was no way Law was going to stop to look over his shoulder even if it would be a sweet sight to behold.

He wasn’t stupid enough to risk *that*. 
That night Trafalgar Law was sitting in his bed reading a thick medical book when he heard a rock being thrown at his window. At first, he ignored it, immersed in a book others would have found utterly boring. To him, it was fascinating to learn about the different procedures one could take cutting up a body to do work on the inside. He didn’t understand how people became grossed out about it.

Another pebble hit his window with a light tap that would have startled Bepo into a barking frenzy, had he not been preoccupied with mooching off of his grandmother’s late night snack downstairs. Law stubbornly refused to acknowledge the noise and continued reading.

The sound of glass smashing made him drop the book on his bed, losing his page. He leapt to his feet, crossing his small room to his window. His foot kicked something on his floor that tumbled away and he could feel glass underfoot.

Outside in the inky darkness he could make out a large outline crouched in the oak tree that grew beneath his window. The form crept forwards on a thick branch towards him. With an annoyed hiss that belittled his current anger Law slid the window up, opening it.

“Portgas Fucking D. Fuck-Ace, how dare you break my fucking window!”

Ace scrambled inside the tight squeeze that was Law’s bedroom window, falling into a heap of limbs on the floor below. Luckily none of the glass that was there pierced into his skin. Instead of his usual board shorts Ace was wearing flannel pyjama bottoms. He was, however, lacking a shirt to cover up that muscular chest of his.

“You fuck-up,” Law snarled once more, flinging a pillow in Ace’s general direction.

Ace caught the pillow, but only because of the aiding light that came from Trafalgar’s bedside lamp. “Shit man, I’m sorry. I’ll replace it. Again.”

“You’d better,” growled Law, ripping his pillow out of Ace’s hands and placing it rather daintily upon his bed. “Now what do you want?”

“Well, Luffy’s sleeping over at a friend’s house and I don’t want to stay by myself with the old geezer. I was lonely,” Ace explained, trying his best to evoke some emotion other than frustration and anger out of his friend. “So,” he started, countenance brightening considerably, “I decided I’d pay you a visit and hopefully-maybe-please-stay-over?”

Law retrieved his book, spent a long silent minute trying to locate his last reading point, and dog-eared the page before setting it down on his bedside table. “You’re sleeping on the floor,” he finally said.

That was all Ace needed to hear to confirm that Law wasn’t mad enough to kill him in a most painful manner while he slept. Overjoyed, he leapt onto Trafalgar’s bed, splayed his arms and legs and snuggled into the well-worn quilt that smelt strongly of his best friend, all man with a hint of spicy cologne. He loved that warm quilt, even if it was well-worn from having been passed throughout Trafalgar’s family members way back in the day.

“Hey, I said on the floor, you useless mutt. Sleep on the mess of glass you made and maybe you’ll lose enough blood that you’ll be dead in the morning. Then I can give you to the old hag to chop up and use in her stew.”
Rather than begging to stay on the bed, as he knew that wouldn’t work on the dark-haired boy, Ace instead reached out and tugged Trafalgar on top of him. Law squirmed and engaged his much bigger counterpart in a fierce wrestling match, one that ended with him tucked under the blanket with Ace holding him down.

Ace giggled, in his usual deep baritone, his triumph. Law only scoffed and chalked Ace’s win up to the fact that he hadn’t had much sleep lately.

“Let’s talk about hot guys,” Ace said after a moment of sizing one another up. He didn’t like the eerie silence that allowed Law to plot his next move to win the battle.

“I’m gay but I’m not that gay.”

“Aw, come on Panda, what about those two freshmen who’ve been following you around lately? The hat duo?”

Trafalgar pulled a face of disgust. “Penguin and Shachi? No, they just think I’m awesome since I told off their teacher earlier on in the year. I’m peer-helping one of their classes.”

“You don’t think they’re hot at all?” Ace asked, curiously watching Law’s face contort into another grimace. “I thought they looked kind of cute in those hats they wear. And Penguin was totally blushing when he was talking to you.”

“Can we not talk about this kind of stuff right before bed? I just want to sleep.”

Ace showcased a pout that told his friend he was the worst slumber party host in the universe. The sight was grotesque to Trafalgar. He managed to free an arm out from underneath the quilt and shoved a palm towards Ace’s face, pushing the expression clear off of him.

“Fine, fine, I am kind of sleepy,” Ace relented, picking up the edge of the patterned blanket. Before Trafalgar could have a say in the matter, Ace had lifted the fabric enough to slide in next to his friend. He grasped the other’s body and pressed himself to him, snuggling up to the warmth he found.

Then, without further ado, soft snores were heard and Law saved his breath, realizing that it was impossible to protest against the heavy narcoleptic mass of stupid known as Ace. He settled in, stole his pillow out from under Ace’s head, and then rolled over, trying to fall asleep.

Usually, he wouldn’t succeed against his insomnia. But he had learned with experiences like this one that having a warm body next to him somehow calmed his mind and put him to sleep like a baby.

That was the only reason Trafalgar didn’t kick Ace onto the floor. He wouldn’t have slept otherwise.

--oOo--

Elsewhere in the city, Eustass Kidd was having a very fitful night. He tossed and turned in his exceptionally regal four poster bed, feeling himself grow sweatier as the night wore on. By three in the morning he figured it was no use; he wasn’t going to sleep tonight, not with his mind refusing to halt its progress processing information.

He rolled into a sitting position, throwing his legs over the side of the bed so they dangled above the floor. He rubbed at his face, ruffled his hair so it went back to standing on end and then cursed to himself. Harsh words made him feel better for only a fleeting second.
It was all that bastard’s fault, naturally. That damned racoon-like boy had done him in, humiliated him, and beat him good at his own game. If he had just socked Trafalgar Law in the face while he’d had his chance he would have never lost. Again, he cursed under his breath.

He decided he needed something to take his mind off of the damned pest. He got to his feet, walking out of his bedroom and into the hallway. He didn’t bother to be quiet even though it was the middle of the night. Nobody was home but him.

His mother and father, both successful business people, were away from home and wouldn’t be returning until later in the month. It wasn’t an unusual occurrence or anything; in fact Eustass was used to being by himself, ever since he entered high school. Before that his parents had hired someone to stay with him, not really for company but more to keep their million dollar estate in tip-top shape.

Kidd knew very well that they could care less about the child living there.

Just thinking about his parents brought a nauseating taste to Kidd’s mouth and he raided the refrigerator, taking out a carton and drowning the orange juice inside with an extreme lack of manners.

Nobody would know and nobody would care.

He then tossed the empty carton in the garbage and hoisted himself onto the kitchen table. If his parents were home they’d freak. But they weren’t and if Eustass managed to break the large oak table he could easily order another one and have it delivered before they even knew anything was amiss.

They weren’t home often enough to know what the house really looked like anyway.

Eustass sat still and listened to the eerie quiet that came with being alone in such a vast space. The state of the art refrigerator didn’t even offer up a comforting hum. In this silence his thoughts once again drifted and he found himself thinking about a certain dark-haired boy that pissed him off to an unimaginable degree.

Oddly enough, he found himself wishing the boy were here with him. At least then he’d have someone to rage at, yell and beat. It would certainly fill this roaring silence that made him feel uneasy. It didn’t matter how many years he spent alone in the house, he still never got used to it.

With a sigh that sounded entirely too loud, Eustass passed a hand over his mouth and remembered what had transpired at school earlier. He honestly had not expected Law to do as he did, kissing him roughly and then running like hell. Well, truthfully he’d expected the latter part but certainly not the former.

Boys and girls alike stayed far, far away from Kidd and sure enough Eustass hadn’t received any sort of kiss before Trafalgar smacked one on him unexpectedly. So it was weird and angering at the same time that Law would steal his first kiss, not that Eustass really cared much about its rite-of-passage significance. No, what he cared about was how Law had done it, completely duping him and then leaving him on the ground like a fool.

*That damn faggot is going to pay,* Eustass resolved, lips curling downwards into their perpetual scowl.

--oOo--

It wasn’t long past midnight that Marco found himself sipping from his third beer of the night. He
watched, bemused, as his best friend shimmied his butt across the stage, belting out some song he’d never heard.

Admittedly, Thatch had put together a pretty decent band ten years ago. They barely did any original material of their own, sure, but their covers were legendary in this particular little venue. Every Wednesday night they played to an eager audience, mostly comprised of middle-aged people that didn’t want to give up on their youth.

He’d been coming out to support Thatch and his crew for a bit less than a decade. When they first begun they’d stunk something fierce and had needed all the support they could get. Now they practically had groupies, though the woman at the base of the stage were more like wives who didn’t get enough at home.

Thatch didn’t mind as he was never picky with his women.

Marco sighed as Thatch’s timeslot came to an end and another group replaced them on the stage. Most likely it would be a band of teenagers screaming their guts out like the last couple times he’d come to watch Thatch play. He grimaced; he didn’t want his ears blown out. He hoped Thatch and the other two members would hurry the hell up and pack up their van before—

A garbled sound left his lips as the first waves of feedback crashed into his ears from the bunch of teenagers trying to make sense of their setup on stage. He groaned, slammed back the remainder of his beer, and headed outside for some fresh air. Everyone could find him later; there was no way he was staying in an enclosed space listening to that crap.

There was a crowd at the door waiting to get out. Faintly Marco felt a tad sad for the band up on stage whose audience was leaving them hanging. But another chord from a frazzled guitar revoked any pity just as soon as it had begun to form in his gut.

He made it outside and went to stand around the front for a minute, catching his breath. Then he went around the backside of the venue and found his friends; Thatch, Jozu and Izou all trying to cram as much of their equipment as they could into their rapidly sagging van.

He walked up to them, noting that the amp in Jozu’s arms was not going to fit into the tiny space Izou was beckoning too. Thatch on the other hand was too preoccupied chatting up a lady off to the side. Some band leader he was.

“Marco, give us a hand, will ya?” Jozu grunted. His grip on the amp was slipping and Marco quickly strode over to help him lift it.

*You guys realize this is never going to fit, right?* Marco thought to himself as he eyed the small space that was left in the vehicle. But he wouldn’t say that aloud. “Oh, I don’t know guys, this one could be a tight squeeze but we’ll try anyway.”

“This is all because Thatch over there wanted to bring the fancy-pants strobe light system,” Izou muttered angrily. Currently he was holding up the van’s back door, as they’d somehow broken it so it didn’t stay up of its own accord. “We should tie him to the roof and put the amp in his seat.”

As much as Marco liked the sound of that idea he shook his head. The police would likely fine them for such behaviour. It had happened before. “No, no, I’m sure we can get this to fit.”

*Yeah, right, and monkeys will come out my ass,* he couldn’t help but think. But he and Jozu kept at it, grunting and pushing the amp until they managed to get it to squeeze in between a guitar case and keyboard. When at last Izou closed the back door, Marco was sweating and wondering when
he’d become a roadie.

Thatch conveniently showed up just as they were getting ready to leave. “Guess what? I got a couple numbers this time.” He seemed incredibly excited, holding up a handful of small papers that looked to be napkins from the bar.

Marco sighed, wholly exasperated with his best friend while Izou struck the man with a fist in the shoulder. It was no secret that Thatch judged how well a live performance went by how many phone numbers he got by the end of the night.

“I hope all of them are trannies in disguise,” Izou said ominously as they all piled into the van. Jozu, being the least drunk since his job as a drummer was to keep time for the rest of the band, sat behind the steering wheel. Izou and Thatch climbed into the backseat, Izou flicking a few fingers into Thatch’s pompadour hairstyle to mess up his groove.

Marco climbed into the passenger seat amid Thatch’s squealing for his hair to be spared by Izou’s wrath. They drove out of the Grand Line and towards the East Blue, where Marco and Izou lived. Coincidently, they had houses right next to one another. How this had worked out nobody knew, but frequently Izou barged in on Marco demanding something mundane like a cup of sugar. That was about the worst thing Marco had to deal with when living next to Izou, so it wasn’t too bad.

Thatch and Jozu were both successful businessmen by day, evident in Jozu’s fondness for wearing diamonds even during the most casual of events. The South Blue was a higher end district sprinkled with mansions and perfectly green lawns. Marco couldn’t imagine living there. Never mind that he would never be able to afford it, he just couldn’t see himself in a pristine neighbourhood. He liked his life laid-back and unfussy in the East Blue.

Izou and Marco jumped out of the van when Jozu pulled up in front of Marco’s house. Thatch bade them a hearty farwell and the two drove off, leaving them standing on the curb with only Izou’s keyboard and a box of their unsold CDs.

Marco helped Izou bring the stuff into his house, placing it in the living room. He had it in his mind to try and make a speedy getaway but he ended up tripping on one of Izou’s rolled up yoga mats. Luckily, he fell on the couch.

Izou laughed at him with his butt in the air and draped his flowery sash that he’d been wearing over his pinkish violet kimono over that same butt jutting out of his sofa. Izou was a notorious cross-dresser who taught yoga classes during the daylight hours as well as fashion classes at the university. They were both teachers, but apart from grading work they had only a few specks in common.

“Will you join me for tea?” Izou asked after Marco had righted himself on the couch. He tore off the flowery sash and tossed it so it crumpled, defeated, beside him. “It feels like forever since you came over. We haven’t had a good talk since…oh, last week?”

“That’s not really a long time,” Marco grumbled, untangling his legs from the offending yoga mat. He rose to his feet, only to be firmly pushed back into a sitting position by Izou. “I have to get back home and feed my parrot.”

“Like hell you do. Who feeds their pet at two in the morning? Now sit and let me make us some tea. I made fresh biscuits this afternoon too.” Marco opened his mouth to protest, but Izou beat him to speaking. “You’re going to eat my baking and you’re going to like it!”

Marco shut his mouth before he could constitute Izou’s wrath and the other man went to work in
the kitchen, soon bringing out a tray consisting of a dainty teapot, even daintier teacups and his biscuits, setting them down on the coffee table. Marco knew he wouldn’t be able to escape now, not with Izou pouring him a cup of tea.

*He is really having boyfriend withdrawal,* Marco couldn’t help but muse. He brought the tea to his lips and drank the steaming contents, tasting a distinctly spicy flavour. He stared down at the contents of the cup, wondering if Izou was trying to poison him for forgetting his birthday a month earlier.

Seeing his puzzled face, Izou clapped his hands together happily to earn his attention. “This is herbal tea that’s apparently good for one’s sex drive,” Izou said with a devious smile. “I couldn’t help but notice you had a dazed look on your face tonight. Is there…someone I might be meeting in the very near future?”

Marco chuckled, “No. My sex life is pretty much nonexistent. I’ve been too busy with work to pursue anyone.”

Izou huffed, his shoulders slackening to show his disappointment. “And here I thought maybe at least one of us was getting some.”

“You still mad at–”

“Don’t say that bastard’s name in my presence,” Izou snarled, grabbing his teacup and downing the liquid in one angry gulp. He placed the delicate teacup down before saying more calmly, “There is no way I’m getting back with my ex. Not again. Never again. And as of today you and I are going to make a new year’s resolution.”

“It’s not going to be new years for another three months,” Marco whined, already knowing where this was headed. Izou, much as the other didn’t realize it, was quite predictable. They had made new resolutions during the summer in past years and Marco knew he’d just have to humour his friend.

Izou waved off that valid point. “Who cares? I still say we make a pledge to get new men in our lives. Heaven knows we need some kind of stimulation.”

Marco grunted and finished his tea, not able to figure out a suitable reply to his friend’s sudden tenacity.

“To toast me with a wafer,” Izou demanded, raising a biscuit in the air. Marco relented and dutifully raised one too, clacking it against the one Izou was holding. “To being lonely old gay men.”

“I’m not toasting to that,” Marco complained.

“Too bad,” Izou snapped, “You already did. Now I’ve been thinking…how about you and I go carousing at *The Night Fairy* tomorrow night? See if we can pick up some guys?”

Marco snorted, knowing that Izou would drag him out of his house in his underwear to go seduce men. But this time he had other obligations. Thank goodness for that, as he still hadn’t gotten over their last visit to that gay bar. “Sorry, can’t. I’m busy.”

“What could a lonely old gay man like you be doing on a Thursday night?” Izou asked incredulously. “Or maybe I should be asking who are you doing?!" Marco opened his mouth but Izou wouldn’t let him speak. “I knew it! Ever since I saw you staring off into space back at the venue! There’s something you’re keeping from me and I don’t like it! Tell me now, who are you screwing?!”
Marco sputtered, Ace’s cheeky face immediately coming to mind, as that was who was coming over tomorrow. “I’m not sleeping with anyone! I’m tutoring a student. Actually, he’s coming over to my place so I’d really appreciate it if you could refrain from dropping in out of the blue. I don’t want him to have an unnecessary heart attack seeing you come over in that ugly pink robe and bunny slipper set I got you for Christmas.”

Izou cocked a thin, perfectly groomed eyebrow. “Is that not a bit…oh, I don’t know, inappropriate? To have a student come over to their teacher’s house? What’s this kid’s name and how old is he?”

“Ace and he’s eighteen,” Marco answered automatically. “Wait, why do you want to know that?”

Izou clucked reproachfully and grabbed a nail file, crossing his legs neatly. He began to file his nails, bringing them to a point. He liked to have them sharp enough to use as weapons as he was wary of being mugged while doing his yoga classes in one of the red light districts within the Grand Line.

“You know Marco; eighteen is sort of like the shifting sand between a child and an adult. If you fooled around with him and he turns on you and calls the police or whatever they’re automatically going to take the kid’s side. You could be labelled a rapist. You’d be kicked out of this peaceful neighbourhood for sure.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I have no intentions of letting that happen then, eh?”

“Still,” Izou brightened considerably, “If he’s a hot and willing eighteen year old then I’d do him in a heartbeat.” Izou laughed jovially, the sound deep and manly. It wasn’t a laugh many were expecting to hear from a man who wore nothing but woman’s clothing in pastel pinks and violets.

“I mean really, how many chances do older guys like us get to screw around with a younger generation? None.”

“Izou, you’ve got to be kidding me. No way in hell am I letting you go near Ace. He’s such a nice, innocent kid.”

“I meant you, dumbass,” Izou retorted. He threw his nail file down onto the coffee table. “I’m just telling you, if chances present themselves, take them. A student and teacher relationship is always pretty kinky. Well, from what I hear anyway.”

“There aren’t going to be any chances,” Marco snapped firmly. He didn’t even know what to saw about Izou’s idea of kinky, so he let that comment pass. “I should get going. I have to teach in a few hours after all. And shouldn’t you be tucked away in bed in your pink nightgown by now too?”

“Ah well, I’m taking my fashion class on a little field trip tomorrow, so I don’t need to be too aware.” Izou got up, lifting the tray and all its contents, whisking away to the kitchen. Marco stole that opportunity to get himself to the door and stuff his feet into his shoes.

“Okay, bye,” Marco called into the depths of Izou’s home.

“Go feed your parrot,” Izou replied, busying himself in the sink.

Marco chuckled all the way across Izou’s front lawn and onto his, arriving at his doorstep in less than two minutes. He fumbled with his keys for a bit before letting himself in. It was quiet in his home and he tip-toed upstairs so as not to announce his arrival to his pet. There would be lots of squawking otherwise and he wouldn’t be able to sleep for another hour until the bird calmed down.
He threw his clothes into the laundry hamper, went about his usual bedtime routine, and then slid into bed. He fell asleep thinking about the disturbing things Izou had said, subconsciously reaching out across his empty bed and wondering what it would be like to have someone there beside him.
Trafalgar awoke to someone rummaging around in his room. His initial reaction was to attack this intruder, but then he remembered the events of the previous night and rolled over onto his stomach, trying to block out the noises.

“Hey, you’re awake now,” Ace said, sounding awfully chipper considering that it was still early morning. He tromped over to the bed and peering down at the lump underneath the quilt. “Time to get up sleepy head, we’ve got school today.”

Trafalgar didn’t move and Ace swung a leg over the lump, straddling his friend’s back. “And guess what Panda?” Law grunted and burrowed deeper into his pillow. He knew what was coming. Ace was always so full of energy in the morning. “I’ll tell you what. It’s Thursday!!”

The unmoveable lump groaned. No wonder he was even more excited than usual.

“Fuck yeah!” Ace screamed, crawling off of Law in favour of jumping on the end of the bed.

Now being bounced around in his own bed, Law knew he had no choice but to get up and face the day. “Fine, fine, let me shower. And don’t go downstairs without me or you could meet an unfortunate end.”

Ace nodded firmly, distinctly remembering how he was literally held at knife point one morning after wandering into the kitchen. Trafalgar’s grandmother was one scary old hag. Ace had been convinced the stealthy lady was an assassin or something in her younger years. Trafalgar had assured him that no, she wasn’t an assassin, only a village shaman back in her old country.

But her skills with that deadly weapon she kept downstairs were admirable all the same. Despite his growling stomach, Ace patiently waited for Trafalgar to shower and get presentable. For this particular day especially, Ace valued his life.

Because it was Thursday. The day Ace would get to see the object of his affections in his natural habitat. He was so excited he thought he must be bursting at the seams like an overstuffed plush animal.

Law tiredly slumped down the stairs towards the kitchen, followed closely by Ace who was skipping and generally just making a ruckus. By the time they reached the kitchen, Trafalgar’s grandmother was well aware of Ace’s presence.

“Oh, it’s you,” she grumbled, her mouth set in a thin line. “The one with the large stomach.”

“Um, yeah,” Ace said, sobering up quite a bit. “I kind of dropped in last night and stayed over.”

Her expression, previously one of complete intimidation that would make a normal person piss their pants, suddenly became joyous. “Finally, someone who might actually appreciate my cooking!”

Trafalgar grumbled as his grandmother brandished two bowls of slop and placed them on the table. Naïve Ace immediately dug into one of the bowls, with Trafalgar hesitantly sniffing at this morning’s creation. He managed to gulp down half of his bowl while Ace got seconds from a very eager old lady then found he couldn’t stomach another bite.

He slyly slid his bowl down the table, positioning it in front of Ace’s face.
Ace consumed the rest of his bowl too. Bepo whined unhappily; he hated it when Ace stayed for a meal, it meant he didn’t get any table scraps.

Bepo got his dry kibble, then Ace took off towards his home with the promise of meeting back up so they could walk their dogs together before rushing to school. Trafalgar could only nod, too intent on trying to smuggle some ‘normal’ food out of the kitchen, namely an apple and some toast.

When Ace got home he first showered, changing out of the clothes he’d slept in. After he was done he walked into the kitchen to see his grandfather asleep on the kitchen table, a donut that was rapidly disappearing held up in one hand. Ace watched, mortified, as Spade sat in an empty donut box wagging his tail and eating Garp’s unfinished vanilla dip donut from his fingers.

“God, I can’t trust Gramps to look after you,” Ace muttered quietly, picking Spade up off the table and setting him on the floor. The dog whined loudly, unhappy that Ace had interrupted his feeding on human food. “How many of those have you eaten?”

His puppy barked and Ace hurried to scoop him up again in his arms, rushing out of the house while simultaneously managing to place a collar and leash on Spade. He bounded down the driveway, intent on getting as far away from the house as he could before Garp awoke. He still hadn’t received a ‘proper’ beating for what had happened earlier on this week, only a few random fists in his direction. It was only a matter of time until his grandfather would awaken in a foul mood and decide to give him some marine boot camp training.

Spade eating his donuts would without a doubt put him in a bad mood.

When he reached the border between the North and East districts he finally set Spade down. The puppy fell on his face after taking the first initial step and Ace immediately wondered if his dog had ingested more donuts than was within the realm of safe for a puppy of his size.

But after a moment, Spade went back to being himself; bolting around, sniffing and peeing on everything. Trafalgar appeared soon at their usual meeting place and they headed out on their way, deciding to take a quick walk in the direction of the Grand Line.

“So, what’s your battle plan?” Law eventually asked. Ace turned to him, perplexed. “For seducing our teacher. Aren’t you at least going to attempt something stupid?” It was expected of his friend, of course.

Ace frowned, his eyes narrowing. He smacked his lips together, oddly offended though Law made these insulting remarks all the time. “Not everything I do is stupid,” he muttered crossly. “But yeah, I do have a plan.” Trafalgar pulled a surprised face out of a hat. He was reminiscent of a racoon caught in headlights. “Don't be so shocked!”

“So what is this plan of yours?”

“I figured first I’ll try and see if he has a wife, then I’ll start subtly dropping hints, you know, like they do in the movies. Well, I guess it might be a good idea to figure out if he’s even gay sometime too.”

“Wow,” was all Trafalgar could say to Ace’s ingenious plan. “You really are going to wing it, aren’t you?”

“I just told you my plan! I’m not winging it if I have a plan,” Ace argued.

Law chuckled darkly, “Having a shitty plan is the same as having no plan at all.”
His sagely words dropped Ace’s mood and he stalked off, dragging Spade away from sniffing Bepo’s butt in the process. Trafalgar walked faster, catching up with him.

“Hey, I’m just saying you should have a more concrete plan of attack. You don’t want to be sending him mixed vibes.”

Ace sighed. “I know, it’s just I’m kind of nervous that I won’t even get to use my plan. If he has a wife.”

Trafalgar yawned, suddenly very tired of analyzing Ace’s infatuations. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like what?” Ace asked absently. He was looking up at the clouds above them, imagining Marco’s face all too easily. No wonder his mark was so poor in Marco’s class. He spent way too much time memorizing every fine detail about the man’s appearance.

“Like that,” Law said firmly, stopping in his tracks.

Ace’s eyes travelled up the road in front of them. It was devoid of all people so early in the morning with the exception of two individuals. They were half-hidden from view by someone’s parked car but from their position the boys could clearly see the two talking to one another. However, it was only Law who immediately identified the people who stood in their path.

Law bent down to scoop up Spade, who was whining loudly at having stopped their adventure, then threw his shoulder at Ace. Ace stumbled backwards and Trafalgar followed, hiding them behind a wall.

“H-hey, what did you do that for?” Ace growled, eyeing how Law was carrying Spade. “What are you doing?”

“Shh,” Law whispered. “I just saw something disturbing so shut up for a second. Let’s eavesdrop.”

Bepo, obedient as ever, simply sat next to Law’s feet, the position hiding himself from the view of those two people by the car. Ace held his breath; not a whole lot got Trafalgar rattled, so he knew instantly that the other wasn’t playing around. He refused to breath and settled for patting Spade’s head reassuringly, dampening out the whines that came from the dog.

“I want you to find out where that bastard lives,” one voice said heatedly, the words drifting in the wind to Law’s and Ace’s ears. “And when you do, tell me.”

The second voice was quieter and Ace strained to catch words that Trafalgar heard easily. Law gulped and was almost going to tell Ace about what he’d done last period yesterday when he heard footsteps. After a silent, tense moment he realized that they were moving away from their position behind the building.

Peeking around the corner, Law saw two backs in the distance, far enough away that they would be out of earshot. He slumped against the wall, wondering why he was being so ridiculous when it came to those two ‘little shits’ as Ace so eloquently nicknamed them.

“Okay, who was that?” Ace asked, taking his dog from Trafalgar’s limp arms. The puppy squirmed and whined to be put down, a request Ace had to grant since he wasn’t able to hold a writhing puppy in his grasp and pay attention to his friend at the same time.

“Kidd and his lapdog,” Law replied. “I think they’re looking for me.”
Ace quirked an eyebrow, offering up one of his incredulous trademark looks. “Aren’t they always looking to harass you?”

“Well, yeah, but something was different this time. I think Kidd might be out for blood. My blood.”

Scrunching up his face, Ace pondered his friend’s words. They stared at one another in silence.

“Look, I don’t know what you’ve done to make him this angry but you should bring Bepo over to my place. They seem to be looking for you in the North Blue and your dog is way too visible. He looks like fucking snow.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea. For once,” Law said jokingly. Ace shrugged stiffly, for he could sense a bit of discomfort under his friend’s words. He was uneasy about what could happen next. Would they find Bepo in the East regardless of how well he was hidden? Would they follow him home from school? No matter how composed Law kept himself, Ace could still see the questions in his friend’s eyes amid a slight hint of panic.

At any rate, Bepo was not happy with the arrangements when he found out his master was leaving him in the idiot puppy’s backyard. Spade, however, was ecstatic, having been bored whenever Ace left him to his own devices. Now he had someone to play with!

Law took his time returning to his house, making sure he wasn’t being watched or followed by anyone suspicious looking. Usually he wouldn’t fall prey to this kind of paranoia but with Eustass and his gang of hoodlums his paranoia was a requirement. He could trust that Eustass would actually do something adverse to him.

He’d done so before and Trafalgar had the scars to prove it.

Okay, so maybe the physical scars had faded over time, but the emotional trauma was still with him. Only he could hardly call it trauma. No, it was merely a chill that seeped into his veins whenever Eustass reared his ugly head in his direction.

Not that he was scared of Eustass. No. Never. He just knew the other was dangerous and worthy of a wide berth.

Trafalgar sighed as he met back up with Ace. They began their walk to school as they always did, chatting absentmindedly about the weather, homework and other... safe topics. Nothing about Marco and certainly not a word about Eustass.

They made it to school without any conflicts, though that fact did nothing to put Trafalgar’s mind at ease. He knew he would be flighty the entire day.

--oOo--

Ace had spent the majority of math class focussing on things unrelated to mathematics. First he’d done his usual Marco-watching, then when the teacher left the room to attend to something in the hallway he’d turned around him his seat and asked a boy looking at his cards to read him his fortune. Basil Hawkins had shuffled his cards and told him he wasn’t going to die today, which was heartening but not exactly what Ace wanted to hear.

After classes ended for the day he bounded home and scarfed down something he found in the fridge. For there to actually be something edible in the fridge told him that his little brother hadn’t been home for a while. He would have to call his brother’s best friend, Zoro, later and see what was up with that.
That could wait though. He had more lucrative things on his mind at the moment, like what to wear that would guarantee Marco’s eyes would never stray from him. Even if he did in fact have a wife.

Ace bounded to his room and began sifting through the contents of his closet, wading in the clothes that hadn’t made it onto hangers. He searched for something more refined than the ratty old t-shirt and shorts he usually wore and produced a sleek black shirt with a lower neckline that would show off his collarbone nicely and a pair of jeans. He threw the shirt over his head and found that it fit snugly and showed off his more manly features, then pulled on the dark jeans.

They were scratchy to the point of being an irritation to his skin. He slipped out of those and put his shorts back on, grabbing a more fitting belt than the oversized contraption he’d been wearing earlier. It would have to do. In the end he found that he couldn’t forsake comfort, not even for Marco.

Over the next hour he played ball with Spade, Bepo sitting depressed on the grass. The white dog seemed to be relieved that Ace had come to take Spade’s attention off of him, but Ace could still see that the dog missed his owner. He quickly texted Law about his dog’s mournful looks towards the North before racing off into the house. He got a large chunk of meat that, again, hadn’t been touched by Luffy from the refrigerator and brought it back outside.

He tossed it to Bepo who brightened considerably until he was just a shining white mass of thankfulness. Then Spade showed up.

Ace watched for a few minutes as the two battled it out, one guarding the meat while the other made dodges at it. Finally, after much roughhousing, Bepo managed to get Spade’s unconscious form under his mass of white fluff while he was locked in another one of his sleep attacks. Ace left them at that, going back inside to fill up two bowls with kibble, placing them on the back porch to be discovered at a later time.

His duties fulfilled, he gathered up his backpack and school things and set out with a scrap of paper in his hand that bore Marco’s street address. He’d looked up the directions to get to the house on the internet and written them down on that scrap of paper earlier. He was all set to rumble.

Only the butterflies in his stomach were already doing too much rumbling. He smacked a hand against his gut, trying to knock some sense into those pesky critters. He only succeeded in hurting himself and making the butterflies skirt about frantically.

Ace was aware that he was probably early so he took his time walking, following his directions carefully to avoid getting lost. He ended up in a quiet neighbourhood before too long, locating Marco’s house easily thanks to the visible house number tacked onto the mailbox.

The house had a quaint feel to it. It was a red brick house with dull maroon shutters around the windows. There were a few shrubs in a little garden that lay in the house’s evening shadow. They looked brown and crispy from autumn’s frost. Aside from the shrubs the only other piece of foliage on the lawn was a single blue spruce tree sitting off to the side of the house. The tree was still healthy looking and Ace stared at it for a while before walking up the driveway.

Marco’s car, a light blue sports car that Ace had always itched to drive, was sitting there dolefully. As he passed it he ran his fingers along the side of the vehicle. Marco always kept that car impeccably clean, so there wasn’t even a film of dust left on Ace’s fingers when he brought them up to his face for examination. He had noticed this cleanliness when it came to Marco. He had wondered if his home would be as spotless as his car, and now he was about to find out.

It was a little before the scheduled time but Ace figured Marco probably wouldn’t care too much.
He was pretty laid-back after all. With that in mind Ace rung the doorbell, hearing the soft chime reverberating within the depths of the house. He didn’t have to wait long behind that dark mauve door as he heard the doorknob turn.

Marco was grinning, a contagious grin that Ace soon found himself mimicking. “Hey,” he said, greeting casual. “Ready to show up Akainu?”

“Am I ever,” Ace replied eagerly. He stepped inside the house, Marco motioning him in. As he squirmed out of his shoes he quickly scanned the area. No sign of life other than Marco. No children peeking around any corners. No wife hurrying to make his acquaintance.

Just Marco.

“So, did you remember all of your books?” Marco asked as he led Ace down a hallway towards what looked to be the living room.

“Yep,” Ace answered. “I’m ready.”

“MARCO!”

Ace jolted a foot into the air upon hearing that screech. It sounded raspy and high pitched, perfect for…

“Oh god,” Ace muttered, shutting his eyes tightly to fight back any tears of defeat.

Marco meanwhile was passive, continuing to lead the way towards their destination. He stopped, looked back at Ace cowering behind him, and furrowed his brow.

Ace recovered from his initial shock, trying to retain a shred of dignity. He would not back away now. He followed Marco’s lead into the living room and tried to ask casually, “W-who was that?”

“Oh, that was my bird,” Marco said, inclining his head towards the huge cage that sat in front of a large window at the back of the room. “He’s a bit talkative. Sorry.”

“I-I thought it was your wife,” Ace said meekly, taking in the sight of the big blue parrot-like creature sitting on its perch. The bird was preening its feathers, disinterested in Ace’s presence.

Marco laughed long and hard and when he was finished Ace felt quite a sense of relief. “A wife? I don’t exactly have one of those,” Marco replied with a hearty chuckle.

A barrage of different emotions ran through Ace, some making him want to jump for joy. But he forced himself to remain calm. An opportunity like this didn’t come often. “So, are you single then?” he asked innocently.

Marco shrugged nonchalantly, Ace’s suddenly excited vibes undetectable to him when his back was turned, straightening up a coffee table. “Yeah, I guess I am. Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” Ace replied. He would’ve shot through the roof had Marco’s hand not suddenly appeared on his shoulder, steering him towards the couch. He got the idea and went to sit, all too aware that Marco was taking a seat next to him. There was only a foot or so of space between their bodies.

For Ace that was too much air separating them, but he didn’t voice his hormonal concerns. He was still giddy from Marco’s hand coming into contact with his body.
“Hey, we going to get started or what?” Marco wondered aloud, nudging Ace with a playful yet reserved elbow. Ace nearly toppled over, not from the force of the impact but from all of the physical touching. Marco was less of a strict teacher in his own home, Ace thought, and more of a friendly mentor than anything else. Yes, there was certainly no pressure here…

Ace scrambled to get out his books and Marco took a look at the contents of his binder, chuckling a bit at some of the more illegible work. Ace saw he was looking at a note that was all smudged from when his face had hit the desk and quickly snatched the binder away, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Marco’s eyes had already roved his messy notes. “Seems like you drifted off that day,” he said, letting Ace slide the note away from him. He could see the red tinge dusting Ace’s freckled face. It was kind of cute.

He shook his head lightly, surprised at that rogue thought. Luckily he didn’t have time to mull over the workings of his mind as his bird was beginning to make a real rumpus.

“I demand a large bag of peanuts and a pair of fluffy pink slippers.”

Ace blinked, unsure if he’d heard the bird right. Beside him he caught Marco sighing.

“Sorry about the bird, sometimes he repeats things that other people have said in his presence. The peanuts bit was something my friend Thatch said and the slippers…well, my next door neighbour has a penchant for anything pink.”

Ace continued to blink stupidly, nodding to show he understood. “What’s your bird’s name?” he asked, angling his face towards the cage to examine the large blue parrot that glared cynically back at him. It had some yellowish green feathers mixed in amongst the blues and lengthy, thin tail feathers that made him think of a male peacock’s furred adornment.

“Phoenix.”

“Phoenix? Isn’t that like a fire bird that gets re-incarnated or something?”

“I thought it would be a suitable name since this guy can spring back from any sort of damage. He fell out of a moving van when he was just a chick, narrowly escaped death by cat and then flew the coup at the veterinary clinic and surprisingly found his way home after two weeks. So yes, Phoenix is his name.”

“…He seems pretty badass,” Ace said after a moment of contemplation.

“Badass!” the bird, Phoenix, repeated.

“See what I mean by talkative? He repeats everything.” Marco seemed a bit flustered by this, but any dishevelment that might have risen to the surface was quickly repressed before Ace’s eyes. “Anyways, let’s get down to business. I’m sure you have better things to do on a Thursday night than stay here with me.”

Ace opened his mouth to protest to that. He was about to decline that he didn’t have anything better to do when his brains told his mouth it would be better to keep quiet.

“I’m guessing we should look over your latest test first. Since, to be frank with you, it was pretty bad.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t really…awake much that week when you taught all the material.”
“I noticed.” Marco sifted through the textbook Ace had brought along. He located the page they would need with ease, years of teaching kids from the same textbook having left him with knowledge of the order of pages within. He didn’t need the table of contents.

“Parabolas don’t seem to be your strongest point. Want to start on those?”

Ace groaned; truthfully, he didn’t want to even look at math. He wanted to explore Marco’s house and learn a little about the man living inside it! But he supposed he had to do his study work as that was the only reason he was presently sitting on Marco’s couch beside the man himself. Besides, one on one tutoring with Marco was the best way to learn math.

Dutifully, Ace listened to Marco lecture him about parabolas and other math equations that had completely left him baffled during class. He couldn’t help but notice that Marco was less rigid sitting with him on the couch than when he was standing up in front of the class. Hell, Marco was even cracking a few jokes. Granted they were kind of lame math jokes, but Ace laughed nonetheless because it was Marco trying to make light of Ace’s most hated subject.

After an hour of trying out different problems – Marco intently watching Ace scribbling away on paper trying to find the answers and offering advice and subtle hints – Ace finally felt he’d reached his math consumption limit. There was no way he could compute any more problems. He slumped on the coffee table they’d made good use of, hair splayed across the function he’d been trying to draw. As he went down, he began to feel an odd and all too familiar tingling sensation running up his spine.

Before he could warn Marco he was about to be hit by a sleep storm, his eyelids slid shut.
Ace’s sleep attack lasted for only a minute or two and then he regained a sense of self.

Dimly, as he came out of his deep sleep stupor, Ace heard Marco chuckling. “Guess it’s time to take a break. Want coffee?”

Ace turned his head groggily to regard Marco. He blinked a couple times, registering the situation. “It depends if you want me to immediately clonk out afterwards on your couch. Again.” Marco gave him the single arched eyebrow stare. “My narcolepsy hates coffee. I find it like an instant K.O.”

“Alright, no coffee for you then. Why don’t you just come raid my fridge, since I don’t know what you like.”

“You’re kind of a crappy host. I like that; it makes me feel more at home.”

Marco rolled his eyes discreetly. “Whatever makes you happy.”

Ace jumped up, revitalized since his teacher had given him a break from the boring math work. He went off in search of the kitchen, Marco trailing behind. It wasn’t a big house, though it did have two stories from what Ace could tell (he didn’t know if there was a basement yet). Finding the kitchen was easy – most of the room was white or black, with a few stainless steel appliances. He had been noticing how much of the house was simple, painted in creams with contrasting dark furniture and an extreme lack of pictures to coat the walls.

Ace couldn’t help but want to redecorate Marco’s house and add a bit of pizzazz to the place. He kept his comments to himself though. After all, Law had always told him that his fashion sense was messed up and he wondered if Marco would think the same.

Besides, all he cared about was what could be found in the large grey fridge. He opened it up, finding it to be full of food. It was by far the most colourful place in the house. He slammed a hand in front of his lips before he could start salivating unattractively.

It registered that Marco had gone over to a coffee machine beside a black stove, getting his coffee going. Ace, however, was preoccupied with sticking his head inside the fridge, his butt sticking out.

Marco had to admit the sight of Ace’s writhing buttocks was…oddly entrancing. He slapped a hand over his eyes, reprimanding himself for thinking such illicit thoughts, and barely caught on that Ace was trying to speak to him with his head still inside the fridge.

“I’m sorry; what?”

“Can I make a sandwich?” Ace asked again, glad that Marco was finally answering him. He had been worried the man had gotten his coffee and left him inside the fridge.

“Go ahead,” Marco replied. He didn’t care either way if Ace wanted to snack. He had told the kid to eat dinner, but he didn’t know whether Ace had actually done just that before coming over.

“Want me to make you one too?” Ace asked eagerly. He withdrew from the refrigerator, bagged lunch meat, mustard and a can of mayonnaise in one hand and a head of lettuce in the other. He was grinning as if he’d dug up gold inside that fridge.
“Uh, sure,” Marco said hesitantly, feeling thrown off about the whole spectacle in front of him. This was his house and his guest was offering to make him food? He didn’t quite know what to make of Ace. Then again, for three years he had never known quite what to make of Ace.

The boy was kind of hard to read into, despite all of his bubbly antics.

It wasn’t long before Ace was bringing two sandwiches to the table. Marco had grabbed his coffee by that time and had poured Ace a glass of orange juice as the other had requested during the sandwich making process. Now they sat, eating. Well, more like inhaling in Ace’s case. Marco, not really hungry, was half done his sandwich by the time Ace finished.

Marco offered the remainder of his sandwich, remembering that Ace wasn’t really one for proper manners or the like. As predicted, Ace gleefully took the offering, scarfing it down like a starved dog. The orange juice disappeared soon after too.

“How about we change this to ten questions?” Marco suggested carefully.

Ace grinned; he was content that Marco had even agreed. And besides, ten questions were enough to shine some new insight into his teacher’s life. “Okay. But I’m still going first.”

Ace pretended to think long and hard about what he was going to ask. Finally he smirked. “What’s your favourite colour?”

Marco was silent for a moment, taken aback by such a simple question. “Blue, I guess.”

Ace gave him a dry look that urged him to be more descriptive. “Well, a pale blue. Not so much a dark blue. A summer sky blue?”

“Fair enough, your turn.”
Marco shrugged, deciding to keep to the light-hearted tone Ace had set. “And your favourite colour is…?”

“Red! A bright vivid red like the colour of fire!” Ace exclaimed all too passionately. He managed to earn a chuckle from Marco, making the butterflies in his stomach flutter. “My turn. Have you ever done something illegal?”

Marco sputtered and choked on his coffee, almost spitting it out in Ace’s face. When he finally got control of himself he asked, “Why would you want to know something like that?”

“Are you passing this question? Because you only get one chance to pass a question.”

Marco didn’t think he wanted to give up his freebie card so soon. Despite knowing that a student of his, someone who looked up to him as a mentor, sat in front of him he replied, “Okay, I’ve done some illegal things. But nothing too bad.” Ace gave him a look to elaborate. “I’m not telling you anything else!”

Ace sighed, resigning himself to curiosity. “Well, I could always make it my next question.”

“It’s my turn now,” Marco said firmly. He would have to get Ace’s mind off of the illegal with a question that would distract him. “Since you seem to be really into food…what’s your favourite food to eat?”

“That’s a rather tame question,” Ace said with a faint giggle. “I guess if I had to choose…uh, lots of stuff is coming to mind; I like way too many things. Lasagne? Hamburgers? Fries? Ice cream? Chocolate cupcakes with vanilla icing and sprinkles on top?! Man, this is actually such a hard question!”

“Are you going to pass?” Marco questioned teasingly. He ran the tips of his fingers around the rim of his coffee mug, feeling quite smug that he was able to get Ace flustered.

“Never! I’m going to go with the last one, the cupcakes. Because they’re delicious.”

“Do you have a sweet tooth or something?”

“Hey! Only one question per turn! It’s my turn now,” Ace grumbled. He could feel a blush rising on his cheeks from Marco’s sultry smile. He couldn’t help but wonder if Marco was looking at him like that on purpose, just to throw off his game. “Okay, I’ve got a good one. How old are you?”

Marco visibly stiffened, his mouth pulled into a straight line. “Not telling.”

“Are you passing?” asked Ace. Damn, he had really wanted to find out…

“Yeah, I’m passing,” Marco muttered, looking into the dark contents of his coffee mug. There was no way that his age was going to make an appearance in their conversation. In Marco’s opinion it would only put distance between them. “My turn. What kind of illegal things have you done?”

Ace scoffed, “Oh, so you automatically assume I’ve done illegal things?”

“Yeah, no offence, but you kind of seem the type to get a kick out of things gone wrong,” Marco answered. He folded his hands on the table, looking quite expectantly in Ace’s direction. “Well?”

Under Marco’s scrupulous gaze, Ace had no choice but to answer him. “If I’m broke, sometimes I dine ‘n’ dash. Once I set fire to a flower garden outside of a fire hall, which in hindsight I realize was a very mean thing to do to the firefighters. Then there was that time I walked into the local
police station with some fake fireworks I got from one of Luffy’s friends and officer Smoker nearly swallowed his cigars and pissed his pants when I lit them and—”

“Actually, never mind, I don’t want to know any more than that,” Marco interrupted, shaking his head. He wasn’t frowning or expressing any sort of disappointment in his young charge; he was chuckling and recalling memories of his own adolescence. “I get the picture. Your turn to ask me a question.”

“Your hairdo. I believe that deserves some explanation.”

Marco’s eyes narrowed even further than usual. “What about my hairdo? You don’t like it or what?”

“No, it’s not that.” In fact, he quite liked Marco’s hair. It was oddly sexy. He often wondered what it would be like to run his fingers through the short barely visible hair that grew on the sides and back of Marco’s head and then play with the puff on the top. Yes, he did like Marco’s golden locks.

Ace hurried to clarify, “It’s just…why do you keep it short in the back and on the sides but long on the top? I mean, it’s unique and I like it.”

Marco’s face went slightly pink and his eyebrows were doing a little jig on his forehead as he contemplated what to tell Ace. He settled on the truth, knowing that Ace would likely be able to call him on any lies that might come forth. “I used to wear a mohawk in my younger years,” he finally divulged quietly. “I kind of didn’t want to give it up, so I kept half of it.”

Ace broke out in laughter, his head hitting the table in front of him as he lost all sense of muscle control. When he was finally able to lift his head he said: “I guess this brings us full circle back to the age question! So how old are you really?! You say ‘my younger years’ like an old man yet you can’t be that old!”

“It’s my turn to ask the questions!” Marco yelped before Ace could get his age out of him. He cleared his throat, then took a moment to himself to think of something that would certainly not lead back to his age. He settled on a much more creative question than the enquiries he was asking of Ace so far. “Okay, I have a good question…If you wrote a book about yourself, an autobiography that is, what would be the title of that book?”

Truthfully, the first thing that came to Ace’s mind he shunted away with a giggle. He didn’t want to scare Marco off by saying The Flaming Homo. Besides, that would imply he was one of those girly men, which he certainly was not. “Shot up in Flames? Naw, that’s not as cool as…A Sea in Flames? No, never mind that’s lame. Sleeping in the Fire? Eh, I don’t really want it to allude to my narcolepsy too much. Oh, wait, I’ve got it…Fire-crotch!”

“…I’m not sure how to react to that last one,” Marco said, the title spinning around in his brain.

“Oh, I guess you didn’t hear about the time I set my pants on fire in Aokiji’s chemistry lab during my freshman year, huh?”

“…That idiot was you?”

“One question per turn!” Ace cried quickly. Earnestly, he didn’t really care whether or not Marco knew about his less than stellar moments. It was just he didn’t want to waste his valuable time with Marco recounting about past events. He wanted to move forward.

Ace snorted at his train of thought, leaning back in the wooden chair while he thought of what he
could possibly ask Marco to reveal about his private life. He’d given up his one chance to not answer a question, so whatever Ace asked now would have to be given to him. Of course, Marco could always lie, but Ace knew he wouldn’t dare, not in front of a student who could quite possibly call him on it and ruin that bridge of respect between them.

Ace supposed he could ask about Marco’s bird, or maybe about how long he had lived in this house. Or even how long he’d been teaching at Ace’s high school. He might be able to get an idea of Marco’s age by asking indirect questions like that…

Twiddling his thumbs with a grin on his face, a brilliant idea came to mind. Yes, he knew exactly what his next question would be. He only needed to figure out how to gently phrase it…

After a length of time, Marco sipping at his coffee awaiting the next question, Ace decided there would be no beautiful way to word his thoughts. Best to just get things out in the open.

“My last question is: are you gay?”

The coffee in Marco’s mouth ended up as a mist that coated the table. Ace shrieked a very manly shriek as a bit of spray ended up touching his cheeks. He was laughing full out as Marco tried to form a cohesive sentence, sputtering and trying in vain to regain some lost composure. Luckily he really hadn’t been drinking too much coffee at the time, but the fact remained that the coffee that did go in and out of his mouth had been projected clear across the table.

“Answer my question!” Ace demanded in between fits of giggles.

“NO! Yes! I mean, shit, what the hell kind of question is that to ask your teacher!”

Seeing Marco’s fright in his eyes, Ace quickly sobered up. He tried his best to obtain a sagely expression despite battling the giggles. “We live in a society where your sexual preference hardly matters anymore. If it makes you feel better, I’m gay too.”

Truthfully, Ace hadn’t expected that he would admit his sexuality aloud so easily. It had just…slipped out magically. Like Trafalgar Law’s grandmother’s false teeth sometimes did. Stuff just happened.

“It’s really none of your business. Besides, this isn’t a very…appropriate discussion to be having between a teacher and a student,” Marco huffed, his face coloured a lush carmine.

“What’s so bad about it? Honestly, do you even know what age they start teaching kids about sex nowadays? It’s damned young if you ask me. Something like this should hardly matter.”

Ace was very aware that he was whining but at that point he didn’t care. He’d popped such a volatile question – he’d be foolish to think he wouldn’t have to dig his feet in and push for an answer.

“I’m gay and that’s all I’ll say about it.”

And, just like that, Ace had his answer.

“Don’t tell any of your school buddies,” Marco warned sternly. “I don’t want people to start…getting the wrong idea of me based on stereotypes. Surely you know how many closed-minded people there are out there?”
“What happens in this house stays in this house,” Ace swore, placing a hand over where he thought his heart resided. “Well, except I want to be able to bring any acquired math skills to the classroom.”

Marco snorted at Ace’s attempt at a joke to smooth things over. He was completely and utterly flustered and no amount of mopping with a napkin at his spilt coffee could help the situation. How had Ace managed to sucker the answer out of him so easily? Desperately he looked to the bright red digital numbers on the stove that read the time. It was late, late enough to call their study session off without looking like a complete moron.

“Hey, you should get home soon before dark.”

Ace raised a feeble, awkward hand towards a window behind Marco. “Um, it’s already dark out.”

Marco spun around to see that Ace was indeed correct. He bit his bottom lip; it looked like the middle of the night during winter. Pitch-fucking-black. Marco mentally cursed. He knew what that meant, as a responsible adult.

“Guess I’ll just have to drive you,” Marco said begrudgingly. “Get your stuff and let’s go. I, uh, have to clean this up…”

Springing up from the table, Ace barely contained his excitement as he briskly strode back into the living room. A glance over his shoulder had revealed that Marco was still trying to clean up coffee and not having much success due to the amount of fluster he was suffering from. He was currently alone in the living room and he could do whatever he wanted…

“SCORE!”

Ace jumped, hitting one limb against a lamp. The lamp teetered and he lurched to save it from toppling to its demise.

Being as Marco-absorbed as he was, he’d forgotten about the bird.

The bird glared at him as he began packing up his study things, stuffing everything into his bag that had an uncanny likeness to a watermelon. He kept a wary eye on the bluish green-yellow thing, unsure of what to make of its mindless outbursts.

“Shoot the duck,” the bird said next. “Put the lime in the coconut and shoot the duck.”

Ace blinked, confused. Then he caught sight of the television sitting not far from the bird’s cage. He hadn’t noticed that before though it was glaringly obvious. He understood then why some of the things that came out of the bird’s beck made no sense. Phoenix was just imitating anything and everything it heard. Thoughtlessly.

He got a very devious plan. Taking long strides over to the cage he began to whisper, “Marco likes Ace. Marco likes Ace. Marco likes Ace.”

The avian stared at him with its little beady black eyes, cocking its head to the side. Ace continued despite the bird giving him a questioning look. Finally, at long last, Phoenix began to open its beak and chitter, mouthing the words that made Ace grin.

“Marco likes Ace,” the bird repeated in its high-pitched caw. “Marco likes Ace.”

“Damn, this is like taking candy from a baby,” Ace muttered with a smirk, snickering to himself.
The bird fell silent for a moment, and then chirped, “Marco likes Ace like candy.”

“W-wait! That’s a bit too sexual sounding, bird-brain!” Ace frantically whispered, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Marco didn’t suddenly appear behind him.

“Marco likes Ace like sexual candy.”

Ace gargled, realizing his plan had gone out of his hands. But, before he could try his best to remedy the bird’s sudden mixing of words, he heard Marco’s voice calling him from the depths of the house.

“Hey, Ace, are you ready to go?”

Cursing, Ace grabbed his watermelon bag and booked it out of the room, unwilling to begin thinking about what that dumb bird might say to Marco in his absence. He met Marco at the door, the older man’s hands on his hips and a stern demeanour about him. Instantly Ace missed the cool, relaxed atmosphere that had been between them earlier.

It was clear to him now that he’d probably pushed too far in one sitting.

They were silent as they walked out the door and piled into that blue sports car. Ace was so overcome with a sudden fit of nervousness that he didn’t even savour the smoothness of Marco’s car which he had often longed to ride in. Hell, he barely registered how graceful Marco’s driving was either.

The older man only spoke to ask Ace how to get to his house. It wasn’t far, so the blue vehicle pulled into the driveway before Ace could re-file his muddled thoughts and conjure up a new course of action. Instead all he could do was quickly thank Marco and then open the door to get out.

His feet touched the gravel driveway, but he found he couldn’t move into a standing position. Not with Marco’s hand on his shoulder again.

“Wait,” Marco said, slightly breathless. “You swear my sexuality won’t get out? I don’t want to have to deal with any negative rumours that could spring up from something like this. I really hate it when people make a huge deal about it.”

Ace licked his lips before replying, finding himself dried out. “Yeah. Our secret.”

Marco nodded, not willing to tell Ace that he wasn’t exactly the first person he’d come out to and he certainly wouldn’t be the last. It would just be better, for the both of them, if that conversation in Marco’s kitchen was tucked away into the back of their minds.

He let go of Ace and the other scurried away, waving over his shoulder with a wide grin on his face. Marco couldn’t help but smile back, raising his own hand in a mock salute. It would be fine, he assured himself. Ace might look a bit dopey but he could keep something as simple as a conversation a secret.

Or so Marco hoped.

--oOo--

Ace was splayed on his bed with Spade on his head when he called Law on his cell. The puppy
was busy snuffling Ace’s hair, snorting in the new smells that had accumulated on his master’s person.

Law picked up on the fifth ring. “What?” he growled.

Ace grinned, knowing that Law always screened his calls before answering them. He knew it was Ace calling to bug him before the words even left the boy’s mouth.

“Just wanted to call you and tell you what a success my life is at this moment in time,” Ace gabbed. His tone was full of gloating pleasure; this Law noted easily and tried his best to ignore.

“Ugh, don’t tell me I have to listen to you squeal about him tonight.”

“But Panda, you’re the only one who’ll listen to my shit,” Ace whined. “And I have to tell someone or I’m going to explode. And then how will you feel, knowing you set off an atomic bomb?”

“I’ll feel accomplished.” Law sighed, and Ace knew he was about to relent. “Fine, whatever. You have two minutes to chat as much as you like about…whatever, and then I’m hanging up. I’ll listen.”

Law could distinctly hear Ace sucking in copious amounts of air in preparation for what was to come.

“Okay, so I went over and we were studying – well, he was pretty much helping me with everything since I didn’t get anything to stick in my brain this past week – then we took a break after I fell asleep and,” Ace paused to renew the air in his lungs, “and, then we went into the kitchen and played this game of ten questions…wait, I think I made us sandwiches before that…yeah, anyway we played this game of ten questions and I learned his favourite colour, not his age, and that he used to have a mohawk and do some illegal things but most importantly I learned…”

Ace suddenly trailed off. On the other end of the line Law grunted. For a split second he wondered if Ace had fallen asleep mid-sentence. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

“And?” Law pressed, trying to judge whether Ace had gone down snoring. He couldn’t hear any disgusting snuffling, but one never knew with Ace. Sometimes he was a noisy sleeper and other times he was completely silent. “Ace?”

More silence. Then…

“Wait – I can’t tell you!” Ace suddenly shouted, overcome with emotion as he remembered Marco’s exact words: how he couldn’t tell any of his school buddies. Yes, this would surely count as breaking a man-to-man promise, something he wasn’t inclined to do, even if it was Law he was speaking to.

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

“Oh, sorry Panda. My bad.” He pursed his lips as Law continued to grumble profanities into the phone. It appeared he was nearly through talking with Ace. Quickly Ace decided to continue their conversation before it was too late and he was left to his lonesome. “Ace?”

More silence. Then…

“Wait – I can’t tell you!” Ace suddenly shouted, overcome with emotion as he remembered Marco’s exact words: how he couldn’t tell any of his school buddies. Yes, this would surely count as breaking a man-to-man promise, something he wasn’t inclined to do, even if it was Law he was speaking to.

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

“Ow, you fuck-head, that’s my ear! Your two minutes of rambling are officially up!”

Trafalgar sighed as he recounted his rather mundane day, at least by his standards. “Well, during last period I went snooping around in the office when everyone left the room and managed to find a file cabinet containing information about all of the students in the school.”

“…You’re like a secret agent man,” Ace mumbled in awe. “Except without the sunglasses…then
again you hardly need them with the bags under your eyes shadowing your motives.”

“Shut up, Ace,” Law snapped. “I’m talking. Anyways, I found Eustass’ file and read it, just so I know his house address in case they kidnap…well, dognap Bepo. Him an’ Killer.”

“Huh. Wow.” So Law was still paranoid and planning his moves eons in advance. “And I’m guessing you weren’t caught?”

“Of course not. I actually formulate tactics ahead of time, unlike you. Anyways, I read some pretty interesting stuff this afternoon and right now I’m busy trying to make sense of things.”

“What kind of stuff?” asked Ace, genuinely curious.

“Not telling. It was kind of personal and if you want to know you can try and sneak into that file cabinet and see for yourself. Of course knowing you that would be an impossible feat and you’d end up getting expelled for sure.”

Ace grunted, “Whatever. Keep your top secret information, agent Panda Bear, I don’t need it.” He could hear Trafalgar snickering at his expense on the other side of the line. “By the way, your dog is all depressed you haven’t come to visit. I mean, it’s too late now, but are you coming in the morning or anything? Or are you just leaving me with the responsibility of taking care of your dog?”

“Look, I spent all day thinking about him and I think I have an idea on how I could resolve this. You could say I’ve found some blackmail and if all goes well I can execute my plan tomorrow. So tell him I’ll be coming for him soon. What’s he doing right now?”

Ace pushed Spade off of him before replying, since he was getting a bit too rambunctious and trying to climb up the bottom of his shirt like it was some tunnel adventure.

“Right now? Well, I let him in the house as soon as I got back and he immediately took up a post at the front door. I’m sure he hasn’t moved since. He’s kind of waiting for you to show up I think.”

Law sighed, feeling the weight of leaving his Bepo behind. He had never been away from his dog for so long. “Give him something tasty to eat before bed. He likes those Kraft cheese slices, the cheddar ones not the mozzarella. I know you have some in your fridge.”

“…And you say I spoil Spade.”

“…Shut the fuck up Fire-crotch and go do as I say.”
Chapter 7

Marco’s hands were so sweaty that they stuck to the steering wheel of his little blue sports car. He was well aware of how hard he was breathing as his hot panting was fogging up the windows something fierce. He even had to turn on the air conditioning and it was autumn.

By the time he got into his driveway he knew very clearly two things: his sweat was freezing cold and he was a wreck. He hopped out of his vehicle, but instead of continuing up his driveway he instead went across Izou’s front lawn and up to his friend’s front door.

He rang the doorbell frantically.

Izou, dressed in little more than a fluffy pink robe that barely covered what lay below the beltline answered quickly. He swung the door wide, out of air and staring wide-eyed at Marco.

“W-what’s wrong?! he asked breathlessly. “Oh god, it’s not Pops, is it?! I told him that sake was bad for his health but he never listened!”

“I need to talk to you, right now. I’m having a moral crisis here. Come over,” Marco requested.

“Oh, and nothing is really wrong per say. I saw Pops this morning like I do every morning and he’s in high spirits. Though that might be because he’s always more or less drunk.”

Izou glared at him. “Then don’t ring my doorbell like it’s an emergency. I thought someone fucking died, you asshole.” Izou turned away to stuff his feet into a pair of sandals, switching from the fluffy pink slippers Marco had gotten him years ago as a gift. He continued to grumble about how annoyed he was to be interrupted so thoroughly during one of his late-night yoga sessions.

They ended up in Marco’s living room, Izou flopping onto the couch like a rag doll. Marco sat on the floor beside him, facing Phoenix’s cage. He drew his legs up to his chest and held them there, thinking hard and wondering to himself why the hell he had suddenly decided he needed Izou’s moral support.

“I was about to give myself a facial when you rang that damn bell. What do we need to talk about this late at night?” Izou asked, curious as to what warranted this late night visit. He could see the beads of sweat that clung desperately to Marco’s forehead as well as the unease in which Marco held himself, so vulnerable and child-like. He had only seen his friend do this when extremely anxious or confused. “Well?”

“Okay, so I was tutoring this kid, like I told you I would be tonight,” Marco began. Izou straightened, his interest effectively piqued. “It was going fine until we took a break and he decided we would play a game of twenty questions…only it was ten questions we decided on and even then I don’t think we quite made it to ten…”

“What did he ask you?” Izou inquired softly, tilting his head to the side. He knew his friend quite well actually, having grown up as an orphan who’d been taken in by the same man that raised Marco. They had lived together for quite some time in their youth with a bunch of other lads, all of which Izou considered more than friends. He considered Marco to be family.

“Well,” Marco started, his voice breaking, “he asked if I was gay.”

“He…what?! Really?! What did you say?!”

“I told him the truth, obviously. What else could I have done? It’s not like I could have lied to him.
He’s my student for crying out loud! Those kids can tell when their teacher’s lying, I swear!”

Izou was silent for a minute, contemplating his next words carefully. At last he laughed, hurrying to slap Marco on the back. “Don’t you know what this means? If he’s asking something like that…”

“He told me he’s gay too in order to get the answer out of me. That’s how he totally played me and got me to admit my sexuality. Ace can be unexpectedly cunning and I let my guard down.”

Choking on his own saliva, Izou hacked up a storm. He sputtered for a bit, trying to make a coherent sentence that Marco would understand. Many failed attempts transpired before one was made successful.

“D-do you e-even realize what this means? He could actually be interested in you, old man! Huh, never thought this day would come. I was just kidding when I said all that stuff about willing eighteen year olds, you know. Chances like that are slim, like winning the lottery and shit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Izou,” Marco snapped, feeling his face become hot. “He’s just a kid. He was probably just curious. You know how teenagers are. Besides, curiosity killed the cat.”

“But satisfaction brought it back. Cat’s have nine lives after all,” Izo said smugly. “So, what did you two do? Kiss or something? Or, heaven forbid, do the nasty with–”

“No!” Marco shouted, feeling his emotions run rampant. Anger, embarrassment and anxiety to name a few were boiling to the surface. “Nothing happened between us! Why the hell would you even think that!? Marco took a deep breath, fighting to regain a sense of control. “But Izou, truthfully this,” he made a vague gesture to his masculinity, “is not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what’s got your mind all warped, darling?” Izou asked, his deep voice oddly soothing in Marco’s ears. He crawled along the length of the couch until he was directly behind Marco and put his hands on the other’s shoulders in a comforting, brotherly way. “I get it that it’s not really the kid you’re worried about, that much I can tell since I’ve lived with you so long and put up with all your ‘finding yourself and your inner gay man’ shit. It’s something slightly more…abstract, isn’t it? The bigger picture.”

“Yeah…I don’t like it when kids that I might not be able to trust get a hold of my personal life, you know what I mean? Some kids can…twist things like that. They can say anything to a group of adults like ‘that man raped me’ and what have you and those adults will always believe a crying snivelling child over a gay man. My job, hell, my life could be ruined so easily.”

Izou was silent then he exploded like a supernova, only much more pink and fluffy.

“Why are you worried about getting fired?! Our Pops is the frickin principal of that school – your boss for crying out loud! Hell, I think he knows about your gayness already…Actually, I’m sure he must know.”

“Of course Pops knows! I freakin told him! And, like I’m trying to say, it’s not him I’m worried about.”

“You worried the other teachers are gonna give ya flak for being gay in the first place or something?”

“No, no…well, okay, maybe a little bit. But that’s not it either, Izou.” He sucked in a deep breath, knowing that sometimes it took a few times to run an idea past Izou before anything stuck. “It’s…teenagers these days tend to take any excuse to make a teacher’s life hell. I don’t even know how
I’d deal with their little beady eyes watching me like I was some creep or…rapist or something.”

Izou blinked owlishly. That was when Marco knew his words had finally been road blocked inside his friend’s brain as opposed to them flying out his ears.

“Yeah, you’re right. Teenagers are like a flock of crows. They’ll surround carrion on the road and pick it apart bit by bit or gang up on one another. They can be mean little fuckers.”

Marco heaved another tense breath. Then another and another and another still, attempting to calm his racing heart. He was almost to the point of being able to think logically again when a very loud, very rude cackle rang out.

“Marco likes Ace like sexual candy!”

Marco simply stared at the bird cage in front of him, speechless. Then Izou’s voice deafened him.

“Why would I lie to you?” Marco retorted stiffly. He dodged a punch aimed towards striking his gut by rolling across his carpeted floor. “When have I ever lied to you?!”

Izou froze mid-kick, contemplating his friend’s words with a furrowed brow. His face scrunched up, resembling a pug’s. “That time in third grade. You lied to me about stealing the teacher’s supplies for an art project and I got detention for a week. Asshole.”

“I thought it was funny– though didn’t think you’d get detention for a week. That was kind of harsh,” Marco said. “Wait, how the hell do you even remember that? Why do I remember that?”

“That’s not the problem here,” Izou growled. “That bird of yours just said something profound!”

“Look, I don’t know why he said that – he probably just merged my name, the kid’s name and an infomercial for Viagra or something.” Marco took a deep breath, “Why would I lie to you about something this serious?”

Izou sat back on his hands, letting his bare feet twirl in small circles. He was silent for about a full minute, taking in Marco’s sincere albeit severely disgruntled appearance. “Good point. Okay, I believe you. That damn blue chicken thing always screws with our heads anyways.”

“He has a name,” Marco protested, feeling quite hurt as if he were the one insulted. “It’s Phoenix.”

“Whatever. I’m going to go home, crawl into my bed, and forget this whole conversation ever happened.”

“Fine. Good night.”
“Good night. Don’t dream about Ace now, ya hear?”

Marco chucked a couch pillow at Izou’s retreating, laughing form.

--oOo--

Law loved Fridays, really he did. Only this Friday was vastly different from all the other Fridays. This Friday he would have to actually do something after school, as opposed to going home and relaxing. Yes, this Friday would be troublesome, this he knew.

He convinced himself that it had to be done and during the one morning class that he shared with Eustass he mixed in the catalyst that would determine how the rest of his day played out.

He had gotten up to leave class early, thanks to a note he forged for the teacher, but before he walked out that door he’d gone past Kidd’s desk and dropped a crumpled up piece of paper on it. The words he’d written in his fancy cursive were seared into his mind.

*Meet me on the corner of Little Garden and Elbaf after school today. Come alone, if you’re a man. I’ll be waiting. Don’t be late or I’ll leave. - Trafalgar*

That had been hours ago and school had long since ended. Indeed, Law was currently standing on that corner between two streets, giant buildings all around him. The first half of the Grand Line had always been the more developed side, with many little alleys and secret hideaways mixed in amongst the industrial clutter. It was the perfect place for what could be an ugly confrontation.

Law didn’t have to wait long for Kidd to show up. His hulking form was easy to spot against the dull concrete as the youth’s bright colour scheme was in stark contrast to his surroundings. Law on the other hand was easily camouflaged, having instead decided to forsake his smiley hoodie in favour of a loose-fitting grey shirt and sleek black jeans.

When he was certain Eustass had him locked in his sight, Trafalgar raised a single arm towards the overcast, grey sky. He made a lazy beckoning motion and shortly let his hand drop to his side once more. Then he turned and made off down an alley, expecting that Kidd would follow.

Kidd did, although with a peek over his shoulder, Law could see him hesitating.

“We’re just going someplace more private!” Law shouted back at him.

Kidd seemed to believe him, or at the very least he was comfortable enough to move from a leisurely saunter to a brisk walk. Law too picked up his pace, not wanting to let Kidd catch him prematurely. He didn’t want outside forces to interfere, like the police or passers-by. He needed to be completely and utterly alone in order for his oh-so-brilliant plan to work.

A wicked grin spread his lips thin. Today it was quite possible he could end *everything*.

He shook his head; optimism was not what he needed in this situation. He needed firm and unrelenting realism. Straight logic.

Well, screwy logic in his case.

Finally they reached the destination that Law knew not a soul traversed through, effectively cutting them off from the rest of society. He stopped and waited for Kidd to catch up to him, leaning against the side of an old abandoned building as he watched Kidd take long strides towards him.

At last Eustass stood barely five feet away, glaring and sneering at him.
“Why the fuck did you want to go all the way out here? This place is creepy as fuck,” were Kidd’s first rough words.

Trafalgar chuckled lightly. “What, it’s too grimy and grungy for your refined tastes?”

Those rigid shoulders of Kidd’s stiffened more than Trafalgar had thought they would over a simple remark. He held back a triumphant smirk and thought; This is going to be easy.

“Why the hell have you brought me here? I doubt it was so I could kick your ass in private.”

“Actually, I was hoping we could have a nice man to man talk,” Law admitted, the corners of his mouth lifting into a sardonic smile. “You see, I happened to overhear a bit of a plot that would leave me battered and bruised. I want to strike a bargain with you since I have obtained some knowledge that you would likely prefer I keep hush-hush. You follow?”

Kidd’s face curled into a snarl. He understood perfectly what Law hinted at. Blackmail.

“Reputations take only seconds to demolish,” Law continued slowly. His smile grew wider when he saw that Eustass’ eyes narrow menacingly. “Besides the fact that I have nothing to lose if I made a gay scene with you in the middle of class, I also know some rather…embarrassing things you’ve done in the past. Crying for a parent’s attention, isn’t it?”

“I…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kidd growled.

“You do.”

“I don’t,” Kidd snapped, advancing on Law. As far as he was concerned, Trafalgar had simply put himself in another awkward situation. He’d left himself completely uncovered! He was backed against a wall, with a rabid animal coming down on him to bite his jugular.

Kidd smirked wickedly. This could be fun.

Trafalgar saw this inhuman gleam in Eustass’ dark eyes. At the rate he was closing in on him Law could make out the flecks of gold and red, mostly red, that dotted the inside of his iris. The eyes of a crazed madman.

“Don’t be hasty,” Trafalgar warned. “Slow and steady wins the race, or so the tortoise and the hare show in Aesop’s famous fable.”

Eustass snorted, yet stopped in his advance. He was a mere two feet away now, looking down on Law with the intent to grab his throat and give him a firm shake. “The tortoise cheated. And I’m not as stupid as the hare; I know you’re full of bullshit. Anything that could save your ass.”

He honestly hadn’t expected Eustass to know that version of the story, the real version. He had to admit he was rather impressed that such a rough bully knew his old writings. And here he thought Kidd didn’t care about anything that wouldn’t directly benefit him in some way.

Still, Kidd was moving forward and his hand came up to grab Law’s shirt. Law let himself be grabbed, didn’t show a trace of fear. He knew if he tried to bolt now he’d not only look like a coward but he’d urge Kidd to act on his animalistic instincts to kill him.

So he stood his ground, unflinching, and used his brain.

“You might not be able to admit it to yourself, but you’re hurting, aren’t you?” Slowly Trafalgar brought his hand up, trying his hardest not to appear threatening in order to keep his body intact,
and poked at Eustass’ left pectoral. He lightly drew a well known shape, rounded sides curving inward at the top and intersecting at the bottom. “In there. In your heart.”

“Like hell,” Eustass said gruffly. With his free hand he swatted Law’s wandering hand away. “You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

“I snooped your personal file at school. I know your parents are famous businesspeople and they must not be home often. You feel alone. You have a record of childhood delinquency, a stab for attention maybe?”

“It’s none of your fucking business,” Eustass snarled. His grip on Law tightened, exposing his inner turmoil. “You shouldn’t be going through other peoples’ personal lives.”

“You don’t have anyone who loves you, do you?”

At that point Eustass lifted Trafalgar off the wall he’d backed himself into, let go of the front of his shirt, then gave him the strongest punch to the side of the face he could muster. Dimly Law saw it coming and managed to angle his head so that Kidd didn’t break his jaw, but he still went flying to meet the dirt, crashing and burning with pain.

“I’m fucking sick of your mind manipulation!”

Trafalgar picked himself up, using the wall of the building for support. He felt a bit of blood well up inside his mouth and realized numbly that he’d bitten his tongue. He spit the metallic life juice out loudly, glancing down at the dirt to see the little red stain.

Looking at his own blood, Law realized something, an angle that he hadn’t taken yet.

“It’s not mind manipulation; it’s experience,” he rasped. One hand went to cradle the sharp stinging he felt from Eustass’ blow and another held him up. The blood was pouring out of the puncture wound on his tongue and he hacked out another gob of the bright crimson stuff, watching it fade into a dark stain on the ground.

“Experience,” Kidd spat, unconvinced.

“Yeah,” Trafalgar said without a hint of humour or a smile. He was deadly serious. “Experience. I know what it’s like to be alone and to think you’re unloved. My parents died in an accident when I was a kid and I went into foster care for many, many years. They were the worst years of my life since I kept going in and out of the same damn orphanage in this same damned city. Finally my real biological grandmother showed up out of nowhere and fought with everything she had to get custody of me, just because I’m supposedly part of some northern tribe by birthright. I still don’t know what to make of her though. She’s fucking nuts but I guess it’s better than being around those who don’t even want you.”

 Honestly, he didn’t know what compelled him to tell Eustass his personal past. It could have been guilt, as he had gone through and read word for word about all of Kidd’s troubles, documented nicely in a thick file. It might have even been because he wanted to disprove Kidd, to tell him that he knew what he was talking about. But maybe, maybe it was because Trafalgar felt a certain unexplainable kinship, one that had sparked when he first laid eyes on Eustass.

He didn’t know, but either way he found himself reaching out to a stunned Kidd. Likely the other boy didn’t know what to make of his most hated enemy coming out and confessing all matters personal to him.

Law placed himself back in the same place he had been in before Kidd had punched him. Right
back into the line of fire. A small part of him, the rational part, screamed that what he was doing was suicidal. But that part was droned out by another voice, encouraging him to keep pressing forward.

“So, why don’t you let me in?” Trafalgar whispered, bringing his lips down on Eustass’. At first the other stood still, then, much to Law’s surprise he began to feel the raging teen hesitantly kissing him back. Eustass was rigid while the dark-haired boy moved his hands up to cup his face, keeping him in place.

Kidd could taste that familiar tang of blood on Law’s lips and for a moment the taste completely baffled him for no particular reason. It was just weird, he supposed, to be kissing someone whom he had bloodied.

It was stranger still to feel Trafalgar’s goatee against his chin for a second time, but the hairs weren’t prickly or discomforting in any way. In fact, they felt sort of good. Soft. He found himself moving forward against Law, pressing his lips against him more insistently. He wanted to feel more of the things Law was willing to offer.

The thought surprised and horrified him.

He pulled back abruptly, breathing hard. He was about to bring his hands up and push Law away from him, preferably to the ground but it was like Trafalgar had already anticipated his moves.

“Am I so far beneath you that you won’t even give me a chance?” he asked before Eustass could get a hold on him to fling him away. He took a step closer to Kidd, closing off any air that might have flowed between their bodies. Pressing himself against Kidd’s much larger body, Trafalgar once again kissed that pale skin.

Vaguely he wondered why he was doing this. Why, suddenly, did he decide to try and taste Kidd, the person who, more than anything else, wanted to see his guts spilling out of him? The man who would rather knife him in the stomach and then toss him into a gutter to bleed to death in solitude whilst cackling like a lunatic?

Why was he so stupid all of a sudden?

Trafalgar didn’t know the answer, only knew that in this moment in time he was kissing someone with a passion that came with knowing he could die if he fucked up. He’d ran his stinging tongue against Kidd’s lips, sucked on them, then pulled back for a breath only to dive in again.

Kidd’s hesitation had vanished and in its place was determination. He grabbed a frantic hold of Trafalgar’s thin shoulders, ripped the boy from him, then flung him to the ground like he was made of feathers before he could allow himself to think further.

Panting and looking down at the darker boy whose emotions flitted between anger, disappointment and pain, Eustass shook his head and swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Stay the fuck away from me,” he growled threateningly.

Then he strode away, leaving Law panting on the ground and wondering just what the hell he’d been thinking or trying to prove. And whether he’d been trying to prove something to himself, or to Kidd.
Eight study sessions with Marco over the course of two months had certainly brought up Ace’s grades though he was still in jeopardy of not being able to pass the exam at the end of the semester, so the study sessions were still scheduled.

Over the past few months, however, Ace hadn’t felt as though he’d made any progress.

He wasn’t thinking about math though. No, he was thinking about his blundering relationship with a certain blond teacher. No matter what kinds of hints he threw towards Marco, whether it be touching his arm firmly or letting his fingers linger over Marco’s hand a little longer than what could be called a friendly gesture, it seemed as if the older man were either ignorant or ignoring of his advances. He was certain that his teacher wasn’t ignorant. Marco was too damn smart to be ignorant. He was simply ignoring.

That alone frustrated Ace a great deal.

Marco was ignoring his advances but making no effort to curb them. Ace strongly believed that the blond had some semblance of feelings for him. He had to! He always smiled in Ace’s direction at school and had, on numerous occasions, gone out of his way to assist Ace whether it be just before a test or to make sure Ace got home safely when, in all truth, Ace could get home just fine on his own, even in the dark.

“He hasn’t been making any moves towards me,” Ace grumbled one fine Thursday morning.

“Why would he be making moves towards you? That would put his job at risk,” Law answered, giving Ace a mock sympathetic slap on the back. The older boy threw out a hand to knock Law away. Trafalgar dodged the tossed appendage at the last possible second, snickering as he danced out of the way.

“Not helping my cause,” he complained, sucking in a deep breath of chilly winter air. While Trafalgar had bundled up in a black parka on top of his usual sweater, Ace had only a thin jacket and a t-shirt. Still, Ace wasn’t shivering or anything, in fact, he was kind of hot even with the frozen grass on the ground crunching beneath his boots. But that could be written off as a testament to how hot his temper could sometimes flare.

Law sighed and drew his scarf tighter around his neck. He was cold despite having the blood of the north running strongly through his veins. Seeing Ace fuming was amusing but only to an extent, then it got irritating. “Ace, when are you going to just give it up?”

“Never,” Ace quipped with a grin. He decided to retaliate with a question of his own. “When are you going to pick up Bepo?”

“Today. I think it’s safe to say I won’t be bothered anymore.”

“For the past few weeks Kidd has been avoiding you like you carry a disease. You never told me what you did that day you came to my place with a bleeding tongue and that big-ass black eye. Man, you looked like such panda on one side of your face.”

Law shrugged, the slight rolling movement lost under all that clothing. He adjusted his favourite fuzzy, spotted hat on his head, moving it down over his short black hair so it covered his red ears better. “Shit hit the fan. Let’s just say I scared him off.”
“Huh. You must have pulled out your textbook for Advanced Calculus 101 and started explaining the problems to him. That would make anyone run for the hills.”

“Hardy, har, har,” Law snorted. “Not everyone’s an idiot like you, Ace.”

“Hey! I’m smart; it just doesn’t show in my academic pursuits.” Ace stuck out his tongue, crooked to the side, and Law grinned back cheekily. They could reach an understanding most times.

“Oh, and thanks for acting like a hero yesterday while everyone else stood around Luffy in shock.”

“Well, someone had to stop the bleeding before he died,” Law said factually. “It might as well have been me.”

“Seriously though, thanks. Luffy’s such a moron at times. Like, who the hell thinks it’s fun to run with scissors?! And how the hell did he manage to get them stuck in his gut?!”

Law held in a boisterous laugh, the image of Ace streaking down the hallways with a sharp object in his hand coming to mind. Ace liked to think that he and Luffy were two completely different people with no similarities. “Your little brother has a gift. As for how he managed to cut open his stomach, let’s just say Zoro and Sanji were having another one of their little spats conveniently at the same time Nami was demanding that Luffy bring her scissors. Push kind of came to shove. Accidents happen.”

Ace grumbled some more about little brothers making their older counterparts worry and stalked off in the direction of the school’s main entrance. Someone had strung up Christmas lights early all around the sign that read their school’s name, Raftel High, in big blocky letters. It was certainly too early to be festive and a janitor was perched precariously on a ladder trying to untangle the latest prank as Ace and Law walked past.

“I’m going to class early to do some last minute studying for a test. See you at lunch then?” Ace asked as they got inside and were about to go their separate ways. They had their homerooms on opposite sides of the school.

“See ya. Hope you took your psychedelic drugs so you don’t fall asleep on top of that test.”

“Shut up. Modafinil isn’t a psychedelic drug, it’s an antidepressant! Spade takes it too, though, you know, he takes a much smaller dose.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Who’s the one that’s going to be a doctor someday?”

“Ugh, you’d be like the surgeon of freaking death. Who the hell would come to you?”

“Your brother.”

“That is true.”

Law laughed heartily as he walked away, hand raised in a friendly goodbye. Now that Ace was alone, he began briskly walking towards his first period, arriving there in record time. He slumped into his usual desk, pulling his binder out of his watermelon themed bag and quickly made good use of his time by reviewing his notes.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a big hulking form akin to that of a sumo wrestler enter the classroom and take a seat behind the teacher’s desk. Mr. Jimbei, his history teacher, began to unpack the day’s test from his briefcase.
Ms. Nico, who urged everyone to call her Robin, came in soon after. She was student teacher, intent on teaching history some day, and Ace liked having her do some lessons in place of Jimbei as her voice was much easier to understand as opposed to Jimbei’s rough grunts.

“Morning Jimbei, Ms. Nico,” Ace greeted them cheerfully.

The large bulk of a man, who much to everyone’s disbelief was actually made out of muscle, grunted in answer. Nico Robin smiled, then said, “Good morning, Ace. I don’t know if Mr. McLeod ended up finding you this morning, but he’s asked everyone who’ll listen to pass on a message to you. He wants you to meet up with him in the math wing at lunch today.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks Ms. Nico.”

“Call me Robin,” the young woman protested softly. “Formalities make me feel old.”

Ace only nodded, turning back to his studying. Only he couldn’t really focus now, not when he knew Marco wanted to see him about something or other...

After class, he knew that he failed Jimbei’s test miserably. It was all Marco’s fault, really. The man was so distracting, even when he wasn’t present!

By the time lunch rolled around Ace found himself more skirmish than usual. He just couldn’t sit still during any more lessons. When at last the lunch bell rang he bolted out the classroom door and down the hall, intent on getting to the math wing. But at the same time he was running like a bat out of hell he was also texting, letting Law know what was up and that he’d either be late to lunch or not there at all today.

It was just his luck that before he reached his destination he’d run into Marco. Literally.

Papers flew everywhere, creating a tornado of white all around them. Ace went flying through the air in a most spectacular fashion, his arms spread wide as he tried to stop his downward descent. He suddenly jerked to a stop, strong hands grasping those flailing arms, but the papers underfoot were slippery and he met the linoleum floor with a crack anyway.

“Ouch,” Ace mumbled to the dirty floor. “That hurt.”

“Are you alright?!” Marco asked frantically, his hands still gripping Ace’s upper arms even though he’d fallen anyways. He moved those hands now, bringing them towards him as he crouched next to his student, which in turn helped Ace come to his senses.

“O-oh, yeah, I’m still alive,” Ace stuttered, working himself into a sitting position. His eyes glanced at the sea of papers all around them. “Uh, sorry about those papers! Here, uh…” he trailed off as he began to gather the sheets of paper together, stacking them haphazardly in an effort to regain his composure. In front of him Marco had begun to do the same thing and soon Ace was handing him the last of the sheets, which he’d discovered were actually math tests from a class other than Ace’s own. They looked like they hadn’t yet been marked.

When they both made it to their feet, Ace inquired, “So, you wanted to see me for something?”

“Yeah, actually, before we knocked into each other,” Marco replied, smiling despite looking a bit more rumpled than before. His dress shirt, a pale blue stripy thing, was untucked and Marco’s metallic reading glasses had slid down his forehead onto the tip of his nose when they’d collided. Ace bit his lip as a strange urge came over him that instructed him to fix Marco’s glasses. Luckily before he embarrassed himself by acting on his bizarrely wifey instincts, Marco took the wire-rimmed glasses off his face and hooked them on the collar of his shirt.
Ace gave him an awkward, sheepish grin. “I’m really sorry about that, again. I sometimes don’t watch where I’m going.” He didn’t admit that he was texting and running, since that would doubtlessly make Marco think he were a childish idiot. So he kept that to himself and slyly tucked his cellphone away into the back pocket of his pants by feigning a motion to put his hands on his hips.

“No, no, I’m as much at fault as you are. Besides, I’m glad I ran into you. Though maybe not literally. You almost took me out. Did you ever consider trying out for football?”

Giggling slightly, Ace followed Marco as he continued down the hallway, intent on getting to the math office where all the teachers stored their classes’ work when they needed some place to put it for safe-keeping. Marco entered into this small room first, followed by a very hesitant Ace. The room was devoid of people. Bulky filing cabinets dotting the corners of the room and several computers blinked at them, monitors spinning bright florescent screensavers.

Ace watched Marco place the papers they’d just painstakingly scrapped off of the floor into one of the top drawers of a filling cabinet and said, “So what exactly was it you wanted to see me about?”

Marco straightened up, gesturingmeaningfully towards the chairs that were tucked under the counters where the computers sat. Ace grabbed one and Marco grabbed another and both sat.

“It’s about your study lesson tonight. I have to reschedule. Something unexpected came up,” Marco admitted. The corners of his eyes were down-turned slightly, showing an inkling of melancholy.

“Oh,” Ace breathed, the whoosh of heavy air giving away his sudden disappointment. “Something unexpected?”

“Yeah, see my friends are in this old skool band and they had to move their live from its usual time yesterday night to tonight. And I never miss a show so…”

Ace nodded, the gears in his head processing this new information. “What’s the name of their band?”

“The Whitebeard Pirates.” Ace crooked an eyebrow at the name. Seeing this, Marco said, “It’s an old story, that one. I grew up with those guys.”

“Oh, no, I mean…aren’t they the famous cover band around here?”

Marco’s eyebrows shot up into outer space and his eyelids arched up higher than Ace had ever seen them go. “Y-you’ve actually heard of them?!!”

“Yeah!” Ace said enthusiastically. In truth, he’d only heard the band’s name in passing, but Marco didn’t need to know that much. “It’s cool that you know them. I’ve always wanted to go to one of their shows but my buddy doesn’t really like them so…”

A little white lie…or two. Who knew what Law thought about a band he probably never heard of? And Ace had never expressed interest in going to a Whitebeard Pirates’ show. Still, Ace had to set himself up somehow…

“Well in that case, do you maybe…want to go with me? I can get us in for free,” Marco offered. “I’ll warn you though, you might find it boring…and my friends can be a bit strange.”

Instantly Ace thought of the time Law had shown up at his house with road kill and tried to convince him to put it in his garage for safe-keeping. Law had been going through his I-must-cut-up-everything-I-can-get-my-hands-on-to-see-how-it-works phase. Earnestly, he hadn’t quite come
out of it yet. “Can’t be any stranger than my friends.”

Marco blinked for a moment, in wonder, and then shrugged as he realized he shouldn’t pry into Ace’s life. “Well, okay, if you want. So I guess I’ll just swing by and pick you up at around seven then? I don’t know how long we’ll be there though…I usually don’t get home until the wee hours of the morning but since I’m bringing my car rather than hitch-hiking with the band I guess we could leave whenever.”

“My gramps isn’t going to be home tonight and my little brother is likely going to be spending the night at a friend’s place.” Another white lie, but hey, Marco didn’t need to know Ace would be forcibly packing his brother up and sending him off to a pal’s for the night. Just for his peace of mind, Ace didn’t let Luffy stay home alone. Too many bad things could happen.

“So I’m cool to stay out late into the night,” Ace finished, grinning broadly.

Marco frowned like the responsible adult he was. “Well, I won’t let my friends keep us out too long regardless. You still have classes in the morning after all. And I don’t want to make you any more tired than usual, what with your narcolepsy and all.”

Ace smile faltered a little; it seemed as though he might have to milk his time with Marco for all it was worth. Ace was about to open his mouth and protest that his narcolepsy hardly mattered when a chill worked its way down his spine. But, before he could turn around, a deep, gruff voice boomed in the tiny room.

“Working with the student, Mr. McLeod, or just engaging in idle chit-chat?”

Marco tightened and lifted his eyes to regard vice principal Akainu, standing there in his stuffy white suit. Ace peeked over his shoulder and managed to give a hint of a smile, though he would admit that Akainu’s sneaking around scared the crap out of him.

Marco and Akainu glared at one another subtly, as if both wished to go at one another’s throats but could not due to professional standings.

“We were merely talking about Ace’s study sessions with me,” Marco ground out flatly. “And what might you be doing here? If you need me to find you something–”

“No,” Akainu interrupted, his ever-present frown sagging even more than what Ace thought was possible for a human being. “I simply stopped in because I was wondering what a student was doing in a teacher’s lounge. It’s against school policy.”

Ace looked back at Marco just in time to see the slight flare of his nostrils. So, Marco didn’t like being interrupted. At least not by this man.

“Prior to this I had a delivery of papers I had to make to this office. Ace was just helping me out, being the kind kid that he is.”

Ace had a mixed reaction to that; he wanted to blush at being called ‘kind’ by Marco but at the same time the label ‘kid’ bugged him to the point of wanting to scream. He was not a kid! Sure he just turned eighteen a few months ago, but he was not a kid.

On top of that, Marco had just lied to his superior to save Ace’s ass. Ace hadn’t helped all that much in any delivery of papers.

Akainu scrutinized them, then snapped, “Fine, but please don’t linger here or the other students might get some funny ideas.”
Ace wanted to ask what qualified as a ‘funny idea’ but held his tongue as Akainu turned his back on them and strode out of the room, letting the door slam shut behind him.

“He’s such an asshole,” Marco muttered. Ace turned to him, surprised that his teacher was so upfront with his thoughts, being in a school environment and all. “Old man Newgate only hired him because people were starting to think he only hired his ‘sons.’ What a mistake.”

Ace blinked curiously. “The principal’s…sons?”

“Yeah, see a long time ago the principal of this school used to own an orphanage and many of the teachers in this school were a part of the big family that went in and out of that orphanage, including myself. Course that orphanage has recently been turned over to different, though still perfectly capable, management since Mr. Newgate is getting on in years. Lately people have started to call him Whitebeard because of his age. No doubt you’ve heard that nickname.”

“Wow, so the old man is actually like…”

“Yeah, we call him Pops,” Marco supplied with a lazy grin. “So there, a bit of trivia for you.”

Ace nodded wordlessly. He tucked this information into the back of his mind, knowing that it could come in handy later. But who knew ol’ Whitebeard had owned an orphanage before becoming the principal of Ace’s school?

“He’s a cool guy,” Ace said after a minute of contemplation.

Marco’s eyes shifted away from Ace’s face and grew distant. “Yeah, he’s been a good father figure for us all.”

“Wish I had someone like that,” Ace said wistfully. “My biological father and mother died before I could know them. Course I have Gramps, but it’s not the same. He’s a maniac.”

“Oh, I didn’t know your parents were…I’m sorry,” apologized Marco, coughing awkwardly.

“Don’t be. Like I said, I never knew them. And despite not knowing my father personally, I don’t like him.” Ace shrugged his shoulders, “Still, I wish I had a real ‘father figure’. Gramps never quite cut it. I mean, he was okay when I was younger but he’s…just not someone I can go to for any old problem, you know?”

Marco nodded, though he couldn’t really relate as closely as Ace thought since Marco himself had been in Pops’ care for as long as he could remember. He’d always had a father; they just weren’t related by blood. Which was fine by him.

Ace opened his mouth to say something else but the sound of a bell shrieking through the hallways cut him off. When it stopped ringing Ace, too, shrieked.

“What?! I never even got to eat my lunch!” he wailed.

Marco laughed as Ace tore out of there, knowing that the kid would likely wolf down whatever he’d brought for lunch on the way to his next class. He stopped laughing when he realized that the next class on his own agenda happened to be math. Ace’s math class, that is.

Damn, he hadn’t been able to eat lunch either.

--oOo--
“Have you come to a decision about him yet?”

Kidd glanced to his left, meeting the sparkling eyes of his friend peeking out from under a massive mess of blond hair. Killer glared at him, but then again, Killer glared at everyone whether they knew he was doing the glaring or not.

“You told me not to go after him but you haven’t really told me why, all of a sudden, he’s off-limits,” Killer continued, his voice calm and steady.

Eustass sighed and continued to recline on his sofa, eyes flicking back to the large flat screen television that showed an action movie with not enough blood and gore for his tastes. He wasn’t really watching it, but he didn’t really want to answer Killer either.

For two months, Killer had been trying to sucker the answer out of him. And for those two months Kidd had been growing more and more irritated with his right hand man. He’d snapped on more than one occasion, threw a few angry tantrums, and Killer, rightfully, was beginning to get suspicious.

“What happened? What did he do? Because I swear I’ll kill him if he’s done something to you,” Killer mumbled, sitting down cautiously on the couch next to Kidd, much like a jungle cat might crouch on an overhead tree branch, waiting for unsuspecting prey to come along underneath. “I might not have found his house yet but that’s because you called the search off. Why?”

Kidd’s eyes slid shut against the sight of a car exploding into a million pieces, killing its occupants and wounding the main hero of the movie. Kidd hadn’t been paying attention enough to know what characters had died now or what the main character’s name even was. “I’m trying to watch the movie,” Kidd said, gesturing lazily to the television. It was an obvious lie.

Beside him Killer let out a barely audible huff and focussed his eye forward, letting the lie slide by him. “Sorry, Captain,” he muttered, using an old nickname for his friend. “Eddie and I have just been kind of bored lately. We haven’t been doing anything destructive and the Christmas light thing Eddie did out of boredom was pretty lame.”

“He did that?” Kidd muttered, ashamed. So the ugly ass Christmas lights that had been strung around the high school’s front entrance had been Eddie’s doing? “That was pretty lame. Are you guys really that bored?”

Killer shrugged his thin shoulders. He then ran a hand through his long hair, ripping it through the many tangles. He tended to abuse himself when he was thinking and as a consequence got many split ends. Not that it mattered much to him.

“I just want to know why you’ve stopped torturing Trafalgar Law. He was the only one interesting enough to fuck with.”

Eustass felt his temper flare like an ugly little duckling among his other, prettier, emotions. “Fuck, would you stop bringing that bastard up?! I’m fucking done screwing with him!”

And that was the truth, much as Kidd himself didn’t want to admit it. He didn’t want to screw with Law any longer. That teen had completely baffled him, sending him mixed meanings that could only lead to one thing; backstabbing. There was no way in hell Kidd would fall for his trickery. All he needed to do was stay the hell away from that bastard.

The room was silent save for some woman’s high-pitched screaming on the television.

Killer watched his words, ran them over in his head before he let them out. He could tell from
Kidd’s heavy breathing that he was in an incredibly short-tempered mood at the moment and could easily turn violent.

“Captain,” he started quietly, “Could I go after Law then, if you won’t?”

Kidd groaned loudly, squeezing his eyes shut. This was not what he wanted. He knew Killer would eventually ask this and it put him in a tight spot. “Okay, I get it; you want to spill that guy’s guts for pissing me off, don’t you?” Killer smiled creepily, inclining his head once in gleeful agreement. “As flattered as I am, I don’t want you going off to do shit alone.”

“I’ll bring Eddie,” Killer suggested flippantly. He dug another hand through his curled blond locks, cruelly ripping out pieces of hair that couldn’t stay connected to his scalp. Kidd was honestly surprised that Killer even had all that much hair left by the brutal way he treated it.

Eustass closed his eyes, Eddie’s face appearing on the backs of his eyelids. The boy was like a freaking zombie. Always drugged out of his skull. Doped up on crystal meth, or some other crazed narcotic. No way could he trust Eddie to go with Killer as backup. The guy was an idiot when it came to following orders. He was more likely to get arrested than complete a job assigned to him. “No.”

Killer let out another barely audible huff of exasperated breath.

“I’ll go with you,” Kidd suddenly suggested. He picked up the remote for the TV, clicking a button to shut it off and threw it back on the arm of the couch. He got up slowly, stretching his shoulder blades until he heard a satisfying snap, crackle, and pop. “I can’t trust that other moron to do anything right.”

Killer’s eyebrows shot up, though nobody could see them under his messy bangs. He was confused; why was Kidd suddenly being complaisant with his ideas when he’d so adamantly refused them before? For weeks? But he didn’t risk voicing his concerns, not when Kidd was finally back to his old self. Or so he hoped.

As much as Eustass didn’t want to risk having his reputation ruined by Trafalgar, he also knew that if Law even tried to tell Killer anything about him and how he had another man’s lips imposed on his own, his friend wouldn’t believe the words of the enemy. Which is why, he reasoned with himself, they would go on the attack at long last. Then perhaps he could end this sort of intimidation Law wrapped around himself like a snugly blanket.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel uneasy about going after Law. Especially after what had happened last time…

“We’ll follow him home from school, how about? Tomorrow. Friday. Ambush him then and show him what happens when he messes with my head.”

Killer raised his eyebrows again at this, his bangs hiding his surprise. So, Law had messed with his friend’s head? He cast his eyes back to the television screen in time to see someone get decapitated by a rather smiley actor wearing a very feathery pink coat. Killer liked to take things like that as an omen. Tomorrow could prove to be an interesting day after all…
Ace was more than ready to blast off when Marco’s little blue sports car rolled into his driveway. He bounded down the front steps, completely missing the last couple as he catapulted through the air, and heard Spade barking frantically behind him from inside the house. He didn’t know if his puppy would make a good watch dog or not before, but now he was quite certain the dog was barking at the intruder he could see from the windows. Ace would have to clean those windows later, since they would be streaked with slime from Spade’s wet doggy nose.

After he landed on the lawn, jarring himself back into reality, Ace forced himself to get a grip. He swallowed his excitement as best he could and tried to appear calm as he got into Marco’s car, smelling the aftershave lingering in the air. He could also sniff out a musk that was so distinctly Marco, the same smell that he’d picked up on every time he entered Marco’s home for one of their study sessions.

He greeted Marco sedately, trying his best to keep his voice level. He didn’t want Marco to think he were much closer to an immature child than a responsible adult – that would wreck his plans of getting close to the man. He wanted Marco to see him as an equal, someone to get to know. Someone he could potentially date…

Ace accidentally let out a manly giggle at that thought. This whole thing felt kind of like a date.

“Excited I see,” Marco said anyways. Ace chuckled once more, this time nervously; he should have expected that Marco would see through his façade. He wasn’t very good at hiding his true emotions. Not in front of a man who saw him practically every day for the past few months.

“Uh, yeah.” Ace buckled himself in with a sheepish grin that extended upwards to wrinkle his face and make his freckles stand out under his eyes. Stars in the night sky, those freckles were. He had a love/hate relationship with them; he loved the fact that they connected him with his deceased mother whom also had freckles, but hated that they were considered childish looking by most.

“So…what have you been up to since I last saw you a few hours ago?”

With raised eyebrows, Marco answered, “Oh, not much. Just ate dinner and lazed on the couch, looking at this huge stack of papers I still have to mark.” He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he contemplated his duties and lack of will to do them.

“For our class?” Ace asked politely. Though he was far more interested in what Marco had for dinner he tried to push his overbearing stomach away in order to ask more sophisticated questions. He’d already messed up once this evening.

“Yeah, I wish. Your class is relatively small so it doesn’t take too long to mark everyone’s work. No, this is for my other class which is filled to the brim with troublemakers that have really awful writing. People seem to think that I don’t read their work for accuracy and they can hide the fact that they don’t know what they’re doing by writing sloppily.”

“Wait a second, so I’m not a troublemaker?” Ace couldn’t help but ask jokingly.

“You’ve never given me any problems.”

Ace glowed, not literally, but he sure felt like a million beams of light were coming out of every pore on his body. Like fire, hidden just below the surface of his skin, was seeping out of him. Marco had a weird-ass effect on him.
They made idle chit-chat until Marco pulled up at the venue. He had his usual parking space that he nearly always was able to scoop when he came alone rather than in Jozu’s van, one right near the front exit and facing the street. It was perfect for a quick escape if need be.

Frankly, Marco was kind of nervous about how the night would go. He couldn’t really place his finger on the why but he had a feeling in his gut that something was going to happen. Whether that something would be bad or good his gut had yet to determine.

Marco could see that Ace was trying to suppress what had to be an incredibly peppy jig as they walked up and into the venue. Once inside he could no longer see Ace shifting from foot to foot eagerly, but the overhead red lamps highlighted Ace’s face as he craned his head up to look at Marco, waiting obediently for some further instruction.

Marco led them to his usual spot at the bar, well aware that Ace hadn’t even reached the legal drinking age for their city. In front of him the barkeep, a rather big man by the name of Blueno, immediately set about serving Marco his usual beer but faltered as he glimpsed Ace, a sight he’d never seen before.

Blueno gave his usual patron a questioning glance, but scurried to grab a coke for the youngsters, clearly underage. “That one’s on the house,” he said as he brandished the drink. It certainly would be on the house, considering it was such a rarity to see Marco bring a friend with him. Or was he a friend? Blueno settled himself into a chair that placed him far away from them and continued to observe the sight carefully.

Ace grinned at Marco’s astonishment. Marco knew Blueno rarely gave anything for free. Seeing this, Ace said, “My cute charm works all the time.” He wanted to add, Especially on older men, but held off on it, thinking that perhaps it would make Marco nervous.

Marco snorted a bit at Ace’s joking, catching himself staring too intently at the way the red lighting danced across Ace’s dark hair and adhered to his pale, freckled cheeks. Cute indeed.

He took a much needed gulp of beer, hoping that his thoughts would become muddled. Then he remembered that he actually had to drive Ace home relatively sober and cursed under his breath, thankful that he could see his friends up on the stage doing a quick, last minute sound check. Hopefully they could take his mind off of Ace’s obvious charms.

“See the guy with the ridiculous hairdo?” Marco asked, raising his beer towards Thatch. “That guy’s my best friend. His name is Thatch and when he sings he brings all the older woman to the yard. Well, they grovel at his feet anyways.”

They both laughed, Ace sipping occasionally from his soda as Marco pointed out the rest of his friends. “The big guy that’s all lit up like a Christmas tree is Jozu. He likes to wear a lot of shiny things, though he’s not exactly what I’d call sociable. Until you get to know him or get him drunk that is.” He could see Ace’s eyes give off a kind of mischievous gleam at that. He’d probably said too much there. The alcohol couldn’t be already loosening his tongue, could it? “And the geisha man is Izou. He lives next door actually.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen him a couple times!” Ace exclaimed, fixating his eyes on the man wearing a pale pink kimono and attaching cables to his keyboard. In truth, Ace had seen Izou peering out of his window at him as he’d walked up to Marco’s house, but he’d never thought anything of it until now. So, Izou at least knew his face…

Ace took another sip of his cola, waiting for the band to begin, and began to plot his next moves, something Law had advised he try to do every once and a while.
He tried to think of a plan, but his thought processes were cut short when Marco suddenly began guffawing beside him. Curiously, he turned around fully on his barstool and asked, “Hey, what’s so funny?”

“Aha, look at Thatch up there dancing.” Marco snorted as he pointed at the spectacle. “He looks like a drunk peacock.”

Ace followed Marco’s finger to the sight and let out a laugh himself. The man’s dancing style was not only outdated by a decade or two but it seemed as though he was having troubles moving about the stage, for he was tripping on wires and such.

Finally, many ‘smooth’ moves later, Thatch addressed the crowd. Well, he addressed the ladies, since there was an obvious emphasis on their presence rather than the few men that dotted the room. Then the band launched into a rather earth-shattering tune that reminded Ace of something he might hear if he stepped into a shop selling motorcycles. He decided he liked it, almost as much as he liked having Marco snickering constantly beside him.

Now he knew why Marco never missed a show: this was like a comedy act for him.

“Thatch looks like a blonde Elvis Presley, except, you know, not as great a singer!” Ace screamed above the clash of the music. Marco angled towards him, humour evident in the way his eyes twinkled mischievously in the reddish light of the bar.

“You could say that again.” Marco jerked his head back towards the stage. “Look, now he’s on to bending over and singing down to that group of ladies gathered at the base of the stage.” Ace leaned precariously on the edge of his stool towards Marco, being barely able to hear him. Seeing this, Marco too moved in closer so their foreheads were a scant few inches away. He repeated himself, then said, “I always feel bad for Jozu. Since he’s the drummer and all, he always has a good view of Thatch’s behind sticking up in the air.”

Ace let loose peels of laughter, losing his balance on the stool. He didn’t really find it all that hilarious, but there was something in the way the venue stank of alcohol and people having a good time that fuelled his amusement. He was glad of that too, for he did indeed lose his balance and topple over, conveniently onto Marco, who caught and steadied him.

Then the arm that held him mobilized righted him but continued to drape itself across Ace’s shoulders. Marco, well, he was just too concerned Ace would actually fall and hit his head. He didn’t really want to be responsible for brain damage to a student.

With Marco’s arm wrapped around him, Ace allowed himself a little triumphant smirk. He was an accidental genius, he was. It was a perfect bonding moment, he mused, one that would hopefully stay in Marco’s mind long after they parted ways for the weekend.

Ace suddenly had a bright light turn on in his brain. He initiated his idea as quickly as possible. This new idea involved snuggling closer to Marco under the guise of having a conversation amid the music.

Marco looked down at Ace, noticing how the other had effectively scooted his barstool closer to him and was now more or less leaning on him to keep himself from falling over. He threw a questioning look down to the tuff of dark hair, but either Ace didn’t see or didn’t care to acknowledge him.

“He seems to be a real womanizer,” Ace suddenly commented, watching how Thatch extended his
arm down into the crowd of squealing women. He had to get the conversation going somehow.

“You have no idea,” Marco answered dryly.

“My brother has a blond buddy like that. Kind of freaks me out.”

“There’s one in every circle of friends.”

“Yeah, probably.” Ace moved his head so it sort of, but not quite, rested on the base of Marco’s neck. He couldn’t exactly place his head on Marco’s shoulder, since the arm around his own body prevented that, so he settled for the next best thing.

Marco, meanwhile, was growing increasingly uncomfortable with Ace’s weight on him. And it wasn’t because Ace was heavy, though he certainly was...no, it was because he was fairly sure Ace was taking advantage of the friendly situation in hopes of turning it into something more.

It could be said that Marco had an epiphany under those flickering red lights, watching Thatch prance about on stage. Yes, something became uncomfortably clear to him.

He was all too glad when the first set of songs came to an end and the band leapt off the stage to rest. It gave him an excuse to detangle himself from Ace, whose hands he’d found moved to his chest, fingertips dancing over the light blue t-shirt he had decided to don instead of his usual dress shirt.

Ace gave him a questioning stare when Marco hopped off his barstool and underneath that initial questioning, Marco saw, was a hint of disappointment. He panicked.

“Um, uh, how about we go backstage? Then you can meet the guys?” Marco said the first thing that came to mind and, looking back on it a few seconds later, he realized it was probably the worst thing he could have said.

“All right!” Ace agreed enthusiastically, grinning. Any traces of disappointment were gone and in their place was the giddy excitement of a child opening a birthday present.

Marco knew he’d be regretting letting Ace get close to his group of friends, but his big mouth had assured him that he couldn’t go back now.

Damn.

As they moved towards the backstage area Ace found himself being jostled about in the tightly packed crowd that had begun moving around the moment the Whitebeard Pirates had stopped playing. Marco eventually took pity on his inexperience and wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders for the second time that night.

Much as he hated to encourage Ace, his protective instincts were kicking in.

With a barely concealed smile, Ace nestled into the crook of Marco’s arm, pressing himself up against the warm body he found there. He also risked throwing his own arm out to curl around Marco’s waist. When Marco looked down reproachfully, Ace yelled through the crowds’ racket, "Extra grip so I don't lose you!" But, newly enlightened, Marco knew that was not the entire truth.

Yes, bringing Ace here had been a monumental screw up on his part, Marco knew.

Regardless of Ace hanging onto him like a creeping Charlie might adhere itself to a stone wall, Marco managed to get them into the back rooms of the venue. Locating the band was easy; Thatch
was in the process of practicing one of his finishing moves for the night on a table while the other two much more amiable band members were watching with trepidation.

Everyone was very surprised to see Ace dangling off of Marco. Luckily for the latter, Ace had the sense to let go and smile as if there was nothing going on.

Cheeky monkey, Marco thought as he clenched his jaw and tried to brush off his embarrassment. His friends weren’t exactly used to seeing him with a hanger-on, male or female.

“Guys, this is Ace. He’s, uh, a fan, I guess.”

Ace blinked, confused until he realized that he’d told Marco that he had always wanted to go to a Whitebeard Pirates gig. Right, that had been his first little white lie…or second? Either way, he had to act the part. He couldn’t blow his cover now.

He opened his mouth to proclaim his apparent fandom, but found that someone else was stealing his airwaves.

“See Jozu! I told you my lovely voice can reach the ears of younger generations!”

A grunt was all Thatch got as Jozu continued to display more interest in Ace’s sudden appearance.

The man with pompadour hairstyle rushed over to Ace after being more or less ignored and looked down at him as if to make a quick judgement. Then he grinned, his face welcoming. “Hey there, kid. My name’s Thatch, though if you’re a fan you probably already knew that much. We should be friends,” he said cheerily, getting straight to the point. “Any friend of Marco’s is a friend of mine.”

Ace let go of the fact that yet another person had called him a kid in front of Marco and concentrated on the ‘in’ he’d been given. It was perfect. “Yeah, let’s be friends! For sure!”

He and Thatch grinned at one another until the other big guy standing behind his new friend extended a beefy hand in Ace’s direction.

“Jozu.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jozu,” Ace said politely. He remembered Marco saying something about Jozu needing time to open up to people. He could already tell that the burly man who wore copious amounts of sparkly Jewelry was more reserved and likely wouldn’t be as quick to take to him as Thatch had. Ace only nodded to himself, tucked the information away in his mind for later musings, and let that slide.

Finally the man with the pink kimono around his lithe, though muscular body stopped giving him a weird, spacey look and stepped forward as well. “And I’m Izou. I’ve heard a lot about you, Ace.”

“Y-you have?” Ace stuttered, stealing a glance at Marco only to see the older man’s eyes widen. Marco looked like a tortoise that had been flipped over onto its back and was now struggling to right itself. Ace looked back at Izou, seeing a hauntingly familiar smirk on that man’s face.

Then, he realized, it was like looking into a mirror.

At this, Ace could only smile smugly and say coyly, “Oh really?” He crooked a sly eyebrow and winked at Izou, letting the other know he was more than willing to play a little game.

In front of him, Izou grinned broadly, his lipsticked mouth stretching to accommodate this
obtrusive expression. In that moment Ace knew he and Izou had already come to a comfortable understanding.

“Yeah,” Izou continued, “Marco here talks about you all the time.”

“He does?” Thatch asked, perplexed. Jozu too appeared a bit mystified to hear this declaration.

“To me he does,” Izou stated irritably. “I don’t know what he tells you morons.”

“I…I thought I was Marco’s best friend!” Thatch whined, throwing a disbelieving hand in front of his eyes as if he couldn’t stand to look upon the traitorous world any longer.

“You know, I’m standing right here guys,” Marco piped up, his eyes twitching in the flickering overhead lights. Even backstage, the décor hadn’t changed much. The lights were still dim, giving the room a ritzy allure.

“Oh, Ace, you said you’re a fan of our band, right?” Izou said with a telling wink, ignoring Marco completely.

Ace grinned at the wink more than anything and nodded.

“In that case, come with me.”

With vigour usually reserved for a triathlon runner, Izou grabbed Ace by the hand and tugged him along behind him, suddenly hell bent on taking them somewhere. While Jozu and Thatch didn’t seem to mind having their newest fan dragged out of the room, Marco nearly had a conniption.

“H-hey, wait! Where are you taking him?!”

Izou opened a door and pushed Ace through, who went all too willingly. “Oh, you know, giving him the full band experience. No worries, dearest Marco.”

“Then wait for me!” Marco cried, speeding off after them.

Quickly Izou slipped through the open doorway and slammed the door behind him, but not before shouting, “Nope, true fans only!”

“I’ve been a true fan for decades!”

But Izou had already locked the door and no amount of hysterical pounding would make him open it up again. Meanwhile, Ace was ecstatic that Marco seemed to care about his wellbeing.

--oOo--

“Where are we going?” Ace whispered, taking care to keep close to Izou in the darkness. He could barely make out the streak of pink in front of his face. It felt so weird, being willingly abducted by a man who wore a pink kimono.

“Down the rabbit hole,” Izou answered giddily. “Step lightly now, Alice.”

“It’s Ace,” he snapped back.

“Not in here it isn’t,” Izou retorted. “This, my dear friend, is the underground tunnel that leads to the Okama paradise most commonly known as The Night Fairy. We’re just going down here so I can have a little talkie with you. Of course we’re not going all the way to The Night Fairy; I don’t think I can make it there in these red pumps I’ve got on.”
Ace didn’t know whether to snicker or make a remark about how unmanly it was to wear high heeled shoes meant for ladies. Undecided as he was, he remained silent. Soon enough, Izou stopped suddenly and Ace bumped into his back with a soft *ompfh*.

“Ah, here we are…where is it…somewhere here…” Izou muttered, twisting his body around in the tunnel as he searched for something of utmost importance. “Aha, here!”

The tunnel was bathed in a soft rosy light and Ace blinked frantically, trying to adjust to the bright colour. He took stock of his surroundings, noting that they were indeed in some sort of underground concrete tunnel. No wonder the temperature had dropped so suddenly when they’d gone through that doorway.

He then noticed the bench sitting there in all its glory. A wonderfully wooden, purple bench with equally wonderful red trim. The only piece of furniture in the tunnel. Hell, the only *thing* in the tunnel besides the dazzling lamps that came careening out of the concrete walls.

He peered past Izou’s bulk, mostly all billowing fabric, down the narrow tunnel, frowning when he realized he couldn’t see an ending in the distance. He looked behind him and, again, he couldn’t see the door from which they’d come. Oddly enough, this didn’t scare him as much as he thought it should.

“Shall we sit, Alice?” Izou asked, taking a seat on the bench before waiting for Ace’s reply.

“It’s Ace,” he once again wailed. He took a seat beside Izou regardless. The bench was spacious, with enough length to fit three or four butts, if they were packed together like sardines that is. “Why are you calling me…Alice?”

“Ah, never mind. Maybe we’ll change your Okama name to Ann, as that seems more fitting for some reason. Anyways, tell me all about your relationship with Marco. That’s all I really want to hear.”

“Relationship? Well, he’s my teacher…”

“Lover?”

Ace cast his eyes away unhappily. Izou gasped, painted nails coming up to cover his gaping mouth. “Wait, you mean Marco was telling me the truth?! That there really is nothing going on between you two?! That the parrot-thing was lying to me?!” Izou had been positive since the moment Ace had walked into the backstage area hanging off of Marco that there’d been something more than platonic! To be told he was wrong…it left him reeling.

“Yeah, ‘fraid so. Wait, he told you there’s nothing going on between– Wait, he even considered that we could be–”

“Yes and yes. Still it’s troubling that he’s still so prime and proper about the whole student and teacher thing. Jeez. This is going to be more work than I first thought. Oh well, all the more fun for me.”

“Wait, Izou, why does it seem like you’re going to get involved?” Ace asked cynically, arching a dubious eyebrow.

“I *am* going to get involved,” Izou answered confidently. “Because I know Marco better than you do right now,” Ace huffed at this, “but that’s not to say that can’t change. All it’s going to take is a bit of elbow grease to get to Marco. Preparatory things, see. There *is* a right way and a wrong way to go after a guy you like, ya know?”
“Oh, so you’re going to give me advice now, is that it?” Ace asked sceptically. He twiddled his thumbs nervously, since he was effectively trapped in a cave with only one other person to rely on. He didn’t know if it was a good idea to trust the word of a male geisha. It just seemed a touch risky.

“Advice, sure, maybe other stuff too,” Izou said, his face squishing up as he thought.

Ace frowned, his mind jumping to conclusions. “You’re not going to give me condoms, are you?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of obtaining some irresistible, sexy lingerie, but sure, if you want cond—”

“Lingerie?!” Ace squawked, reminiscent of Marco’s pet bird. “Wha, what are you—”

“Oh, would you calm down!” Izou cried, clapping his palms over his ears. The tunnels made every little sound louder as the sound waves were trapped within the concrete, bouncing every which way. Ace’s screaming could seriously give him a headache.

Ace quieted as he realized that anything he said would be amplified and possibly heard by other people. Including Marco. Izou smirked at the sudden setting of Ace’s jaw.

“Actually, I am a fashion teacher and in my spare time I can make you pretty much any seductive garment you could ever imagine.”

Izou expected a resounding ‘no’ but instead the younger male simply shrugged.

“Seductive you say?”

“I say.”

Ace nodded gradually, seriously considering the possibilities.

“Anyways, I actually didn’t really drag you here to talk about sexy underwear, though that’s always a hot topic I’m eager to debate. I wanted to talk to you about Marco, of course.”

“I want to talk about Marco too.”

Izou laughed at the enthusiasm he could hear in Ace’s voice. “Okay the…hmm, where to begin? Oh, I know, how about the plain and simple fact that Marco is a pretty lonely guy. I mean, apart from his parrot he doesn’t really have anyone to come home to. He totally claimed that he can’t pursue a relationship because of how busy his life is, but that’s such a blatant lie.”

Izou took a deep breath, then continued, “So, like the good brother-but-not-really I am, I’m worried about his wellbeing. That’s where you come in. See where I’m going with this?”

“You want me to get together with Marco so you don’t have to worry about him,” Ace reiterated, still sceptical. But he, truthfully, liked the idea. After all, it ended with him and Marco together.

“More or less, yes.” Izou leaned back on the bench, stretching out his heeled feet as he reclined. “Now, I know this plan might seem a bit obvious and a touch rash, but I can assure you there is no faster way for our objective to be met than to go at things full-throttle…”

And so, Ace was given a plan, just as Law had always advised him to obtain.

--oOo--
Marco was not very pleased with Izou later that night when Ace was returned to his side. He saw how his friend was talking to Ace, all whispery and secretive and stuff. He knew nothing good would come of Izou’s influence. Izou was a freaking crazy radical! He was a part of the Okama Organization for crying out loud! Hell, he was an Okama recruitment officer when he felt like volunteering! The kind of man who’d strut into a church and preach the words of change to the congregation: that was Izou!

No, nothing good could possibly come of introducing Izou to Ace. Already Ace had displayed what Marco could only refer to as ‘that crazy drive to do crazy things’ and Izou would only intensify these inclinations.

After the second set of the night, Ace and he left, hardly speaking to one another. Marco had no idea what Izou had said to Ace, but all of a sudden the boy had become like a living, breathing statue. Not nearly as animated as he’d been when Marco had picked him up earlier.

It was like Ace was deep in thought. The very idea of Ace deeply thinking sent Marco into a worried frenzy.

Indeed, all Marco got when he dropped Ace off at his place was a grateful but quiet ‘thanks’ and an equally quiet ‘good night.’ Then Ace had disappeared into his house, without that smiling glance over his shoulder that Marco usually received every time they parted.

Izou had seriously fucked with Ace’s already screwy chemistry and now Marco was rightfully pissed. That, or this was the calm before the storm. Yes, now that Marco thought about it, Izou had a habit of executing things in phases…this could very well be the calm belt he was experiencing. He would have to watch his back because he was certain the storm was going to be happening very, very soon.
The next study period on Friday – which Marco had decided would take place the day after the concert – came too fast for Ace. He was an odd amount of fried nerves, with Izou’s encouraging words bouncing around like fleas inside his head.

He sauntered up to Marco’s house, as he usually did, noting that the overcast sky was looking to drop some rain sometime today. He could feel the dampness in the air and knew his bones would not like having the rain come down upon them. For some reason or another, he preferred a hot, dry, desert-like climate over a cold, damp, wintry climate. It just seemed to suit him far better.

On the doorstep of the little red brick house, Ace’s throat constricting rather painfully, he mused that he felt nauseated. But he wasn’t sick or anything of that nature. He was simply a nervous wreck in its most basic teenage form.

When he rang the doorbell, Ace poked his fingers into the sides of his mouth, forcing his lips into a grin. He willed the muscles to hold it in place long enough for Marco to open the door.

That door he stared so fixedly at opened slowly, creaking all the while in protest that Ace felt quite fitting to the situation. While there was a smile on Marco’s face as he appeared in the doorway, it was just as forced looking as Ace’s own.

“Come in,” Marco said, moving aside to let Ace through the threshold. “Ready to study?”

“Yeah,” Ace mumbled quietly. He offered up a fist punch to the heavens, but it was painfully half-hearted. “Let’s do this.”

And do this they did. They went about the usual motley questions quickly and with focus, completely absorbing and applying themselves to their tasks. Both were rather kidding themselves, feigning what was really on their minds.

It only took an hour until Ace found himself growing aggravated with the lack of response from Marco. He checked the clock on the wall, noting both the time that had passed and how the methodical ticking happened to be louder than any conversation they’d engaged in so far.

It was then that Ace decided he would have to take the initiative to start a bit of a chat lest the ticking of the clock drive him up a wall. “Say, Marco…”

“Yes, Ace?” His voice betrayed a hint of discomfort. Nervousness. He could only wonder what might come out of Ace’s mouth now, what with the way things had been turning out…

“Don’t you think we ought to take a break?” The suggestion bounced off of Marco and immediately the man felt himself loosen up. If Ace were asking for a break he simply wished to go into the kitchen and raid the refrigerator. Nothing Marco couldn’t handle.

“Sure,” Marco replied. “I’m guessing you want something to eat?”

“Oh, no, I’m not really hungry.”

As soon as the words left Ace’s mouth, Marco froze, wondering if the apocalypse was about to happen or if hell had really entered into a glacial age. Ace not hungry? The very notion was absurd.

“Y-you sure?” Marco stuttered, unable to believe his eyes when Ace nodded his assent.
“Actually, I’m kind of getting a headache from all this math,” Ace said, a little laugh escaping from those rosy lips. Marco noticed it was a shaky laugh, one that reverberated up and down his throat. A laugh like a daring mouse looking to run across the nose of a sleeping cat. “I was hoping we could just sit and…talk.”

“Well, what do you want to talk about?”

Ace cocked his head to the side, shifted in his seat, and found he liked to press up to the warmth of Marco’s body next to him. “Actually, I don’t really want to talk,” Ace admitted. He brushed a hand across Marco’s arm, fingers smoothing over the invisible little blonde hairs there. He felt the slightest shiver under his fingertips and looked to Marco’s apprehensive face.

Then he stood up and moved in front of Marco, wanting to be able to see his every move. After all, that’s what Izou had said to do…face everything head on. He had said to just do it and to avoid looking back. That relationships can only move forward if you seize the opportunity to move them forward. Those had been his words, and Ace had taken them to heart.

“But I guess I have to talk to make you understand. Lately I’ve been trying to get you to notice me,” Ace started. He felt his heart begin to quicken as he saw Marco stiffen, lidded eyes lifting. “And I think you’ve noticed that much.”

Marco gulped tensely, hating how his tongue seemed to be suddenly tied up in a knot.

Ace continued his spiel. “Sorry I don’t have much tact. Wasn’t really born with the powers of seduction.”

Marco winced now; there really was no way this was happening to him.

Again, Ace continued, “And I’m sorry that I can’t control my feelings, but maybe that’s for the best? I mean, you seem to be denying them. Or at least you haven’t really acted on them.”

“I don’t know what kind of craziness Izou has put into your head but I don’t–”

Ace felt his indomitable temper flare up like a little flame catching some tinder. “I know you like me too, so come on! I shouldn’t have to be the only one making a move! Just admit it!”

Marco found he had nothing to say to that desperate plea, his face whirling into a mix between surprised, horrified and guilty. Admittedly, he couldn’t say anything though because Ace was already on the move, swiftly putting his hands on Marco’s shoulders. But, just like that, Marco was snapped from his petrified state. He tried to pull away. Ace’s hands were firmly clamped on to the folds of his shirt and any twisting Marco did resulted in them lopsided on the couch, rapidly falling into an awkward position. Caught between lying down and sitting up.

Marco found his voice when his parrot cried out at the strange happenings before its birdy eyes. “Lovebirds!” Phoenix squawked.

“Ace! Ace, what are you doing?! I-I, no, no, no–!”

Marco’s panic escalated as Ace toppled over on top of him and made his objective unashamedly known by twisting his face upwards. Lust, pure adulterated lust, scorched Marco as he looked down into Ace’s dark, searing eyes. He knew what was going to happen if he didn’t attempt to stop Ace.

Ace, on the other hand, was on an adrenaline rush equivalent to jumping out of a plane ten thousand feet above the ground. With no parachute strapped on.
Much to Ace’s horror, however, it quickly became apparent that Marco was much stronger than him. So, Ace did the only thing he could do to avoid being thrown to the ground. He dove, flattening his body against Marco’s. Their crotches lined up as Ace struggled to cling to Marco’s dress shirt, desperate to go through with ‘the Plan’. He wasn’t going to live with any damn regrets.

The dive took Marco by surprise and he looked down at Ace, leaving himself open for opportunity.

Ace smashed his lips down on Marco’s, who gasped and tried to verbally protest. He was cut off as Ace took his bottom lip between his own, sucking and running a much too greedy tongue along the soft flesh. Not only did Marco taste like surprise, he tasted like what he had for dinner, which must have been delicious in Ace’s humble opinion.

Earnestly, Ace thought he had Marco, thought he had won. The other closed his parted mouth, giving Ace access to his upper lip to more properly seal them together. But Ace's hopes were dashed and the fear was returning as Marco resumed his struggling, this time with double the intensity.

Ace could do nothing as his hands were violently ripped from Marco's shoulders. Marco pitched him over the side of the couch, much like a seaman might toss an anchor into the sea. Ace narrowly missed the coffee table as he fell to the carpeted floor, landing awkwardly on his back, the force of the impact leaving him stunned. It didn’t hurt much physically, but emotionally it left him feeling pile-driven.

"Ace, how dare you?! I don’t know what stupid things Izou told you, but I don’t reciprocate these childish feelings you have for me! Lessons are over, go home." With that, Marco leapt up from the couch, walked past Ace’s defeated and sullen form, and darted into the depths of his home. He knew that even Ace, persistent as he was, wouldn't follow.

Ace lay on the ground, broken and confused. Had he really been wrong about everything? All those hastily hidden signs Marco had been giving him…weren’t signs at all?

“Marco loves Ace,” the parrot squawked suddenly.

“Apparently he doesn’t,” Ace muttered, feeling tears well up in the corners of his eyes.

He picked himself up eventually, along with all his books, and headed for the exit, only numbly aware of what had just transpired. He stuffed his feet into his banged up sneakers and shuffled out the door. Dimly he realized it was raining quite heavily. He stood for only a second on the porch, then took off leisurely through the pouring rain, the liquid immediately seeping through his clothing to chill his heated skin. He knew his books, despite being in his backpack, were going to get soaked if he didn't hurry home or find shelter to wait out the storm, but none of that mattered to Ace. Besides, he felt the real storm couldn't get any worse than what it already was.

Unbeknownst to Ace, he was being watched. Marco could see him from his upstairs bedroom window. He could see the boy ripping angrily at his hair, his drenched clothes, and the rain itself. His insides twisted up at the sight and he forced himself to tear his eyes away. Marco turned, back to the outside world, and slide down his wall below the window until he became a ball of trembling, fearful limbs. If only he weren’t so damn afraid. Afraid of what Ace had done to change him. Afraid of what people would think. Afraid of himself for feeling so messed up.

He covered his face in his hands and tried to stop the rainfall from coming to his cloudy eyes too.

--oOo--
The hunt was on.

The rain plastered Eustass’ hair to his forehead and no matter what he did to try and remedy this blemish to his appearance, it didn’t work. His usual black headband did not do anything to keep either the rain or his hair out of his eyes. He had forgotten how long his hair actually was when it stuck straight up in the air but now with it constantly in his line of sight he was debating whether or not to take some scissors to it.

Ducking under the awning of someone’s porch, he wiped the water droplets from his eyes and scanned his surroundings. There was no sign of Killer anywhere. Pretty soon Law would be walking past and Killer would miss him completely.

Though maybe that was for the best. Less people around to worry about. Not because Killer would ever rat him out, but because Law might speak up with some tidbit that Kidd would prefer not to reach any ears, no matter how loyal those ears may be.

He lowered himself into a crouch and waited silently, hearing the trickling of rain running off the roof of the house he sat outside of. From his position he had an excellent view of the street and, sure enough, he saw Law coming in his direction a mile away.

Law was running and Kidd couldn’t blame him. The sky was dropping cats and dogs on them today.

Before Law could get too close, Kidd hid himself away against the siding of the house. Then he tensed his muscles, getting ready for a sprint that would end everything. A thought flitted through his mind. Perhaps Killer was here after all, hidden away and ready to pounce at the right moment.

They had split back at the school, since Law had been known to take two possible routes from the Grand Line back to the North Blue, depending on whether or not Ace was with him. Apart from that, they still hadn’t heard much about where the boy actually lived.

Not that it would matter much after tonight.

Kidd steeled himself as Law passed, running through the puddles without a care for the water springing up all around him. He was drenched anyway.

With a guttural grunt, Kidd jumped over the porch’s guardrail and took off after Law, intending to sneak along behind him and run him down when he least expected it. If he had to tackle the boy to the ground, so be it. The mud didn’t bother him.

Over the sound of the torrential downpour, Law heard the heavy footfall of his pursuer.

“Oh fuck,” he muttered into the rain, swiping at his eyes to clear his vision as he stepped up his speed. “Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Kidd ground his teeth when he realized Law knew he was there chasing him. All it took was a glance over the shoulder to confirm. Kidd knew, despite his all terrain boots, that catching a frightened Law was probably futile.

They had done something of this nature before, though back then Kidd had never intended to severely hurt anyone. Now was different.

Law dove into one of the Grand Line’s many alleyways, hoping to shake Kidd. Unfortunately, he hadn’t put enough distance between them yet and Kidd saw through his plan. However, Eustass lost a bit of ground when he slipped in the mud and almost went down, recovering just in time to save his soaking wet clothes from further humiliation.
Where was Killer when he needed him? Only Killer could run fast enough to catch that bastard, and even then he could only catch Law by a hair, if that.

Just then, Trafalgar disappeared completely from his sight around another corner and Kidd screeched his defeat, tacking on a furious last burst of speed. As he spun around that corner he stopped cold, taking in the wide, scared eyes of his prey.

Dead end. Perfect.

Eustass’ eyes flicked to the sole piece of property that lay in this alley. A dumpster. Even more perfect.

His usual wicked grin returned to his face as he savoured his triumph, breathing hard. Across from him, eyes roving everywhere for any chance of escape, Law was panting just as hard.

Eustass gave them both a grace period, holding still as could be until both had caught their breath. Then he said, ominously, “Guess it’s the end of the Line. Isn’t it?”

“Guess so. How Grand.”

Eustass snorted, amused that Law could carry his little joke. As much as he hated Law, at least the man could have a bit of humour in his final hours. “You know, you’re lucky it’s me you’re dealing with. If it had been Killer instead, he’d be ripping you a new asshole by now.”

That creepy grin of Law’s emerged from its dormant lair. “All the better for you to fuck me with.”

Kidd felt himself flush, though from anger or embarrassment even he could not tell. Both, he figured.

The jibe was enough to propel him forward. Catching Law when he had no where to run was easy, a simple feint to the left and then a grab to the right and the boy was up against a wall in no time. Kidd allowed himself the pleasure of being as rough as he wanted, which ended up with Law squirming and gasping for air as Kidd pushed all of the life support out of his lungs.

He eased up for just a moment, wanting to savour being the one to cause so much agony for a while longer. Maybe he’d even call Killer on his cell phone to direct him to the scene to take part. He contemplated this as he squeezed the air out of Law’s lungs a second time. Naw, best to just get on with it himself. Law could be too mouthy.

He eased up on Law again, letting the other regain his breath and think he had a chance against him. He liked seeing that ray of hope in Law’s eyes, only to be snuffed out a moment later. It was oddly entrancing. Or perhaps it was Law’s eyes alone that were oddly entrancing.

He shook that thought from his head with a quick toss of his soaked, stringy hair.

Suddenly, Law spoke up, voice raspy, “This is like a scene right out of a chick flick. Two lovers passionately kissing in the rain and clutching each other tightly. Very romantic.”

“We’re not kissing,” Kidd growled. “I’m slowly killing all of your brain cells by asphyxiation.”

“That’s too bad. I was going to go on to medical school and become a doctor. Could’ve perhaps saved your life, or one of your loved ones’ lives one day.” Law’s sparkly dark orbs narrowed as he chuckled darkly. “Oh, I forgot, you don’t have loved ones.”

Kidd growled as he snuffed Trafalgar once more, the gasps and grunts for air sweet music to his
ears. A bit harder and he’d be breaking ribs next. But he liked to prolong the torture. Besides, Law hadn’t let out a single whimper yet. He would break Law before he broke ribs. It would be far more entertaining that way.

He let up on the pressure just as Law’s eyes started to droop and he started to pass out from a lack of oxygen, letting the other recover enough to raise his head and look him in the eyes once again. When they did gaze defiantly at one another, Kidd half expected a smile to creep onto Law’s face again. It didn’t.

Instead Law said sadly, “Ever wonder what things could be like if you were born in a different place, to different parents, to different friends?”

“Are those going to be your dying words?” Kidd asked harshly.

“To a different lover?”

“No,” Eustass replied hastily, all too ready to crush Law against the concrete with every ounce of strength in his body. The rain was blinding his eyes and all he could really make out was a blur of tanned skin and dark hair with equally dark eyes swimming somewhere in between. Everything glinted a cheerful glint, much too cheerful for Eustass’ taste. For some reason it made him angry and he snapped, “I don’t wonder useless garbage like that.”

With a feral grunt he blinked away the water in his eyes and brought Law to the edge of unconsciousness once more, then relented and hoped that the stupid shining gleam that lay in Law’s sparkling eyes would be gone.

It was still there when Law found the energy to raise his head once more.

“Since it’s clear I’m not going to get out of this one,” Law muttered, voice barely above the whispering of the rain. “Perhaps you’ll do me the honour of fulfilling my dying wish. A final send off from this cold, cruel world.”

Kidd watched carefully, waiting for that familiar mocking smile or those shifty eyes. There was nothing familiar in front of his face, just one very tired young man who seemed to be clinging to life most pathetically. He’d always thought Law was easy to exhaust, but until now he hadn’t ever realized that a human’s life was so easily stamped out.

“Can you promise me, man to man, that you’ll at least give me that honour?”

After a slow minute of silence, Kidd finally nodded. He didn’t know what made him do it, but it was the same thing inside of him that made him say, “Fine. I promise.”

“A kiss, that’s all I ask.”

Kidd’s face crumpled and he almost tossed Law’s nearly lifeless body into the mud. “No.”

“You promised. Man.”

Eustass battled with himself, but found that there was no other way to defend his manhood. With an anguished snarl he pressed his forehead to Law’s and placed his lips over the other’s, gently and hesitantly, reluctant that he’d let Law lead him into this yet again.

Law kissed him back, with all the vigour of a man living his last breath. As much as Kidd wanted to pull back, he knew if he did he’d be letting his prey go. At least that was his excuse for continuing forward and pressing himself into Law’s frail body, already deprived of oxygen.
Besides the obvious discomfort of kissing such cold, rain-soaked lips, Kidd found that an electric shiver worked its way up his back when Law’s facial hair once again tickled his skin. It felt even softer than the last time they’d locked together, perhaps an influence of the rain?

At any rate, Kidd kept himself against Law for longer than what could be deemed a final dying wish. When they finally did part, Law heaved air once before throwing the last of his rapidly draining strength into another kiss, this time one that was eagerly received.

Eustass found a tongue smoothing over his lips, insistently delving into the opening. His first instinct, to bit the intruding appendage, was overruled by the sheer curiosity at the tingling feeling that erupted as soon as Law breeched his parted lips. Then he began to taste, for the first time, the foreign saliva as it seeped in with that intrusion and touched his own tongue. It was a sweet flavour, almost as if Law had eaten some candy just before leaving school.

Kidd inhaled sharply through his nose, taking in the scent of Law’s skin: water and sweat mixed to make a bizarrely soothing aroma. He allowed his tongue to be prodded insistently, but didn’t engage in much more than a bit of movement with his lips.

As Law withdrew the second time, he took Kidd’s bottom lip between his and sucked fiercely, pulling it away from Kidd’s jaw possessively before letting it snap back into place. That satisfied him, for now.

With a lazy smile, Law met Kidd’s uncertain eyes with his own, then allowed himself to droop, resting his head on Eustass’ shoulder. He thought it fine, just then, to give his body a little rest.

Kidd didn’t know what to think as soon as he realized Law’s body had sagged against his without any life left in it. This added weight would bring them both down into the mud if Kidd didn’t act fast.

Awkwardly, Kidd moved them off the wall, since Law’s head, with eyes closed, was falling all too easily towards the concrete. It wouldn’t do them any good if he gave himself brain damage. He’d feel guilty picking on a guy with a mental handicap.

That is, if he hadn’t just killed Law.

No, the guy was still breathing. Faintly.

As much as Kidd still had the primal desire to punch Law in the gut and be done with it, he would not raise a hand against someone unconscious. It wasn’t the right way to go about doing things. It wasn’t the respectable way.

Or at least that’s what he convinced himself to think as Law lay comatose in his arms. Kidd found his grip slipping and thrust a hand down under Law’s ass, lifting him back up so he rested half over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. His other arm securely fastened Law’s upper body to his chest and, just like that, Kidd set off to get out of the rain that made him blind.

He found a dry place beneath an awning of a dilapidated building that hadn’t seen business in years. No one could see them from the streets at the angle he was standing at. Slowly, ever so slowly, he positioned Law so he wouldn’t drop him on the hard ground by accident. Thankfully it was asphalt as opposed to mud. While water ran off the awning overhead and dripped in a puddle next to them, the asphalt was dry.

After a moment’s contemplation, Kidd sat his butt down first, crossing his legs, and then moved Law so he was resting comfortably in his lap, head against his shoulder. He had an arm wrapped
securely around Law’s upper back, keeping him from flopping around as unconscious people tended to do. There they sat, all exterior sounds droned out by the rain, Kidd looking down into the face of his enemy and feeling a wave of crushing defeat.

Stranger still, he found he didn’t really care all that much.

Out of boredom, he brushed a hand through Law’s hair, spiking it up. It felt weird, those black, short hairs, running through his fingers. So different from his long, red locks. Foreign.

With a deep sigh, Kidd leaned his head back against the building and laid his hand over Law’s chest, feeling his steady breathing. He was abnormally calm for having just set out after school to bash his enemy’s brains in. Looking back, Kidd supposed he should have known that with Law in the equation, it wouldn’t be easy to simply roughhouse a bit and then throw him into a dumpster.

Sitting there with the rain pouring down, with nothing better to think about, Kidd began to think deeply about the only thing he had with him at the moment. As much as he hated to admit it, he liked the dark circles under Law’s eyes. The dark splotches drew his eyes in and that in itself gave Eustass a shudder that crawled from his neck down to his groin. He shut his eyes in an effort to keep from reacting to having a warm body curled in his lap, all too easy to take advantage of.

Dimly, he began to register the slight shifting in his lap and took his head off the wall behind him to investigate. Blinking, looking slightly frazzled, was the strange abomination that had captured his attention from that first moment they’d crossed paths back in their freshman year. Never had Kidd imagined he’d be sitting under a leaky awning in the rain with that same boy, in a most compromising situation.

“Alive I see,” Eustass whispered as those sleep-deprived eyelids opened.

“Huh. Seems that way,” Law replied shortly, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily to forcibly clear them. “So. I’m not dead.”

“Not yet,” Kidd warned quietly. He wondered if it would be appropriate to release his grip on Law’s body. Then he wondered why he was thinking about what would or wouldn’t be appropriate where his enemy was concerned.

“I’m glad…that you obliged me.”

“Don’t mention it. Seriously,” Kidd growled, feeling that familiar hate seep back into his veins. “If you do, I’ll kill you for real next time.”

“Next time? Does this mean you’re letting me go?”

Eustass’ brow furrowed as he considered this.

Law bit the inside of his cheek, then said, “I’ll never tell a soul. About anything. Not your family issues or the fact that you taste suspiciously like rainbows. I’ll keep it all to myself, if we call a truce.”

Kidd stared down at those dark eyes, so stupidly intelligent and witty, that searched his own face. Though they were humouring him, they were also sincere.

“Truce,” Kidd found himself agreeing.

Trafalgar grinned, only this time Eustass did not find his smile all that creepy. He didn’t find it irksome either, which surprised him more.
While Law didn’t really want to leave this warm lap he was cradled in, as his body was shivering with cold from being soaked so thoroughly, he knew he had to sooner or later. Kidd would no doubt get aggravated if he did not move.

Carefully, Law slid out of Kidd’s grip, the other’s hands falling off of his slim body slowly. He got to his feet and backed up, moving to the edge of the awning where dry became wet, very wet. He stared down at Kidd, who remained seated and passive, watching him move. Faintly Law noticed how Kidd’s eyes took in the way his wet clothing clung desperately to his skin and how his jeans had moved dangerously low, well below his hips. His smirk grew, and in that moment he decided to expose himself.

“By the way,” Law said as he braced himself for his second run of the day, “Just now…I never fainted.”

Before Kidd could get to his feet and throttle him, Law began his sprint through the rain, intending to get away quick.
Chapter 11

Saturday found Ace doing his best impression of a vacuum cleaner.

First went everything in the fridge, then the cupboards were raided, and somehow he’d consumed much of the contents of the freezer as well. At the moment, it was well past midnight. All day Ace hadn’t had a single narcoleptic attack, but he wasn’t feeling tired. How could he be when he’d sat on his butt all day eating? No, quite the opposite in fact, he was a ball of energy.

Negative energy.

Thanks in part to the consumption of all food in the house he was now restless in addition to hurt, frustrated and angry. It was a deadly combination, one that only a few people knew how to deal with. One of those special souls being his little brother, who was currently not at home. For if he was Ace would not have gotten away with eating everything in the house.

Stuffed full of food, Ace was lying on his bed, staring up at the overhead light until his eyes blurred. Really, he knew he should be trying to get some rest, but after what had happened the night before he was a nervous wreck, more so than any other time he could remember.

Sleep terrors. The bane of his narcoleptic existence and the reason why there was a hole in the wall from his fist.

Really, he supposed he could refer to them as the hallucinations he sometimes had just as he was waking up. But that undermined their horror and how violent he could get while engaged in a trance. That hole in the wall from last night was pale in comparison of some of the things he’d done in the past.

He could clearly remember the vivid pictures his mind had conjured up. And it wasn’t just pictures; smell, taste and touch had been involved too, all to create a grisly re-enactment of his brother’s death all those years ago.

Sabo.

The boy next door. His first friend. His brother. His death was still heavily rooted into his subconscious, and almost all of his nightmares included Sabo in them. But the sleep terrors not only included Sabo, but they included every sensation of that one fateful day.

Ace rolled over, away from the light shining down on him, and grabbed his shoulder where a tattoo he’d gotten on a whim during his grieving would forever remind him of what he’d lost. He knew he needed something to take his mind off of Sabo, but Luffy who would normally cheer him up was gone with the wind, over at his friend’s house. This was fine with Ace, really, since he wanted Luffy to go wherever he was happiest, but sometimes he wished Luffy would still insist on sharing a room with him, just so there was someone to try and wake him up if something happened.

He knew his other defence against his fears wouldn’t work tonight either. He couldn’t even stomach thinking of Marco, so it was obvious that he wouldn’t glean any comfort from picturing the man’s face in his mind as he tried to drift off to sleep.

Ace sat up finally, curling into a ball on his bed. He knew he should be trying to get some rest, since the only time he had a hallucinogenic episode was when he was grossly overtired, but he still feared that he’d be trapped in another sleep terror. But such was the fear he had to live with until he returned to a relatively normal sleep cycle, for him anyway.
He struggled with what he knew he should do and what he really didn’t want to do until he picked up his phone from the bedside table next to him. He was too hyperaware to sleep. He needed to physically tire himself out.

He sent a quick message to Trafalgar. 'You awake?'

Not five minutes later he received a reply. 'I'm always awake.'

Ace smiled, they were sad cases of sleeplessness, he and Law.

'Want to do something?'

'At midnight?? You serious?'

'Of course. U in?'

'Meet you on the Grand Line.'

'Okay!! Wear black.'

'Don’t order me around. I’ll wear whatever I fucking like.'

':P okey-dokey Panda Bear'

Ace jumped out of bed, got dressed once more in dark clothes, and headed out. He shut off the bedroom light behind him, feeling slight relief and self-guilt that he wouldn’t be sleeping again.

--oOo--

They met under a lamplight, and the first thing Law said to Ace was, “You look worse than I do. And I usually look pretty shitty.”

Ace turned his head down towards the pavement, hoping his bangs would cover the dark circles under his eyes. “Yeah, well, stuff happened. I’ve been having bad nightmares again and Marco rejected me. I don’t know if they’re connected: probably not. Maybe I just need to switch my meds again.”

“The only way those two could be put together is if you hadn’t slept because of Marco, since I know you only tell me about having nightmares when you get overtired and aren’t really thinking about what to hide from me or share,” Law said matter-of-factually. Ace shrugged, too mentally beat to argue back with any vigour. “Anyways, you just said that Marco rejected you. I don’t want to be an asshole here, but I want to know how it happened.”

Ace shook his head, running a hand through his shaggy, unkempt hair. “I jumped him. He rejected me. That’s all I’ll say. I don’t want to talk about it.” With a sudden smile on his face, Ace reached out and touched Law’s shoulder, or where he thought Law’s shoulder was. Law had chosen, of his own accord, to wear all-black attire, and even though they were standing off to the side of a street lamp, Ace could barely make him out from the surrounding shadows.

“So, what have you been up to? Cheer me up, Panda.”

“ Weird things have been happening to me too. I got Eustass to agree to a truce, so I guess I don’t have to worry too much about him stalking me anymore with killing intent.”

Ace stepped closer to him, hoping to see Law’s facial expression. Not that there would be much there other than a knowing smile, but still. “How the hell did you manage that?”
“Metaphorically, you could say I cut him open and found a tiny, itsy-bitsy heart. Literally, I faked fainting. It worked marvellously, but I have to say I’m going to miss mentally torturing him,” Law said, tone dropping. With a confused blink, Ace thought he heard an edge of disappointment coming from his friend.

“I’m still confused, but according to our rules of friendship I suppose I can’t press you for more details than that,” Ace muttered, “since I didn’t really give you much to work off of either.”

Law shrugged, the movement lost in the darkness. “Whatever. We walking places or what?”

Ace led the way, bringing them deeper into the heart of the city. There were a few people up at this hour, mostly gamblers who’d lost track of time in the casinos and a great many drunks stumbling out of pubs. Ace wondered if he should go in for a drink to loosen up, but he remembered that he didn’t have his fake license on him and he doubted Trafalgar had brought his either. If they were accosted they’d probably end up having the police called on them. Ace didn’t fancy spending the night in Smoker’s jail cell.

Smoker. Right. “Hey, I have an idea for something to do.”

Law grunted, watching how a drunk narrowly missed slamming into him as the man passed by. “You know, I hate walking around at night in this city. Too many imbeciles. Honestly, it’s like a city of outlaws or retired pirates or something equally ridiculous.”

Ace ignored his statement and reached out for Law’s hand in the darkness, succeeding in grabbing his lower arm. “Come on. Let’s go.”

For a while, Law let Ace lead him around under the street lamps, growing more and more worried about Ace’s ‘idea’ as they progressed down the Grand Line. Drunks, thankfully, were getting fewer, though that was because there were less pubs down this way, what with the police station down here and all…

“Ah hell, are you seriously taking me where I think you’re taking me?” Ace didn’t answer, though Law could swear he heard a stifled giggle. He grit his teeth, feeling a flash of anger take over. “Portgas Fucking D. Fuck-Ace, I will not stand for breaking into a police station again with you. It was dangerous the first and second time, and a third will probably cause me to experience heart failure.”

“Oh, would you relax, Panda? We’re not breaking into anywhere tonight, I swear. Not even a residential house for a little kitchen raid. Besides, I still have that bite mark on my ankle from that family dog that chased us out the last time. It’s kind of hideous, so I don’t want another.”

“So we’re not going to do anything counter-productive to society tonight then?” The slightly younger boy asked hopefully. He had latched on to Ace, worried that any minute now the other would take off and cause a commotion.

With a smack of his lips, Ace said, “It’s too boring in this city. We should do the public a favour and make things livelier around here.”

“By doing what?” asked Law, not liking the gleam of mischief he could detect in Ace’s eyes as they stopped under a light outside a shop. Numbly he registered that they were at Marine recruitment headquarters, conveniently located right next to the city’s largest police station. The very thought sent a chill through his blood.

“Want to light Smoker’s car on fire? He was grumbling about needing a new one anyway the last
time he tried to arrest me.”

The suggestion didn’t surprise Law. In fact, after years of knowing how Ace worked, he was half-expecting it. Whenever Ace got emotionally upset, he would do something drastic to occupy himself. No, Trafalgar was not surprised in the least.

“That’s pretty badass, even for you,” Law whispered, wondering if there were video cameras homing in on them. One could never be too careful...he had been researching the newest security camera technology that some businesses in the city were installing, and so far the Den Den Mushi systems were pretty efficient and startlingly easy to get caught on video with. Worried, he pulled his hood down over his head a bit further.

“The way I see it, we’d be doing a service to Smoker and the public. You in?”

“Your logic is skewed.”

“You chicken?”

Trafalgar grit his teeth at the insult. “Fuck no,” he growled. “Let’s torch that motherfucker.”

Ace grinned. He knew just how to work over his friend. “Okay. On the way here I picked up something interesting.” He took something out of his pocket and pressed it into Law’s waiting hands. “Here.”

Law felt it in his hands. It was a small box of sorts. He held it up to the light under the Marine Corps. headquarters and squinted at it. For a while, he couldn’t figure out what it was, so he opened it and made a reproachful noise at the back of his throat. “Matches. We’re going to do this with matches?”

“Why not?”

Law groaned and considered throwing the package away into the dark so Ace wouldn’t be able to go through with his devious scheme. “You know, the last time we committed an arson felony we were equipped with a lighter and gunpowder. Plus a bucket of lighter fluid. So why is it we’re downsizing to matches?”

“Because,” Ace whined, “I don’t have the money to serenade anyone into giving me gunpowder! Or lighter fluid. The last of my summer job money went towards repairing your bedroom window.”

Law snorted haughtily. “Well, that was your own damn fault.”

Ace fixed him with a hurt look, and then it was on.

Despite previous resignations, Law found himself squatting beside Smoker’s patrol car with Ace snickering away and trying to light the matches he’d found on the way to their meeting spot earlier. Law was torn between wanting to see the matches light and wanting them to stay useless. While it would be entertaining to see Smoker’s car catch fire, it would potentially cause a lot of headaches later. If they were caught.

“Oh, here we go,” Ace said as one of the matches finally caught after numerous strikes on the sandpapery underside of the box. “Ready with Rapunzel’s hair?”

Law grumbled his assent, holding out the role of twisted toilet paper he’d snatched from a public washroom and braided so it looked like a candle wick. Quickly, before the match went out, Law
opened the fuel tank of the car and stuck one end of the braid into it, then held out the opposite end to Ace.

The little flickering fire caught the toilet paper and started to burn, gradually making its way up the length of the braid. When Ace was sure it wouldn’t go out, Law wrapped the toilet paper around the fuel tank hatch so it would stay in place and they both booked it to the far side of the parking lot.

They sat on the asphalt and waited.

“Gunpowder would have been much quicker,” Ace muttered. “Maybe the fire went out. Toilet paper never really worked that well. Eh, Panda?”

“Shut up and wait, I’m still suffering from indignation because you had me go steal a roll of toilet paper of all things from a public washroom.”

Ace snickered, feeling his mind wander at last to more amusing and non-Marco related things. Thank goodness. “Well, it’s not like you had to listen to me. I mean, you could have made me do it instead and–”

“Shhh, it’s starting,” Law interrupted, eyes watching as a sudden spark spewed forth from the car. As anticipated, Ace fell completely silent save for his noisy breathing, the only sign that he was excited about what was going on.

They watched for a few moments as the fire disappeared into the fuel tank, then had to shield their eyes as everything combusted at once.

The raging gasoline fire was magnificent and all-consuming. Beside him, Law could hear Ace making tiny exclamations over the roar of the fire. They were far enough away that they weren’t in danger, but they could feel a blast of heat envelop their fronts and Law had to step back a few paces to avoid feeling as though he himself were catching fire.

Meanwhile, Ace was transfixed by the flames, watching them crackle and reach skyward, then twist back down to gobble up more of the car. It was beautiful, the red fire he’d created. So calming, and so much better than lighting a candle and staring at it with fascination, which he’d done on numerous occasions.

He supposed he must have entered into a trance, since before he knew it Law was shaking him and yelling.

“Hey, we should run now! I can hear sirens!”

Badly wanting to stay and watch the flames, Ace said, “What if it’s just Smoker’s car malfunctioning in its dying hours?”

“No you moron! It’s the firefighters!”

Ace sighed as he realized the noise in the distance was getting louder with every passing second. It was time to go. “Okay, let’s banana split.” He laughed raucously.

“Why is it always food with you?” Law grumbled as they took off, galloping down the street. It became a game of dodging people and keeping their hoods held down low, but Ace was having such a grand time of it that his laughter attracted the attention of everyone around. Not that any of the drunks would remember two dark hooligans streaking past them in the morning.
It was mere coincidence that they passed the fire truck racing down the main street.

They only stopped running when they reached the borders of the North Blue, and Ace started dancing a little uncoordinated jig to the beat of some music that poured out of a nearby building. Law snorted his amusement, and though his feet tingled, he didn't join in.

“I’ve been doing too much running around lately,” he wheezed when Ace tried to get him to boogie alongside him. “Frankly, I’m spent for the night.” Ace pouted, the light from a nearby street lamp casting horrific shadows across his features. “Seriously, Ace. Isn’t Garp going to pound your face into a brick wall if he finds out you’ve snuck out of the house again?”

“The old guy isn’t home. He’s at some Marines-only retreat in the boondocks or whatever. Besides…I, uh, don’t really want to go home.”

“What about Luffy? You can’t expect him to fend for himself.”

“He’s not home either. And I told him to take Spade with him, since he went to Zoro’s place and Spade’s great friends with that kid’s three dogs.”

Law said nothing, noting the sadness in Ace’s voice at being left to his lonesome. Ace was never meant to be left alone; he found comfort in another person being with him at all times. Law had slowly unravelled what made Ace tick and found that when Ace was left alone, he often reminisced about the past, a past he’d much rather forget.

Law knew, very well in fact, about Sabo. He was there when Ace had decided to get a tattoo in memory of his brother. Hell, he’d had to get tattoos too, since Ace didn’t want to go at it alone. Ever since that one visit to the tattoo parlour, Law had discovered he quite liked getting inked. So he owed Ace that, at least.

Really though, what made him grab Ace’s arm and drag him back home with him to the North, was Ace’s earlier mention of nightmares. He knew all too well about the dangers of leaving Ace alone to his sleep terrors.

--oOo--

“What were you doing out so late!?”

“Wreaking havoc on the city. Making mayhem. Producing pandemonium. Causing chaos,” Law replied smoothly. His grandmother glared at him, then at Ace who stood behind him, childishly peeking over the top of Law’s head. “No, actually I was retrieving my friend here before he did something stupid.” Which was half-true, Law supposed. He had brought Ace back because he was afraid something might happen if Ace were left to his own devices.

His grandmother’s wiry face scrunched up. She looked between the two boys in front of her, standing in the kitchen in dark clothes. Finally she said, “The traits of one with the spirit animal of a polar bear.

“Yes, polar bear instincts. Protect their kin,” Law muttered, making a hasty turn towards the doorway.

His grandmother nodded, pleased for the moment. “Yes, yes, I always told our family in the north that your totem animal was the polar bear. Of course I was right, but they never believed me.” She chuckled to herself, more or less a senile sound, and then scampered off in the direction of her bedroom. She looked almost…excited. Perhaps she was going to chant to the undead about how her grandson embodied the fearlessness of the polar bear or something of that nature.
Law just breathed a sigh of relief. That old woman unnerved him. When they had first snuck in she’d greeted them with the point of the family heirloom at their stomachs. How she had known they were approaching the house, Law had no idea.

As Ace and Law climbed the stairs, Bepo followed, happy that he wasn’t the only one in the house with the old hag.

“She scares me,” Ace said quietly as he shut the bedroom door behind them. Promptly, he shed his pullover hoodie and then his shirt. Law was busy petting Bepo and scratching him behind his fluffy white ears.

“Whenever you’re ready to go to sleep…”

But as he looked up he found Ace already crawling into his bed. He caught a glimpse of that smiling, tired face as the quilt went over top of him and settled around his hulking mass. “I’m exhausted,” Ace stated into the pillow.

Law chuckled to himself, then reached to turn on a nearby lamp that he had on a small table next to his decrepit reading chair. He sat down and picked up a thick book that sat on that table. “I’m going to read for a bit. It calms my mind down and gets me sleepy.”

“Yeah, I can see how a huge book like that, full of ghastly medical procedures, can induce sleep,” Ace muttered, half-dozed off already. “Don’t worry; I’ll leave you room on the bed.”

Law only smiled as he slouched down in the chair with the book in his lap, one hand dangling down to pet Bepo’s head as his dog settled against the chair’s frame. For a while he read and massaged a place just under Bepo’s ears, but he wasn’t really too focussed on absorbing the book’s offered knowledge.

No, as soon as he started to hear light snoring, Law marked his page and stood up, then grabbed Bepo and dragged him out of the room by his luminous orange collar. Once they were both in the hallway, Law shut the door and Bepo whimpered, despondent.

“Shh,” Law soothed, running his hands up and down Bepo’s back, trying to get the dog to control his crying. “I know you want to stay with me, but I can’t have you upsetting Ace in the middle of the night. I want you to go downstairs, okay Bepo? Just for tonight. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

Bepo whined some more until a firm final word from Law sent him slinking down the stairs, tail unhappily tucked between his legs. Law hated doing this to Bepo, but there was no way he was going to risk creating a volatile situation. If it came to that, anyway. Perhaps Ace would just sleep through the night, undisturbed.

Possibly three days without sleep? Who was he kidding? Ace was going to have some kind of repercussions for not knocking himself out and resting his brain.

Law went back into his room and resumed his position, curling up with his book. Every so often he’d startle when Ace made a huff or other noise as he slept, thinking it was about time for the apocalypse. When he checked the time on his cell phone he was pleased to note that almost two hours had passed since he’d begun observing Ace sleeping, meaning that the boy was almost through the most volatile stages of his sleep cycle.

Law had studied this disorder very, very closely after the first incident he’d witnessed. After all, he was planning on becoming a doctor someday.

He kept the light on as he gently placed his book back on the table. Then he breathed a sigh of
relief and walked over to the bed, lifted the corner of the quilt, and prepared to slide in beside Ace.

With a warning yelp, Ace sat straight up in bed, bare, muscled back to Trafalgar. Immediately Law dropped the quilt and shrunk back. He tip-toed back to the chair and slowly sat down, intently staring at the spectacle before him. As soon as Ace had sat up, his hands had gone to the wall in front of him, smoothing over the surface and then patting it with firmer strokes. Law bit his lip, wondering if Ace was going to put a hole in his wall. Again.

“Ugh, trapped.”

Law ran a hand through his hair after the first words left Ace’s mouth. Great, this was not what he needed. In the light from Law’s lamp he could make out the way Ace’s body trembled, the light bouncing off of his back at all angles.

“Ace,” Law called softly. “Ace, it’s me, Law. Panda’s here.”

Ace whipped around at the sound of Law’s voice and took in Law’s shadowy form.

“Who are you?”

“Panda. Don’t you remember? I’m your best friend. Trafalgar Law.”

Ace continued to shake, his head snapping to and fro as he took in the rest of his surroundings. Law could see the whites of Ace’s owlish eyes and knew, very well, that the boy was seeing things that simply weren’t there.

“Ace,” he called again, careful to keep his voice low and soothing. He got the attention he was looking for, but when Law attempted to slowly and unthreateningly rise from his chair Ace scooted backwards so quickly that his back slammed violently against the wall behind him.

“I don’t know you,” he rasped, voice shaking. “Who are you?!”

“Ace, it’s me, Law. Panda Bear. Look closely.”

Law held perfectly still as Ace slid off the bed, coiling his muscles and getting ready to leap to safety should Ace perceive him as someone else and attack him. Ace drew up close, panting hard, and then mumbled something incoherent.

Then he lunged at Law, knocking them both to the ground.

“Oh shit,” Trafalgar gasped as Ace landed on top of him and knocked the air from his lungs. He braced himself to feel Ace’s terrified wrath, feeling how Ace’s much larger body shook and convulsed above him. He remembered the other times Ace had lashed out at him, thinking him to be a demon or someone out for his blood, and instantly he tried to struggle out of Ace’s grip before he became a punching bag.

“Get down Panda! Or they’ll get you!” Ace suddenly yelled in his ear. Immediately Law went slack in his efforts to break free.

“It’s okay Ace, it’s just me here with you. Nobody’s going to get us,” Law said, forcing his tone to be unruffled. He reached a hand up to rub at Ace’s side, hoping to calm him down until he woke up from his hallucination, but Ace angrily slapped him away.

“No! We have to find Luffy and Sabo. I won’t leave the ship without them!” After this Ace ducked down, stuffing his face into Law’s shirt as if hiding from something unseen. He said a few more
snappish phrases, but Law couldn’t hear due to the muffling capability of the fabric. Suddenly he reared his head up again and whispered, “The ship’s sinking…mhh, we gotta go get Luffy and Sabo…they’re going to drown, we’re going to drown.”

Law quivered as he tried to piece together Ace’s hurried phrases. He was also starting to lose circulation in his arm, where one of Ace’s hands clung desperately to him, nails digging in to flesh. “Ace,” he started calmly, “Luffy and Sabo are safe.”

It was half a lie, half a truth.

Ace made a strangled sound. “No they’re not! The ocean’s going to drown us! Can’t you hear the waves crashing against the ship?!”

At this point Law realized he needed to play along. Ace wasn’t just having a visual hallucination, he was having a freaking audio sensory thing with it. “Okay, let’s get up and go to the bed, er, I mean, the highest point on the ship. We’ll be safe there, okay?”

Ace shook his head and for a moment Law was certain Ace was disbelieving his statement, but then he realized Ace was likely looking at the waves he was hallucinating about. Quickly Law seized the opportunity to sidle out from under his larger friend and Ace grabbed for him desperately. With all the strength Trafalgar could muster, he heaved Ace up to his feet with him.

He managed to get Ace to the bed, though there was much stumbling involved, and they flopped down on the mattress. With a frightened whimper Ace drew into himself and struck out at some unseen thing to his left, a loud crack resounding in the small room. Before Ace grabbed a renewed hold on him, Law scooted off the bed, much to Ace’s horror, and dashed for the light switch that would illuminate the entire room.

He made it across the room, flipped the switch, and the soft yellow glow lit up the dark space. Ace convulsed one last time and grabbed at the quilt, then called out to Law. The younger boy could hardly deny Ace when the other reached out for him and he could see the streaks of tears and sweat all over him in the light.

He crawled across the bed and embraced Ace while he trembled, feeling how fast his heart was beating. As if he’d just finished up a major workout. Ace trembled some more, faintly now, and Law clutched him ever tighter in his Panda hug, remembering that it was an incident like this that had given him his nickname.

Slowly the light brought Ace out of it and he lifted his head from where he had buried it under Law’s chin. Law could see, clearly, that Ace was awake now, as his red face was getting darker in shade.

“Oh fuck, did I…?”

“Yeah, you did. Don’t worry about it.” Law’s eyes flicked to the clock on the wall and he registered the time. Slightly after 3am. “Do you…remember much?”

“No. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Until that moment Law hadn’t felt the bruise that he knew would be on his back tomorrow, and he didn’t bring Ace’s attention to the fresh ding in the wall where a fist had made a connection. Ace would be ashamed enough already. “Naw, it was a pretty tame night terror. There was little screaming involved and stuff. I mean, you didn’t try to jump out the window or anything.”

Ace looked away. It took Law another hour to talk Ace out of his embarrassment and get him
breathing calmly enough to resume lying down to sleep. And when he too finally got under the quilt and reassured Ace one final time that nothing else would happen that night, he passed out without his insomnia giving him any trouble.
It was only Sunday morning and already Marco had a headache from over thinking.

He really wished that Ace knew how hard this was for him. He had exercised that terribly cold, hurtful rejection for Ace's own protection. And for his own safety of mind.

Sitting in his bed, Marco internally debated with himself, trying to figure out what his next move apart from the obvious would be. Then, because his brain tended to try out two different paths at once, he thought firstly that things would return to normal and Ace would get over him in a flash. Secondly, well, that was another train of thought altogether.

With a groan, Marco ran a hand across the sheets on his bed, letting his mind continue to wander briefly along that alternate path. He wondered what it would be like to wake up next to Ace, so different than anyone else he'd ever been with. He imagined Ace would smile at him, perhaps cheekily alluding to the activities they engaged in the night before. Marco looked to his numerous pillows, seeing with half-lidded eyes what could have been. He imagined Ace's shaggy hair would fall like a black luminous curtain on his pillows, inviting his fingers to touch and experience. Then, before the mental visions became too much, Marco jumped out of bed and walked out of his bedroom completely. He went briskly down the hall to his study, sitting at his desk with a mountain of paperwork in front of him. He figured he might as well get an early start. After all, he'd been putting it off all weekend so far.

And so, Marco immersed himself in marking other students’ work, the mundane, repetitive activity keeping his thoughts in check. That is, until he came across one of Ace's assignments.

He looked at it through a film of water gathering in his eyes, chalking it up to the effects of an early morning, his squinting without his reading glasses, and the fact that he didn’t have his coffee yet. The hastily scribbled words were melding together, forming lines and blurred patches, and hazily Marco realized he was imagining Ace’s face out of quadratic equations.

Hurriedly, he tossed the work aside and grabbed someone else’s, anyone else but him. He forcefully cleared his mind and his eyes but he still couldn’t focus; the guilt and overwhelming feeling of loss was clouding his ability to function.

Then, an onslaught of angry feelings prickled his skin. He was mad, mad at Izou for encouraging Ace. But then he realized how stupid his anger was and he once again felt the sting of shame. Izou had encouraged Ace, yes, but that still didn’t mean he could blame the entire situation on his friend.

Normally, he would have walked over to Izou’s house and had a cup of calming herbal tea when he had a problem. Now he couldn’t bear to think about what might happen if he let himself go next door.

So, with a strangled groan of desperation, he picked up his phone and called in the big guns.

--oOo--

“Pops, I don’t think that’s part of your medication,” Marco said as he tossed another bottle of imported sake to the big, moustached man sitting across from him at the oak table.

“Brat, you’re not my doctor,” the old man grunted. Then he laughed a great raucous boom of a
laugh that shook the rafters of his home. “Now, I doubt you came over here just deliver a box of
dog biscuits to Stefan.”

Marco said nothing, his eyes wandering to the Giant Schnauzer in all his big white glory. The dog
saw him staring and gave a quiet woof, then settled in to his doggy bed once more for a long nap. It
was no secret that Stefan was getting up there in age, and his lack of energy was starting to worry
Marco’s Pops.

Then again, when feeding time came, Stefan acted like a little puppy again, so perhaps not all hope
was lost.

“Hey, little Pineapple, you look rather bleak. Someone shake your tree?”

“I’m regretting giving you that book of poetry for father’s day. Not that you’re speaking in rhymes
or anything. More like free verse.”

The next laugh shook the entire house and Marco could swear the kitchen chair he was sitting in
moved like a tectonic plate during an earthquake.

“Dancing around the matter, aren’t you brat?” Mr. Edward Newgate asked with a confident smirk
beneath his bushy white ‘stache.

Marco sighed; only his Pops knew him as well as he did. “Look, I…I’m just at a loss for what I
should do about this mess I’m stuck in. I’m really screwed over at the moment.”

“Oh, what happened? Did Thatch find those pictures of you when you were drunk and decided to
try on one of Izou’s dresses?”

“No its not…no! God, why does everyone remember that?!”

Whitebeard, as kids had taken to calling him nowadays, shrugged his giant shoulders.

“No, it’s worse than that,” Marco moaned, shrinking up into himself. “It’s something I’ve done
that’s morally wrong. Well, I don’t know if it’s really my fault…oh, who am I kidding; it has to be
my fault! I just…don’t know what to think any more.”

“Kid, you know I don’t like guessing games. Tell it to me straight.”

“I’m not a kid anymore Pops,” Marco said, exasperated. “Which is suddenly a real problem. And
what I’m about to tell you isn’t going to be any straighter than a circle.”

“Huh. Is this going to be another one of your math lessons?”

“No.” Marco sighed, then decided it was best to get on with things before his Pops decided to
follow Stefan up on that notion of sleep. That or try to entice his dog into playing a game of fetch
with the boomerang that Stefan had hid under his doggy bed. Now that was always a sight to
behold. “Do you know Portgas D. Ace?”

“The spunky one? Of course. Damn Akainu’s got it out for him. ‘Tis a pity I can’t fire that fool
without a reason.”

“Forget Akainu for a second. Focus on Ace. He’s, uh, well, to put it mildly…ah, I don’t know if I
should say. On second thought it might give you a heart attack.”

Newgate scoffed. “Don’t insult me. I’m not going to die of some damn heart attack.” He shifted in
his seat, the wood creaking dangerously loud. “Don’t make me come over there and wallop your problem out of you, brat.”

“Ace is infatuated with me.”

At this, all Whitebeard had to say was: “So?”

“So?! You don’t get it, obviously. I said: Ace likes me, in that way. He jumped my bones a few days ago, and I rejected him for obvious reasons and now I’m going to have to face him tomorrow at school!”

“Why did you reject him?”

“Oh, reasons,” Marco repeated, exasperated.

“Well, they can’t be that obvious, since I’m not getting it. Do you not like Ace?”

“It doesn’t matter whether or not I like Ace! It’s morally wrong; he’s eighteen and I’m…his teacher. I’m old.”

“I’m old, ya brat.” At this Whitebeard struck out with his large oak staff, which, for the record, was more of a weapon than a walking stick. Marco narrowly dodged the hit and the stick clattered against the floor, kicking up a slight tremor. Whitebeard hit the stick against the floor once more for good measure, this time much harder, and Marco felt the aftershocks of the earthquake as he cowered out of the way.

His old man could pound a person into the ground. This Marco knew very well. His childhood had been full of craters.

“Now, I still don’t see what all the fuss is about,” Mr. Newgate grumbled. “You’re young, aren’t you? I remember just yesterday when the stork dropped you on my doorstep with Thatchy-boy. You two brats started my orphanage and now the Moby Dick is damned successful at re-habin’ you small fries lost at sea.”

Marco grunted passively. It always went back to the orphanage with Whitebeard, always family matters. Ever since he let some people start helping him out with the administrative stuff he had to preach how well off the Moby Dick was compared to every other orphanage in the city to any willing ears. “How are those guys holding up? Curiel, Kingdew, and Haruta?” Those three, all past orphans themselves, had taken over since their Pops had found he couldn’t keep up with the kids like he used to.

“I don’t think the orphans really like Kingdew all that much, probably because he’s so bloody scary looking, but as usual Haruta’s a hit with the kids. As for Curiel, I think he’s more of a stay in the background guy, yeah?”

“Huh. That’s nice I suppose.”

“Anyways, I think you’re postponing the inevitable, little fledgling.”

“I’m not postponing anything! You’re the one who’s postponing stuff.”

“Right, but I’m not the one with the problem, am I?”

“I was hoping I could get some advice from you, Pops.” And there it was, that sad look Marco used to use on Whitebeard all the time when he was growing up. Whitebeard felt his insides constrict; he
really was a big softie when it came to his kids.

“All I can say is: do whatever you think is best. And whatever you do, I’ll be behind you, ready to
beat impolite people with this hunk of driftwood I found walking Stefan one day.” At this he held
up the threatening cane. “If you like that kid, which I think you do else we wouldn’t be having this
conversation, then do something about it. Be a man.”

Marco snorted at that motto. *Be a man.* Right. But Whitebeard had managed to ease his guilt, if
only a smidgeon. “I hurt him pretty bad two days ago.”

“You’re good at making it up to people. Remember that time you tied Thatch to a snowboard and
pushed him off the Moby Dick’s roof two stories up? He forgave you the next day *and* you got to
be the first one to sign his casts. Though I can’t remember how many broken bones he had…”

Marco rolled his eyes at the memory, feeling an embarrassed blush creep up on him. “Yeah, but
this isn’t the same thing. And you forget what Thatch did to me to deserve that treatment. Ace
hasn’t done anything to me.” Marco rubbed at his temples as Ace’s smiling, all-too-innocent face
appeared in his mind’s eye. “There’s another thing I’m worried about. Ace…never had a father.
I’m worried that he…kind of sees me as someone who could fill that void.”

Whitebeard took a long gulp of the sake in the bottle Marco had fetched for him earlier. At last he
said, “You don’t sound so certain ‘bout that. I think you’ll know if he’s looking for a father, and if
he is, point him in my direction. He’s a bright kid…when he doesn’t fall asleep on the way to my
office after setting something on fire.”

There were moments when Marco forgot his Pops was his boss and the principal of Raftel High.

--oOo--

The day was drawing to a close, yellowish-orange light coming down through the dead, crispy
leaves on the old birch trees. These trees lined the picturesque streets which Law currently
sauntered down. As was typical of his deviousness, he ignored the sidewalks and walked across
lush green lawns heavy in pesticides, feet taking him in no particular direction. His brain wasn’t
working to create a place that could be his destination: he was just simply walking for the sake of
walking.

And wondering why there was still some green grass when the world was bloody freezing.

He knew only vaguely where he was. Somewhere in the South Blue district, that much anyone
could tell just by the surroundings alone. Mansions sat perched on rolling greens hills, each tree
groomed to the point of looking artificial, and, most telling of all, the only cars that drove past him
were of the expensive variety. Yes, this was certainly the South. It was polar opposite the North in
every way imaginable.

Law found himself standing still, looking up at a street sign he’d that had caught his full attention.
He recognized the name as something he’d seen before and the absurdity of recognizing something
in the South made him head down that street, curious and wondering just where he’d seen it.

The answer came to him when he saw one very familiar red car parked in a perfectly flat asphalt
driveway. Eustass Kidd, whom he had the pleasure of nearly getting killed by just two days ago.
Right. Now he remembered exactly where he’d seen the street name. It had been on the file he’d
snooped on that fateful day, months ago.

So, this was where the loud, proud, and often angry lived. Who knew it would be so pristine?
Trafalgar found himself slinking up to a tree line that framed the property and half hid the house from street view. He leaned against a birch tree under a canopy of falling orange leaves, noting that everything seemed relatively calm. Too calm…

Law snuck up closer to the mansion, using the low-lying trees for cover, and found that he was quite excited about lurking around in a fancy neighbourhood. He wound around down the side of the house, sprinted across the lawn, and hugged the house’s siding, which was some kind of expensive rock other than brick. It was colder than the harsh autumn air and Law instantly flinched and jumped back, shivering. He really should have worn a jacket. His hoodie just wasn’t cutting it, even with the form-fitting mitts he had equipped.

His head was warm though, brain safely sheltered from the elements by his beloved spotted hat. Still, he was freezing his ass off.

Law groaned at the thought of having to walk all the way back to the North, on the opposite side of town. Why he had wandered so far away, he didn’t know. He had originally set off on a walk to clear his head from the headache that had developed sometime in the morning, after he’d woken up with Ace’s body draped over his.

After kicking Ace out, as the boy had recovered enough from his late night episode by the time breakfast was over, Law had left the house. He didn’t really want to stay at home with his grandmother. She would have made him help her hack up the road kill, with a machete, that she and Bepo brought home the night before and stashed in the cellar.

And he certainly didn’t want to do that on his last day off from school for the week.

Law sighed and moved farther away from the cold mansion wall, backing up enough onto the lawn that he could see a pillar of smoke rising from the top of the house. Looks warm, Law couldn’t help but think, wrapping his arms around his slight frame.

A wry grin spread across his face. It wouldn’t hurt to take a little rest in that warmth, then head home, would it?

Breaking into anything – car, house or refrigerator – had always been Ace’s forte, but that certainly didn’t mean Law didn’t have a few mastered tricks of his own up the sleeves of his hoodie.

He walked the perimeter of the house, avoiding the front, and found a low window that he could see into. He cupped his hands together and shielded the window from the sunlight and its glare on the windowpane, then leaned in to take a closer look inside through his improvised binoculars. A large room with counters. Several appliances on shelves. Cupboards. Looked like a kitchen to him. A very grand, expensive kitchen, the likes of which he’d only seen on television before.

Law licked his dry lips in anticipation and tried the window. It looked like one of those pushable ones, so he tried with all of his strength to heave it upwards. Much to his immediate joy, the window lurched up. Much to his disappointment, it stopped it’s lurching as it jammed before Law could fit his head inside.

He stuck a gloved hand inside gap he’d created, feeling the heat of the house seep into the fabric on his hand. After walking in the cold for quite some time, it felt absolutely delightful.

He pushed and shoved at the window, but it wouldn’t budge any further. Now desperate to get inside the house, for he was beginning to realize just how cold he actually was, Law darted across the lawn and into the trees. He emerged with a large stick which was more like a small tree in circumference. With this in hand he ran back to the window, dragging the tree-thing across the
Hastily positioning his makeshift crowbar, Law licked his lips once more before leaning his weight onto the stick. He could hear a protest in the form of creaking coming from the window, though it didn’t visibly budge. He sucked in a deep breath and threw his body on top of his wedge, this time with the addition of gravity, and was rewarded for his fall on the ground with a satisfying crunching as the half-frozen window jerked upwards.

Law got up and laughed at his handiwork. The window wasn’t all the way open, just enough that he could do his best imitation of a caterpillar and squirm his way through. So he did, landing on the warm tiled floor of a much too extravagant kitchen.

He cautiously got to his feet and glanced around, not sure whether he should be looking for a place to hide or covering his mouth, for it had dropped open out of pure awe at the sight before him. He decided his first order of action would be to shut the window behind him. Normally, this would be a stupid move for someone who’d just broken into a house, but Law was confident in his house-breaking abilities. He could hide with the best of them and he could run even faster. Besides, if he left the window open not only would someone know he was present but the house would get cold. And that just wouldn’t do. Not at all.

After carefully bringing the window back to its original position, Law took his time browsing the kitchen. He ran his fingertips across spotless granite countertops and admired the intricate woodwork of the cupboards for a bit, but then homed in on the coffeemaker. It was a beautifully elegant coffeemaker, one fit for a king should a king even drink coffee.

But, what was so intriguing about the coffeemaker was that it was currently sitting there with a freshly brewed batch of joe.

Trafalgar figured that someone was home, hell, he expected it. It didn’t unnerve him. In fact, it rather excited him.

He opened cupboards quietly until he found a stack of mugs. Taking one down, he quickly filled it with coffee and then used the contents of the expansive refrigerator to tame the java to his liking. All the while Law listened very, very carefully for any sounds that would indicate movement towards his position. Nothing in the house stirred.

It was very eerie, the silence.

Law was used to hearing an overabundance of background noise at home, or his grandmother chanting to the Devil in the next room, or even Ace howling outside his bedroom window like a stray dog. To be in a dwelling that had none of these familiar homely sounds was…creepy.

He finished his coffee while sitting at the kitchen table, then washed his cup, making a lot of noise in the soundless space, and replaced it in the cupboard he’d found it in. He knew this was his cue to pry open the window once more and take off, but his feet wouldn’t obey him and walk towards his self-made exit. In fact, they decided to take him in the opposite direction, out of the kitchen and into some living room type area.

This room was spacious and sparsely furnished. However, it looked like an image in an expensive home décor magazine. Law couldn’t picture himself living in this space every day. Bepo would chew the furniture for one, and Law himself would likely spill his grandmother’s grotesque stew all over the cream fabric of the pillows that were perfectly placed upon the couches.
He shivered unwillingly and turned away, only to continue down the hall, stepping lightly to avoid making too much noise. The hardwood floors didn’t so much as squeak, signifying how well the house was made, and all Trafalgar could hear was the slight nuances in his own breathing as he snuck along.

He came to a winding staircase that led to the house’s second floor. For the moment he decided to bypass it and continue his exploration of the first floor. After all, it would be dangerous to go up as he would have to go racing down the stairs again in order to escape, should it come to that.

For a while he’d thought he’d gotten lost, as every room he’d peered into had the same characteristics. Sure there was different furniture and wall hangings, but mostly it was all expensive stuff that he had never seen before and hoped he wouldn’t have to see again.

The house warm enough, yet it was cold. Very cold.

There was nothing welcoming within it. When Law ended up going full circle around the house and returned to the base of that staircase, he pondered whether or not now was the right time to leave. He hadn’t broken in to steal anything – though that coffee was too tempting to refuse – he had simply come inside for some warmth and to satisfy his curiosity.

His curiosity had yet to be satisfied. So, focussing all of his energy into listening to his surroundings, Trafalgar determined that he hadn’t caused a ruckus. Not yet.

He took the stairs leisurely, with a smirk on his face that foretold his audacious daring.
Chapter 13

As he scaled those stairs, Law couldn’t help but think to himself that he’d gotten away with a lot during his lifetime. Now, at the top of the stairs and looking around at his surroundings, he felt a pang in his gut that maybe he should have turned back when he had the chance.

He shrugged off his gut feelings and pressed forward, moving down a hallway to the left of his position. The light beige, sometimes white walls were sparsely decorated, and the paintings that did occupy some space were quite bland and told him nothing about the inhabitants of the house. They were all paintings, or prints of paintings, not photos of the people who actually lived in the house.

He decided not to spend too much time mulling things over. That was always how Ace got caught. He was easily distracted. Law would not let himself succumb to Ace’s pitfalls.

He walked to the far end of the hall, noting a bathroom and a room filled with books as he went. He wanted to check out the library-like room, but he knew when books were involved the chances of him getting caught were just that much more probable. So he avoided it, even though it pained him to do so.

He came to a closed door, the hall’s dead end. He paused on the other side and leaned forward, pressing his cheek to the wood grain in order to try to hear if there was any movement within. So far, the house had been completely silent, but that all could change in a matter of seconds. After all, that happened the last time he and Ace broke into a house. The family dog had suddenly woken up and decided to try and tear their heads off.

He couldn’t hear anything beyond the door. With a careful twist of the doorknob, Law unlatched the door from its hinges and let go, allowing the door to slowly swing open of its own accord. All the while he listened intently, muscles coiled in case a quick escape was necessary.

He had looked at the staircase and deemed it possible to make a flying leap to the floor below, but even crazy aerobics wouldn’t guarantee his fast retreat. He had to be more cunning than that.

“Huh,” Law muttered softly to himself as the door revealed an empty room. “Looks like I’ve found a real dead end.”

Regardless of what he found, Law entered the room, shut the door behind him to give it that undisturbed appearance, and looked around curiously. There was a four poster bed with a mahogany table beside it. In one corner there was a matching mahogany dresser and on the opposite corner a desk with a dark leather chair. On that impeccably neat and tidy desk a sleek computer sat, air fans buzzing away quietly.

Other than that, the homely furniture wasn’t all that exciting. With the obvious exception of the bed.

Law couldn’t help but feel compelled to creep closer to that bed for investigative purposes. From the doorway it looked like something had died on there. It was all furry looking and warranted a peep. Upon closer examination, Law made the fuzzy blanket out to be some sort of foreign hide. It was a golden brown with flecks of pale orange, black strips running down its length, and oblong shaped. Tiger, he noted with raised eyebrows.

He picked up the furry thing and checked the bottom, seeing that there was indeed a soft backing
material and the blanket was heavy and stiff. So, it was a real tiger pelt, and quite warm looking at that. Interesting.

While he was near the bed he couldn’t help but notice the single item on the bedside table besides the alarm clock, angry red numbers glaring at him for intruding. A piece of paper lay on top of a single book.

He held the paper up to his face and read it. It was a mark tracking sheet for a physics class, much like the ones he had received in his own classes earlier on in the week. Eustass Kidd had a ridiculously high grade in physics, the paper told him.

The paper also confirmed for him that this room was indeed Eustass Kidd’s bedroom as he had suspected. Why else would a grade report paper be sitting on a bedside table?

Next, Law picked up the tiny novella, weighing it in his hands, and read the title. *A Clockwork Orange*. Huh, the dystopian novella with more than enough rape, violence and drugs between its front and back flaps to influence a plethora of bad acts. Law had read the book himself and found it to be wonderfully unique in style, crafted with a mix of Russian, English and gypsy slang. It was truly a book that fascinated him, and here was a copy, sitting dutifully next to Kidd’s bed.

Being in a man’s bedroom, his sanctuary, had to be the equivalent to looking through a woman’s purse. So much could be learned just from the items found in the room.

Truthfully, he hadn’t been expecting to find any books at all in Kidd’s possession. However, he wasn’t too surprised that Kidd would read a book thick in gore and rape, where all the characters were high out of their minds, but he was certainly surprised to find that Kidd’s copy seemed incredibly well worn. Beloved, almost. It was true; the upper corners of some of the pages were bent into dog ears and there was a greying around the middle of the book along the pages where dead skin cells, streaks of sweat and oils from fingers past gathered.

Law was about to pocket the book for further examination, and because he hadn’t a copy of it himself, when his ears picked up a faint tapping. Footsteps. Trudging up stairs.

Hurriedly, he pushed the book into the large stomach pocket of his black hoodie. At the same time his eyes worked the room over, scanning for a place, any place, to hide his body. He peeked under the bed skirt only to find that the bed frame was so low it would be impossible to climb under, even for a man of his skinny stature. He then hopped over to the closet, but found it too cluttered to press his body inside and close the door after him. Panicking – as there was nothing else in the room that could hide him apart from the computer desk that sat in the corner in plain view of the door – Law dove for the room’s single window, intending to see if he could somehow escape onto the roof.

He reached the window and found that it could only be opened to let air in through a screen. He swore and continued to tip-toe around the room, hoping a brilliant idea would come to him as he was listening to the footsteps nearing his position. No ideas came.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He had *one* possible plan of action working itself out in his brain.

Quickly he flopped onto that four poster bed and arranged himself as he thought fit on top of the tiger pelt. His plan basically consisted of trying to make himself as sexy and inviting as possible, though in the circumstances he was too scared shitless to do a good job. He ended up lying on his side with an arm propping his head up while he crossed his legs suggestively.

It was very forced looking, to say the least.
It took everything Law had not to jump up from the bed and try to break the window apart as the
door opened slowly. He closed his eyes, almost in pain, then forced them open again, trying to tell
himself that the whole ‘I can’t see him, therefore he can’t see me’ thing did not work.

His first glimpse of Kidd was a bush of red hair. The second glimpse was an angry expression
slathered across Kidd’s face. The third…well, didn’t need a third glimpse because by that point his
eyes were wide open and Kidd was already yelling.

“What! The! Hell!” he screamed in short bursts. “If I had known there was a raccoon in my house I
would have called the fucking exterminator already! You fucking pest!”

“Wow, I hadn’t been expecting such a calm greeting,” Law said, genuinely surprised.

“I’m going to fucking slaughter you!”

“I take my previous remark back,” Law corrected, springing up from his place on the bed as
Eustass began his charge. Kidd approached from the right, eyes aflame. The good thing about beds
was that, when positioned in the middle of a room, there was always more than one way to get off
said bed. While Kidd ran right, Law leapt left.

Given the fact that Law was known for incredible bursts of sudden finesse, he made it through the
doorway without getting snared in Kidd’s claws. Of course, Kidd would never give up so easily,
and so Law bolted down the hallway with the angry red lion snarling and giving chase.

Law headed for the stairs, all too aware that he would have to put some distance between Kidd and
himself if he wished to escape from the house as a whole rather than in bloodied bits and pieces.
He tore down the steps to the first floor, three at a time accompanied by a spectacular leap as he
reached the last five stairs at the bottom, and headed right. The white walls were all
disconcertingly familiar and with an unhappy grimace, Law realized he was getting himself quite
lost in Kidd’s mansion.

Where the hell was that kitchen again?

“Oh fuck,” Law hissed as he collided with a posh table. In the time that it took for him to recover
from impact, Kidd nearly grabbed onto Law by his hood that flapped out behind him as he tried to
continue his sprint.

“That offer isn’t all that enticing!” Law screamed back, dodging a hastily thrown lamp. Great, now
Kidd was throwing things at him. He really didn’t want this to evolve into a violent game of
household dodge ball. “Has anyone ever told you that you’d make a terrible salesperson!!”

Kidd didn’t reply, and Law found himself behind a couch, with one very angry redhead on the
opposite side, glaring him down. Trapped. He couldn’t run for the hallway in this position. He
would have to wait for Kidd to decide whether to go left or right around the couch. Well, shit, Law
thought. Where is that kitchen and its marvellously broken window?

Kidd, breathing hard (though whether from anger or exertion, Law couldn’t tell) leaned to the right
side. Thinking he was surely going to try to go that way to catch him, Law started to edge left. He
was more than ready to sprint again as if his life depended on it (and in a way it certainly did.)

Then, in a flash of livid red, Kidd catapulted over the couch and grabbed Law by the front of his
hoodie before he could react fully.
“Gotcha,” Kidd cried, triumphant. He slammed Law against the nearest wall, holding him up off the carpet. Law kicked and thrashed, trying to break free, but Kidd’s grip was iron and soon the bigger one of the two pressed himself in close, heavy panting on Law’s face. Law crinkled his nose, wondering if Kidd was going to eat him whole. His white fangs that protruded out of his open mouth were disconcerting.

“Damn, you’re good at running away.”

“I’ve been told I should try out for track and field. Never really appealed to me though. And I was not fucking running away; I was simply taking a tour of this mansion I stumbled upon quite by chance. I had no idea I’d be running into an angry rhinoceros here.”

Earnestly, that was the fastest tour of a house Law had ever put himself through.

“That was one fast tour,” Eustass said, calling him on his first blatant lie. “And as if I’d believe your bull about not knowing whose house this is. I’m not that stupid, Trafalgar Law.”

Well, he had expected both of his obvious lies to be debunked, but it still saddened Law knowing that he was quite possibly screwed.

“Okay Kidd-o, so you’ve got me against the wall,” Law admitted. He squirmed slightly as Kidd’s eyes narrowed, expecting his trickery. Kidd really knew him too well. It was starting to get harder to trick and manipulate the man. “What are you going to do now, frisk me? Ooh, that sounds kinky when I say it out loud. Frisk me.”

A slight rumbling rose up and vibrated against Law’s chest. With a small yelp, Law realized Kidd was fucking growling at him. “H-hey, easy there.”

“I’m assuming you came to steal something from me and–”

“No, no, I was really just taking a tour,” interrupted Law. “It looked like such a warm and inviting house.” Which was half of the truth, considering the house was certainly warm, but the company and atmosphere was anything but welcoming. He smiled, trying his best to appear innocent. In response, Kidd squeezed his elbow into Trafalgar’s gut. “Okay, okay! I did in fact steal something.” He let a cheeky grin peel over his face. “But you’re going to have to frisk me to find it.”

“Oh, I’m sure there will be plenty of time to find a stolen item when I’m chopping your dead corpse up and burying it in my backyard.”

As troubling as that sounded, Law couldn’t help but let loose a bark of a laugh. “You can’t be serious!”

“What the fuck makes you think I’m not serious? You’re nothing but fucking vermin to me.”

At that point, Law knew he had to switch tactics. He let his smile drop from his face and slowly slid a tongue out, letting the wet appendage glide along his too-dry lips. As he expected, Kidd’s eyes followed that slight movement. Resisting the urge to smirk, Law said quietly, “Want to know the real reason I came here?” Kidd’s angry expression didn’t change, didn’t indicate that he wanted Law to continue speaking or not. But Law continued, unabashed. “I came to see you, of course. Why else would I have been lying on your bed awaiting your return?”

“Because you’re stupid.”

As much as Law didn’t want to admit it, there was some truth to that statement.
“That’s not fair,” Law whined. He mentally cursed when he realized his whining had effectively blown his sexy cover. “I mean, I was certainly waiting for you. You couldn’t honestly have thought I’d leave you alone after what happened two days ago? In the rain?” Kidd’s face darkened at the mere mention of that little… incident. “We kissed. Twice. And then you held me all gentle and stuff and played with my hair.”

“You know, it would have been better for you if you’d never mentioned that… mistake, again. After all, you tricked me and made a fool out of me. And I’ll be sure to fucking rip you apart for it now that I’ve got you here.”

“I guess I can’t request a dying wish this time,” Law acknowledged sadly. “Nope.”

With that, Kidd hauled Law off the wall and back up the stairs, more or less lifting him the entire way. Knowing he would not get anywhere by kicking and screaming, Law let himself be manhandled to wherever Kidd was planning on taking him. To his surprise, it was right back to where they’d first encountered one another. Kidd’s bedroom.

“Oh, so you are going rape me after all,” Law stated calmly. He opened his mouth to request that he be taken on top of that amazingly soft tiger pelt, but Kidd beat him to speaking again.

“No, I’m going to throw you out my fucking window. My bedroom is the highest point in the house. You’ll break every fucking bone in your body.”

“I already tried the window. There’s a screen in the way.”

“Anything in this house can easily be repaired if it is broken. You’ll find that I don’t give a rat’s ass whether or not I’m damaging something, because I can always call a fucking repairman the next day.”

Kidd closed the bedroom door behind them with a backwards kick of his foot and threw Law to the ground a couple feet away. Rather than giving Kidd the satisfaction that the impact with the floor had hurt with a grimace and cuss, Law started laughing and grinning.

Kidd advanced on him again, arching his hands so that his knuckles cracked menacingly. Law was beginning to think the boy really enjoyed playing with his prey. He had to think fast. What would stall Kidd and stop him from murder?

A crazy ass idea came to him.

As quickly as he could, Law tore off his hoodie and shirt and tossed the articles of clothing to the side. The sudden absurdity of it all stopped Kidd cold in his tracks.

“What in fucking hell–”

“Stripping!” Law supplied cheerily. He finally managed to get his jeans off, and kicked them to the side. There he sat upon Kidd’s bedroom floor, looking amazingly innocent, in nothing but a pair of black socks and equally black boxers. “Isn’t that a requirement when one enters the bedroom with
Kidd made a gagging noise, but his face had become as red as his hair. Or perhaps it wasn’t a gagging noise so much as it was a gawking noise. Either way, Eustass was floored.

“Put your clothes back on you…you fucking raccoon face!!” he screamed less than eloquently, furiously pointing at the discarded fabric. Some had gone quite far away from Law, and it would take a moment of butt waggling in Kidd’s face to retrieve them. Now that was too dangerous for Law’s tastes.

He pretended to pout. “I don’t want to,” he stated simply.

While Kidd growled at this, Law lifted a hand to his bare collarbone, trailing it down the length of his stomach. Kidd watched with growing trepidation as that hand made its way back up Law’s chest. He curled his hand into a lazy fist, letting his index finger stick out to stroke a circle around one umber nipple, then the other. Kidd’s eyes followed his movements, and slowly Law allowed himself to grin.

He rubbed and caressed his chest for a full minute, noting how Kidd had fallen silent and still. So, there was some way to shut up the raging rhinoceros…

“You’re enjoying this,” Law whispered.

“No, I’m not,” Kidd protested, though his voice held none of its previous strength. It was softer, huskier. Much to Law’s annoyance, he found that he was getting aroused. Shit. That hadn’t been part of his brilliant plan to get Kidd’s guard down long enough to escape.

Plus, the tell-tale bulge that was rising out of Kidd’s baggy pants was speaking volumes to Law. He felt a shifting in his own black boxers. Deciding to take a dive, Law truthfully divulged, “I’m getting turned on.”

“I’m not,” Kidd lied.

Law didn’t care what Kidd said at this point. The answer was clear and pointing at him through a thin piece of fabric or two. “Whatever, I’m not one for formalities. Got any lube?”

Kidd’s eyes widened at the enquiry, then widened further as Law brusquely removed his hard length from his boxers. “Join me,” he insisted. There was a slight edge of nervousness to his tone.

Kidd shook his head slowly, but despite the movement of decline he walked forward and passed Law, heading for the bedside table. There was one drawer on that table, and Kidd opened it, rummaged around inside, and produced what Law had initially requested.

He didn’t know what possessed him to hand that bottle of lube over to Law or, hell, even to retrieve it for him, but he supposed it was a diverse mix of curiosity, sexual tension, and…well, more curiosity. Yes, he was certainly intrigued by Law’s unashamed display.

As Kidd bent over to shakily hand him the bottle, Law reached up and grabbed a hold of Kidd’s shirt, yanking his entire body weakened by shock down to the ground so he sat on his knees. Before Kidd to react too violently to such callous handling, Law made sure his lips found Kidd’s mouth.

He ravished Kidd to the best of his abilities, letting himself relish in the feeling of Kidd’s astonishingly soft and supple lips on his own. Dumbfounded as he was about the whole situation, Kidd could only let Law lead him. At first, Law delved a quick tongue past Kidd’s lips, but it
promptly became apparent that Kidd was not going to smoothly transition into the phase that Law wanted him in.

He was going to pull back and run. Law could feel it in the way Kidd’s body had become tense and his mouth had stiffened. Before the shock factor could completely rub off, Law made a grab for Kidd’s flaccid hand with his own, bringing it to his flamboyant erection. He let loose a low moan as Kidd’s fingers tightened around his length, not knowing entirely what it was he was touching when his sight was obscured by Law’s searing pair of dark eyes.

When he figured it out, after a few slow, guided strokes, Law was sure Kidd had begun hyperventilating. He kissed him again, harder this time, afraid that Kidd was going to actually kill him out of fright for what Law had led him into.

An enormous sense of relief came over him when Kidd kissed him back, lips moving against his. Neither knew if this was a spur of the moment act, but both were eager enough to continue it. Law more so than Kidd. And, when they broke for air, Law decided he’d take them further.

“Jerk me off,” Law requested, though it came out more as a command than anything else.

“I-I’m not gay!”

“I don’t care. Just do it.”

Law went on the attack once more, bending his fingers to make little hooks and latching onto Kidd’s face, drawing him in. Kidd tried to jerk back, but as soon as Law felt the first wave of resistance he threw one of his arms around Kidd’s neck, locking them both in place. Feeling trapped, or perhaps reassured, Kidd leaned down once more to give Law what he seemed to be craving.

As he felt Kidd’s tongue touch his lips hesitantly, Law couldn’t help but think he really should be trying to escape. But then a part of him began to reason him away from that temptation, citing that he was practically naked with a hard-on and wouldn’t get very far even if he did box Kidd in the face and bolt. Besides, as mentioned, that hard-on was a terribly distracting thing, especially since Kidd still grasped it loosely.

Law groaned as those fingers shifted ever-so-slightly, dancing up his flesh and causing goosebumps to appear upon his arms and chest. Kidd’s other hand, still grasping the lube tightly, was hovering over Law’s thigh, close but yet so far from its intended location.

He let go of his hold on Kidd’s face, snaking his palm down a broad shoulder and muscled arm to cover Kidd’s hand where the lube was clasped, unopened. As he did this, Kidd jerked away, eyes nervously questioning. Law knew he would have to move smoothly or else he risked scaring the boy away like a frightened deer. He brushed his sinuous fingers over Kidd’s knuckles firmly, then flicked open the cap on the lube. The bottle let out an eager squeak, and Law found himself overturning Kidd’s hand so that the shining liquid seeped out of the bottle and dribbled onto the throbbing place that needed it most.

Eustass’ hand, wrapped so loosely around Trafalgar, twitched as some of the cold liquid dripped on top of his knuckles. The movement brought out a low moan and Kidd felt himself heat up upon hearing the noise dragged out of Law’s lips. He didn’t know what possessed him to experimentally stroke down the length of Law and brush his thumb over the tip of Law’s cock, but was rewarded with another aphrodisiac moan that he found he liked the sound of.

He tightened his hold, surprised at how much he was enjoying this apparent weakness he had
found. Slowly, up and down, Kidd brought more pleasured whimpers from Law. He had discarded the lube when it served its purpose and Law’s free hand had found a new place hanging over Kidd’s shoulder, nails grazing shoulder blades. Now, with his other hand at work and one free, Kidd raised two fingers and pressed them against Law’s throat, feeling the vibrations of Law’s moans on the pads of his fingers. He didn’t know quite what it was about Law’s neck, but knowing how easily he could squeeze the life out of him is something happened gave him an added sense of assurance. He didn’t think he’d be squeezing anyway, as those vibrations that symbolized Law’s life force were oddly entrancing.

The more insistently he pushed, the more intensely he felt Law’s rapid pulse fluttering away. As he began to stroke him faster, Kidd paid particular attention to that pulse, noting how it sped up as Law’s panting became unrestrained by pride. An uncontrollable urge swept over him. He removed his fingers only to bring his lips down upon that pulse, kissing it with a hunger that did not conceal his own raging libido.

He bit into that neck, not hard enough to damage, and brought out a moan of shock laced with pleasure.

Law closed his eyes, focusing on the almost violent way Kidd was getting him off. Having always been gentle with this part of himself, this was a change from the norm. He liked it, this roughness, but he could feel the fire in the pit of his stomach being stoked too fast. His balls were twitching spasmodically against the cold floor, alluding to the inevitable outcome.

Panting and angling his head away momentarily from Kidd's eager sucking of his neck, Law looked down upon himself and the deft hand getting him off. With every upstroke, Kidd milked out of him a gloop of opaque cum that spilt out onto his knuckle and then drivelled down into the palm of his hand.

The sensation of someone other than himself pulling at him, coupled with the visual stimulus, soon sent Law over that border into the white hot abysm. He gave no warning as he came, only a deep groan as his balls violently trembled and released his seed, the majority of it squirting into the palm of Kidd's hand, who caught it by chance.

As Law wilted against the edge of the bed, Kidd brought his hand up for examination, trying to figure out how such a skinny, seemingly malnourished boy could spurt so much. With a sudden sneer of disgust for the situation he had been dragged into and the mess Law and he had made, Kidd said, "I'm going to the washroom and when I come back, you'd better be gone." His voice was quiet and subtly shaky, betraying a confusion that he knew would haunt him later.

When Kidd abruptly left the room, Law skittered to his feet and pulled on all of his discarded clothes in record time. He ignored the wet feeling in his boxers, knowing it would not be wise to bother Kidd anymore today. He was already pushing his luck as it was. But, he lamented, pushing his luck had never felt quite this satisfying.

He left through the kitchen window, the heat Kidd provided him keeping his skin warm all the way back to the North.
Monday had been hell, Tuesday was embarrassing, and Wednesday was awkward at best. When Thursday came at last, Ace was beyond an emotional wreck. Sure, he had been sleeping better, but during the daytime he may as well have been a zombie. He felt like a fire…after a bucket of water had been thrown on top of the flames.

Ace was worried. As the math class packed up and dashed out the door when the bell rang, Ace stayed behind. Marco had taken a seat after teaching his lesson for the day and was trying to make sense of miscellaneous assignments that had been thrown haphazardly onto his desk when he noticed Ace approaching. Instantly, as with all the days before when Ace walked into math class, the air became stifling around them. Tense.

Before he could get intimidated into bolting for the door, Ace steeled himself and began speaking. “I feel obligated to ask whether or not our study sessions will be continuing. I have a feeling this is a negative though,” Ace said monotonously, rehearsing something that he had thought out days ago. There was no way he could have made something up on the spot and have it make sense to Marco; he would have fumbled and made an even bigger mockery of himself than he did on Friday night.

For a long minute, Marco sat in silence, taking in the tired and deranged look in Ace’s eyes. “You know,” he finally said, “I haven’t been sleeping much myself lately.”

It showed. Marco’s eyes had been drooping more than usual, to the point where it looked like he was asleep while talking at the front of the room. His movements as he walked around, wrote on the board, and pointed out students to answer questions were also quite languid, and seemed to require much effort. Effort he simply didn’t have, Ace had been noting despite trying to put emotional distance between himself and his teacher.

“That doesn’t answer my questi–”

“I regret what I did and said to you.”

Ace found himself averting his eyes from Marco’s sincere face and retorting harshly, “Yeah, well, who cares anymore?”

“I do.”

Ace choked back a sob that threatened to tear out of his throat. On one hand, he was hoping Marco would just forget about the whole incident, but on the other he had been wishing that Marco would acknowledge him in the same light as before.

“I really, really am sorry for what happened,” Marco continued, slowly getting to his feet.

“Yeah, I’m sorry too,” Ace said callously, “I’m an idiot, obviously.”

“No, I’m the idiot.”

“I’m the bigger idiot,” Ace found himself blurting out again. He raised his eyes to meet Marco’s gaze, the slight inkling of a challenge burning within them.

“Actually, I’m the bigger idiot. Since I repressed myself and my true feelings.”
“No, no, I’m the biggest idiot. Since I jumped you and I wasn’t thinking about the consequences for you getting involved with me.”

“You’re wrong, I’m the biggest idiot,” Marco growled firmly. “Since I was thinking too much about my professional life and not enough about how you might be feeling.”

“Fuck, would you just shut up! I’ve obviously got this won! I’m the biggest fucking idio–”

Marco interrupted Ace’s rebuttal, grabbing his chin and leaning across his desk to cover Ace’s lips with his own. He pushed into Ace with his tongue, easily moving past those open lips still half sputtering the end of his sentence. Once he got over the initial shock, Ace began to touch and rub his tongue against Marco’s, faintly tasting the mints that he’d seen Marco chewing on earlier to stay awake. He reached out then, grabbing a hold of the front of Marco’s dress shirt, all too concerned with Marco suddenly letting go of their kiss. Afraid that this was a dream and he would wake up alone again.

As if knowing that Ace needed reassurance, Marco brought his other hand up to tangle in Ace’s dark hair. It was satiny and easy to pull his fingers through despite having the appearance of wild, untamed curls. All of a sudden Marco was fighting an urge to pull Ace over his desk or, better still, lay him out flat on his desk and ravish his body. It really had been too long since he’d made love to anyone. Or kissed anyone for that matter.

Before he could give in to such a forbidden temptation, Marco broke their kiss and moved a thumb up onto Ace’s lissom lips, quieting him before he could even get a word out.

“For doing that here at school, I’m the biggest idiot. Now, to answer your question, I expect you at my place at the usual time. And don’t forget your textbooks. We’re still studying. Nothing changes.”

Ace, red-faced and recovering from his own disbelief, couldn’t get a word out as Marco herded him towards the classroom door. Idly, Marco was infinitely glad that he was almost certain passer-by could not see them from the angle of his desk. Especially since, standing behind the desk, Marco’s fancy fitted dress pants had become even tighter in certain areas. It really had been too long.

He couldn’t help himself, not any more.

--oOo--

After school, Ace had spent a lot of time sitting on his bed thinking about his day. And eating. He was trying to make up for skimping on his meals during the past few days. Currently, he was on his fourth sandwich, and he had it in his mind to make a fifth when he received a text.

He picked up his phone, balancing it in one hand as he tore into his sandwich held in the other. It was from Law. He opened the message eagerly.

‘Hey. You said you probably won’t be busy tonight. Want to go to the G.L.?”

Juggling his sandwich and trying to text at the same time, Ace eventually typed back, ‘Busy. You won’t believe what happened today.’

‘Lemme guess: Marco took you back?’

Ace choked on a piece of bread, hacking and pounding at his chest. Beside the bed, looking for scraps that would never come, Spade whined, worried about his master.
‘HOW DID YOU KNOW?!’ Ace managed to text in all caps as soon as he stopped choking.

‘…from the way McLeod kept looking at you. ALL FUCKING WEEK. Honestly, do you forget we’re in the SAME FUCKING CLASS, IDIOT?!’

Ace looked up and caught sight of the clock. ‘Oops, gotta go. Wish me luck tonight.’

‘Doesn’t matter if I wish you luck or not; you always have your usual screwball luck anyways.’

Ace ignored that last text and sprinted out of his bedroom, then remembered that his grandfather was going to be home. He bit his lip, looking down at Spade who was drooling still from smelling Ace’s multiple sandwiches. He had an awful feeling that Spade would be eating donuts, and this time there was no way to be certain that Garp would stay awake long enough to make sure Spade wasn’t eating any donuts of the chocolate variety.

Mind made up, Ace scooped up his puppy, grunting a little when he realized Spade had grown over the past month or two, and ran out of the house after adding a knapsack full of supplies to his back.

--oOo--

Marco’s face when he opened the door to a wriggling puppy that obscured his student’s face was truly a sight to behold. The poor man really had no idea of the baggage that came with Ace.

“…and this is?”

“I couldn’t leave him at home. His name is Spade.” Ace eyed the carpeted floors of the house seemingly for the first time. Carpet. Ace could only pray that Spade would not defile the house with his…naughtier behaviour.

“Well, he’s not the only dog here,” Marco told him as Spade was dropped to the floor due to Ace’s inability to hold such a large puppy. He wasn’t obese, but the growing wrinkles all over his body were typical of the breed. And those growing wrinkles made it quite difficult for Ace to keep a firm grasp on the dog’s belly. He had slipped to the ground like melting butter, chubby rolls a jigglin’.

“Where’s the other d…” Ace trailed off as his thoughts were stolen away from him. A huge, white moustached dog trotted into view. Instantly, Spade went into butt-sniff mode. “That is a giant Giant Schnauzer.”

“That’s my Pops’ dog, Stefan. He’s, uh, kind of old, so I don’t think he’ll want to play much with–OH GOD LOOK OUT!”

Stefan initiated the game of chase despite Marco’s earlier warning. The giant dog tore around the house, Spade ripping up the carpet after him. Spade’s attention was temporarily diverted when he reached the living room, where Phoenix was preening his feathers and sitting upon his perch.

“Cat’s out of the bag, loverboy,” the bird squawked as Spade trotted up to scrutinize the caged animal.

The puppy was captivated by the talking creature, curious about how it was possible that a creature he had seen outside so many times on walks could sound like a human. He was so curious in fact that he stuck his little, black, wet nose past the bars of the cage to investigate further. He received a peck and a bad word for his efforts to make friends.

Noticing his bird’s distress and appalled at the frequency of the cuss words that were spewing forth
from its beak, Marco said, “Here, I’ll put them in the backyard.” No sooner had Marco suggested this when Spade once again resumed his game of chase with Stefan, who snuffled excitedly through his voluptuous white moustache of wiry fur.

Ace, meanwhile, was laughing and holding his stomach, especially when Marco attempted to gain control of the situation. His first attempt laid him against the wall as Spade and Stefan bumped into him and sent him flying. The second attempt involved an open door to the backyard and…a boomerang?

“What…what the hell is that?” Ace felt compelled to ask, eyeing the white boomerang posed to be thrown form Marco’s hand.

“Stefan’s favourite toy,” Marco replied, huffing. This was why he didn’t have a dog of his own. They tired him out.

“Oi, Stefan!” The Giant Schnauzer stopped and flicked his head around, blinking inquisitively at Marco. Spade knocked into Stefan in that instant of limbo, bouncing off of him like a harmless little flea. Spade was getting big for a male St. Bernard puppy, but Stefan was enormous and certainly packed more weight.

“See what I’ve got?” Marco shook the boomerang once he was sure Stefan was giving him the time of day. In an instant, Stefan was galloping towards them, all one hundred and fifty pounds of excited dog. Ace pressed himself against a wall out of fear, narrowly getting out of the path of destruction. “Fetch boy!”

Marco threw the boomerang as hard as he could out the open door. Both dogs went through the threshold, onto the porch, and then leapt to the lawn after the toy in a competitive frenzy. Before Ace could properly see where they were going, Marco slammed the door behind them. Ace was about to ask why when a boom stole the words from his tongue.

“Boomerangs: they always come back,” Marco quipped. “Now, shall we study?”

“After that bout of excitement? I don’t know if I’ll be able to focus on trigonometry.”

Nonetheless, Ace found himself on Marco’s couch like usual, books splayed out in an arc on the coffee table. While Marco was explaining the cosine law to him for the third time, Ace’s mind was elsewhere. Now with the dogs out of the way more pressing matters than math were coming to mind.

“I can tell you’re not really getting into this,” Marco said after he looked side-ways to see Ace’s blank stare off into the distance. There wasn’t much to look at in this room, only a few pictures of his Pops in a frame on the fireplace and Phoenix chittering away in his cage, ranting about political strife in Russia. Something he had heard on television, no doubt.

“I think I could get into something else more easily. I’m sure there are other things we could be doing with our time.”

Marco sighed. He knew it was only a matter of time and opportunities. “Ace. Just because I kissed you–”

“Please Marco, er, Mr. McLeod? I’ve been waiting to see you alone for hours now!”

Between Ace’s big puppy eyes that rivalled Spade’s and the childish pleading, Marco found himself giving in to Ace’s demands. He leaned over and placed a hand on Ace’s smooth, freckled cheek, holding him still as he kissed him lightly on his forehead.
“There,” he said as he drew back.

Ace frowned. Then he smiled deviously. “It only counts if you kiss me on the lips.”

“Ace, as much as I may want to, we should be–”

“Here, I’ll demonstrate,” he said, grabbing the back of Marco’s head and moving in close. With his lips nearly touching Marco’s, he could hear every breath the other drew. He could smell the faint scent of mints eaten earlier mixed in with that delicious smell that could only be described as Marco’s scent. For Ace, it was better than smelling freshly baked cookies, and not a whole lot of things even came close to that plateau, making Marco quite special indeed.

With his lips so close, he whispered, “This is how you do it properly…”

He leaned in and took Marco’s top lip between his, all too aware that his statement was relatively flat considering his lack of experience in the romantic relationships department. But Ace didn’t care, reaching to grip Marco’s soft dress shirt. He pushed in with his fingers, feeling Marco’s sides stiff with muscle. Ace loved that kind of hardness; it was why he could never date a girl. Girls were too soft, in his opinion, and too easy to damage.

He felt fingers climbing gracefully up his neck and tangling in his hair. Then he was gently pulled away by those fingers, and another hand was placed squarely on the centre of his chest, pushing him backwards. Quickly and smoothly Ace found himself laid flush with the couch, Marco hovering over him with a sultry smile. A flash of fear coursed through Ace since he had never seen his teacher make such dominating move.

“Properly, you say?” Marco murmured as he dove downwards. Ace assumed Marco was going for his lips, and his eyes widened in surprise when Marco tilted his head and fiercely kissed his neck, just below his ear. He puffed out a shuddering breath as the older man trailed downwards with an occasional flick of tongue, ending up on Ace’s collarbone. Gasping as Marco bit him, Ace was distracted enough for Marco to slip a hand up his loose shirt.

Marco continued to suck and nip at Ace, moving his hand up the boy’s shirt, fingernails grazing his skin. He circled Ace’s belly button and then moved back down again, this time using his thumb to rub the darker, thicker hair that formed Ace’s treasure trail. As he began to get closer and closer to the waistband of Ace’s shorts, Ace let out a light moan and was rewarded with a harsher bite that made him cry out silently. But Marco made sure to warmly kiss whatever damage he wrought.

Just as Ace was beginning to wonder if Marco had something more intense in mind, his teacher pulled back, stopping all of his affections cold turkey. The man resumed flipping through Ace’s papers, his expression returning to its former working style.

Ace sputtered silently, the hair around his navel shivering at the loss of Marco’s touch. Finally, he whined in disbelief, “W-why did you stop?!”

“I was simply showing you the proper way I do things,” Marco replied, not sparing Ace a single glance. There was a smirk to be found in his voice, however. “Now we can get back to work, since you’ve gotten what you wanted.”

“Yeah, no. I don’t think so,” Ace said, a hint of anger coming into his voice. “I thought we were going to, you know, do it.”

Marco quirked a fine eyebrow, finally turning to regard Ace who still lay on his back, panting slightly. “On the couch? I don’t think so,” he said, imitating Ace’s voice. “And besides, we’re not
Ace puffed up, his lungs suddenly full of hot air. “Excuse me? I’m ready now, thanks.”

“*Ace.*” There was a warning, much like how a parent might warn their child not to do something bad before they did it. “Honestly, I’ve kissed you only a few times and you want to have full-out sex?” Ace frowned; Marco’s political correctness was starting to turn him off. “I’m not just going to skip to the bedroom with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because, that’s how my last relationship went downhill. We slept together and didn’t make enough of an emotional bond to sustain us. Call me old fashioned, but I refuse to make the same mistakes twice.”

Ace swallowed hard; he had forgotten about the fact that there might have been others in Marco’s bed before him. He didn’t really know how to feel about that. He thought he might be jealous, that somebody else had taken Marco’s virginity, but strangely enough he didn’t feel anything. He thought, instead, that he had been naïve to assume Marco had been single all his life.

“What was this guy’s name? Or, uh, girl’s?”

“His name isn’t important,” Marco whispered, his hand finding itself on Ace’s chest, rubbing at the boy through the cloth of his shirt. Ace smiled faintly, not because Marco had brushed off his previous lover, or lovers, but because Marco’s hand on his chest genuinely felt good. No one had ever touched him so gently, so affectionately. “What’s important,” Marco went on, “is that I’m not going to screw up our relationship from the get-go. I’m willing to do everything but full-out sex, because only that holds sentimental meaning for me.”

“That’s good,” Ace muttered huskily, eyes lidded. He wasn’t listening as well as he should have been. Instead he was enjoying what Marco was doing. It had the appearance of an innocent gesture, but Ace was starting to get turned on…and sleepy at the same time.

Before he could set himself up for a daytime sleep attack, Ace opened his eyes all the way, finding Marco staring down at him, equally wide awake. Not shocked, but a touch surprised in that way Marco had of keeping calm and displaying his emotions sparingly.

“What’s wrong?” Ace asked quietly, following Marco’s gaze until he noticed something slightly out of place. He blushed, let his lifted head fall back on the couch’s arm rest, and groaned.

“I had forgotten how easily younger guys get turned on,” Marco muttered, more to himself than anyone else. Then he chuckled lowly, making no effort to look away from Ace.

“Wow, this is embarrassing,” Ace admitted bluntly. “Especially since you just said how we’re not going to be doing anything.”

“I never said *anything* in the broad sense. I just said we wouldn’t be having full-out sex anytime soon. And then I said that every other gesture is fine by me, so long as we keep the big one until I know our relationship won’t plummet out of the sky.”

Ace jumped then as Marco’s hand delved under the fabric of his shirt once more, rubbing up and down his chest. The attention was starting to really make Ace ache down in his nether regions and he was caught between kicking Marco’s hand away before he reached a point of no return or reaching down to touch himself, since Marco was making him positively horny.
“Take your shirt off,” Marco suddenly commanded before he could help himself. He was intrigued by what he could feel as he worked Ace’s chest over, all of the dips and curves feeling very rugged and manly, not something that he had expected from Ace who was often displaying his more childish side for the world to see. And he wanted to see, craved a glimpse, of what Ace looked like under all that useless fabric.

The authority in Marco’s voice coupled with the muddiness his thoughts were experiencing made Ace obey. He grabbed the hem of his shirt, twisting it up and over his head. He pulled it away and let it drop harmlessly to the ground in a heap. He looked up at Marco, whose eyes were studying his exposed body slowly. Taking every detail in. Memorizing him.

Ace thought he would wriggle under Marco’s gaze, but somehow he felt no shame as Marco looked him over. Instead he began to breathe deeper, letting his chest flare up and touch Marco’s hand, hovering just above his skin. Finally Marco let his hand glide down, touching the side of Ace’s hips. Marco’s other hand landed on his opposite hip, moving up along Ace’s sides, massaging him.

“Are you enjoying this, Ace?”

With a snort, Ace wished to retort with something callous, something along the lines of ‘what do you think?’ All that came from his lips though was a strangled moan as Marco moved his hands to graze across his nipples, which had hardened once the cold air had touched them.

“If you want, I can show you the proper way to make a man feel good.” There was a gleam in his eyes that told of his playfulness. It had really been too long.

Ace gawked at Marco’s suggestion, wondering where this side of his teacher had come from. Normally Marco was stoic and relatively innocent, but this suggestion had revealed a frisky and kinky part of the man that Ace hadn’t thought even existed. Not that he was disappointed or disgusted in any way.

“Okay,” Ace grunted, feeling the butterflies in his stomach swell. Was Marco really serious?

He was. Marco repositioned himself on the couch, on his knees in between Ace’s spread legs, which had moved all too readily.

“Tell me if you want me to stop. I can respect boundaries only if you set them,” Marco said huskily, running a hand down Ace’s front once more and feeling a shiver of anticipation. Ace gasped as that hand went further than it had before, dancing over his belt before setting on his buckle. A little further and that would have been his…

Ace drew in a shaky breath as Marco palmed him experimentally through his shorts, shifting his bulge around so it caused a luscious friction. The heat rose to Ace’s cheeks, flushing them, and he stiffened under Marco’s touch. Ace could hear the small moan that passed through Marco’s parted lips as he began kneading him with the tips of his fingers and the whole of his palm, massaging him to an almost painful hardness. He let his other hand reach up and squeeze Ace’s nipples, causing him to squirm in place and make tiny, needy noises.

After a minute or two of rubbing gently, almost innocently, Marco moved both of his hands to Ace’s belt buckle once more. He undid it slowly, not teasing, just gauging Ace’s reaction to this new development. Ace had closed his eyes, panting as he tried not to appear too eager. Already his hips wanted to buck upwards and find Marco’s willing, warm hands and graceful fingers.

The belt was the only thing that held Ace’s shorts up on an everyday basis, and when the belt came
loose the shorts came down with only a few hurried tugs.

“Well, well, well,” Marco said with a broad grin as Ace’s erection sprung up happily, flopping against his chest. Fully aroused and looking more delicious than any porn Marco had ever viewed in his life. And Izou had sent him a lot of ridiculous videos when he first came out all those years ago.

Ace laughed a bit, nervously, flushing an even deeper red. “No underwear,” he stated. He had chosen to forsake underwear, just in case something happened. Granted, what was happening wasn’t exactly what he’d initially had in mind, but it wasn’t an unwelcome thing. Lying naked under Marco was certainly by far the hottest experience he’d ever been given.

“Guess this makes it easier for me. I’m just sad I can’t tease you anymore. Though that’s not necessarily true.”

Ace gulped as Marco lowered himself, the whiskers along his jaw brushing Ace’s inner thigh. His breath, hot and wanton, made Ace twitch and long to grab onto Marco’s head so he could put a start on what he so clearly had in mind.

“You’re teasing me,” Ace whined.

“I’m just taking the time to enjoy you. Properly.”

“Yeah, well, you’re taking too long, I want to – Ahh!”

Marco grasped his shaft roughly, bringing the tip to his lips. He laid a soft kiss on the engorged head, tasting Ace for the first time. He had been leaking tiny beads of pre-cum, the salty tang and scent giving Marco what he had been secretly craving for a long time now: Ace, in all his naked glory, spread out before him and inviting him to touch and experience.

Marco couldn’t hold himself back and knew Ace felt the same way. He couldn’t even start with a few teasing kisses anymore; he just flat out needed to feel Ace, right then. With a soft chuckle at his own eagerness that caused a vibration deep in his throat, Marco went down along Ace’s length, sheathing him in a hot, wet embrace. He felt Ace curl towards him, felt a hand grab hold of his hair, and knew Ace was probably biting his lip to keep from crying out too loudly.

He worked Ace over quickly using his tongue and sucked him softly to start, knowing that Ace likely wouldn’t be able to take anything harsher. He was right, as he had only begun bobbing his head along Ace’s cock when Ace started quivering uncontrollably.

Watching Marco’s lips devour him was providing an overwhelming amount of stimulation on top of the physical administrations. Ace couldn’t hold himself together; he was tensing and feeling the familiar waves of pleasure coming to a head. Marco was just so experienced. “M-Marc–”

Ace was cut off by his own moan as Marco grabbed his balls and gave them a quick squeeze, at the same time pulling back enough on Ace’s length to suck his tip, giving him that final push he needed. Ace came loudly, body trembling and undulating, then sagging against the couch. Marco swallowed all, wondering how he had been getting by for so long without someone to please. He felt good, better than ever in fact, knowing that he had fulfilled Ace for the moment.

Panting, Ace slid out from under him, twisting upwards and throwing his arms around Marco’s neck. Just as he was about to kiss him passionately, complete with tongue penetration and lots of joyous but playful nipping, a chime resounded throughout the home. Marco froze up, and a horrified expression appeared on his face. The chime, Marco’s doorbell, sounded again.
“Who’s that?” asked Ace, arms still entwined around Marco’s neck.

“Oh shit. Quick, run to the bathroom and get dressed! He came to pick up Stefan!” Marco hurried to his feet, disentangling himself from Ace’s grip. For a second, Ace was heavily disappointed that Marco would be more concerned with the door than him.

“Who came to…oh shit. Him.” Then he became like Marco, flying to and fro, trying to pull on clothes and straighten up the room. Finally, he darted into the bathroom and prayed Whitebeard wouldn’t break the door down to find him in there. The old man was known to pull crazy stunts like that in the school.

Marco, well, he knew he had to face the brunt of the assault. As if to put a voice to the future earthquake, Phoenix decided to finally speak up.

“Marco likes Ace like sexual candy,” squawked the bird.

Now, before he opened that door to his Pops, he had to somehow teach his bird a new favourite phrase.
Chapter 15

Marco had ended up laboriously carrying Stefan to the door and throwing the pooch out onto the lawn, before Whitebeard could say anything or invite himself in for a drink. Though it was rude, there was no way in hell that Marco was about to let his Pops inside, not with the air in the living room smelling suspiciously racy.

Meanwhile, Ace hid out in the bathroom, feeling awkward and spacey. He could hardly believe Marco had given him his first blowjob, and the strange urge to reciprocate had taken over his thoughts. He was fairly sure, no, certain that if Mr. Newgate hadn’t showed up he would have gotten on his knees and tried to please Marco in the same way he had been so tenderly shown. The mental image made him blush.

When Marco came and got him he acted surprisingly normal, which in turn surprised Ace. He had been expecting that Marco would either be eager to go back to their activities or too embarrassed to look him in the eyes. Instead, he was simply passive.

“Hey, um, shouldn’t I, uh, you know…”

Marco reached over to rub gentle circles with the tips of his fingers in between Ace’s shoulder blades. “I know what you’re going to ask, but you don’t need to. I’m fine.” Ace nodded his head, an odd wave of relief washing over him. He had avoided an attempt to give a blowjob. Despite wanting to try it out, there was a fear in Ace that he wouldn’t be very good at all, since he lacked all experience in that department. There was an even bigger suppressed fear that Marco wouldn’t want him any more if he was absolutely horrid at the act.

“I think I should take you home. It’s dark out,” Marco observed, nodding towards the window. Ace shrugged, secretly relieved even more than before. He needed some time to himself, away from Marco, to fully process all that had happened in such a short span of time.

Ace gathered his books and they piled into the little blue sports car. Marco took his time driving Ace home, stealing many affectionate glances as he was driving. Ace returned his looks with a smile and tried not to get too clingy, though he was experiencing an urge that wanted him to reach across the seats and touch Marco. Anywhere, it didn’t matter. His arm, his neck, his inner thigh, it didn’t matter. But Ace didn’t, because clingingness was something children were prone to doing. He wanted Marco to know he was no child, especially now that something so mature was beginning between them.

Still, a tiny lingering doubt was festering in Ace, and when they pulled into his driveway and Marco stopped the car, he just had to ask, “You like me though, don’t you?”

“Yes Ace, I like you. I thought that little act made it clear.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just making sure we’re on the same page.”

Marco chuckled lowly and leaned over to kiss Ace lightly on the cheek, then ghosted over his lips. Ace took it in himself to deepen the kiss, tasting a peculiar flavour on Marco’s tongue. He blushed again in the darkness of the vehicle, remembering just what made Marco taste so unique.

After that, Ace bid Marco good bye and gathered up Spade from the back seat, who had fallen into a deep sleep. He hefted his dog inside the house and left him on his doggy bed as Marco drove off, then went to his own bed and flopped down on it.
A blissful sleep soon consumed him too.

--oOo--

It had been two weeks since Kidd had jerked Law off on the floor of his bedroom and his nerves were absolutely fried to a crisp. Law hadn’t acknowledged him any more than usual, but they only shared one class together and sat on opposite sides of the room at that. Besides, Law was usually gone in a second after the bell rang, and the boy could still get away as fast as ever. Not that Kidd was looking to confront him on what had happened. But he was still uneasy and he wondered just who Law had told about his encounters with him. Though Ace hadn’t come looking for his blood yet, so that was a good sign…

One Wednesday after school, Killer followed in his wake when Kidd was walking home. He was genuinely worried about his captain, keenly noticing the strange behaviour that Kidd had been exhibiting for quite some time now. For a while during the month, Kidd had gone back to his usual, often vicious and sarcastic self, even beating the crap out of two kids who’d looked at him the wrong way; but just two weeks ago, Killer had noticed a change in Kidd again, this time worse than the last.

When they arrived at Kidd’s mansion, the driveway disserted as usual save for Kidd’s red car, Killer decided he would try his best to get to the bottom of this strange development. He waited until they were inside and Kidd had cooked them something to eat, his cooking skills being honed by necessity. After all, the boy had nobody else to do things for him and the maid only came to do the laundry and dust the house, once a week at most.

So, sitting and eating the pasta Kidd had cooked up, Killer casually popped the question, “What’s gotten into you lately?”

Kidd visibly tensed, but barked out a steady, “Nothing.”

“It’s just that you seem kind of…different.”

“Different how?” Kidd growled, feeling his annoyance pique.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Killer said, despite knowing full well what Kidd’s new oddities were. He decided he wouldn’t play coy anymore. He yanked a hand through his long blond hair, the slight snags of pain boosting his adrenaline. “You’ve been really edgy and you keep glancing around as if lots of people are watching you. I mean, no one is though, and if they were giving you weird looks, I’d beat the shit out of them, but the point is you are more concerned than usual. I just want to know what you’re so concerned about.”

Kidd continued to shovel pasta into his mouth, eating away at his anger at the same time. However, there was also apprehension hiding behind that anger, and he certainly didn’t want Killer to find out about that. Finally, after he swallowed, he said, “I’m just observing people. It’s a good thing to do to avoid getting jumped.”

Killer raised his eyebrows at that one. Kidd getting jumped? Who in their right mind would jump Kidd?

Of course, what he didn’t know and what Kidd wasn’t inclined to tell him, was that Law was insane enough to jump him.

They finished their meal in silence and Killer lingered around the kitchen while Kidd cleaned up, an unwanted speck of dust on Kidd’s plate. Usually, Killer was a much welcomed addition to
Kidd’s silent household, but today there was something so irritating about his presence that Kidd nearly jumped for joy when the other announced his leave.

He walked Killer to the door and, before the other boy left, he apologized for questioning Kidd, just as he always did when he voiced opinions his friend didn’t like to hear.

After he was gone, Kidd stared at the door for a while, wondering when he had started becoming annoyed, truly annoyed, at his best friend for caring about his wellbeing. He supposed it was the strain of having to hide things from Killer that tested his waning patience, and without patience, there was no way he could deal with people in general. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to him, this sudden inability to tolerate Killer, but it did. Because Killer was his best friend and usually the only person exempted from his wrath.

Just as he turned to leave the door along with his musings and go to his room for some relaxation, knocking pierced the silence. A tremor ran through Kidd, but he shrugged it off, recalling Killer’s words at how edgy he had become lately. He would have to work on that. It would certainly help him get back to ‘normal’ again.

Kidd turned back, figuring it to be Killer who had forgotten something in the kitchen. Or perhaps Killer wasn’t quite done pestering him. Yes, that had to be it. Killer usually had to come back twice before leaving and he had been doing that a lot lately with Kidd supposedly ‘out of sorts’ as Killer had once put it.

He sighed and steeled himself as he opened the door, expecting a short, snappy conversation. Instead, lazy black rimmed eyes blinked owlishly at him. And that creepy smile perked up higher on those tan cheeks.

“Hey there, Scowl McScowlsworth. You look delightfully pissed on this fine evening.”

Initially, Kidd panicked, expecting Killer to be right there behind Law, getting ready to kill the skinny bastard. Then he wondered why he was caring that Law could be slaughtered in front of his eyes. Then, a spark jolted an idea into his brain, and he realized Law would probably squeal his deepest darkest secrets to Killer just as the other was landing a finishing blow. That alone was enough to worry Kidd.

Mortified, he grabbed Law by the front of his smiley face sweater and yanked him inside. Being much lighter than Kidd and the laws of force being what they were, Law came easily through the doorway. Taking a quick gander outside to search for any traces of Killer, Kidd then slammed the door behind them. He breathed a ragged breath, preparing for what was to come.

“Hey, Mr. Eustass, that was quite rough. Then again, I do enjoy it rough.”

“Would you just shut the fuck up, Racoon Face! You bloody idiot, Killer just left here moments ago! What the hell are you doing here? Again?!”

Law cocked his head to the side, feigning a deep thinking pose with his finger lightly scratching the stubble on his chin. “Killer was here? Huh. I did not encounter any crazed blond men when I walked up. Then again, I don’t exactly go parading around out in the open. You’ll find that I’m not gay enough to wear a frilly pink tutu, Mr. Eustass.”

Kidd sighed, and brought his hands to his face, smothering his eyes. Much to his horror, his overly active imagination tried to picture Law in the aforementioned ballerina uniform. It scared him, deeply.
He removed his hands from his tired eyes, gritting his teeth as he realized Law had moved position. He swung his head around and found the pesky pest moving towards the kitchen.

“Hey!”

“Something smells really delicious!” Law called over his shoulder. There was a certain level of glee in his tone that foretold of bad things to come.

Great, Kidd thought, the bastardly racoon is following his nose. Kidd jogged after him, still fearful of whether or not Killer had seen Law. Sure, Law hadn’t seen Killer, but that didn’t mean the reverse didn’t hold true automatically.

Then again, if Killer had seen Law, then Trafalgar would be pushing up daisies right about now. Killer was still irked about the last time they’d gone after Law and he hadn’t found a trace of him, which was much less than what Kidd got. So, Kidd could conclude that Killer had been just as oblivious as Law. Thank goodness for that.

The boy in question managed to find his noodles with little difficulty. Kidd hadn’t dealt with the leftovers yet, and instead they sat covered in a pot on the stove, still warm and perfectly fresh. Law was lifting the lid off and peering inside like a racoon going through a garbage can.

“Hey! I am trying to fucking talk to you here!”

“Then fucking talk to me,” Law mocked, smelling the pasta. There was a pleasant mix of tomato sauce and cheese and green plant-things and a few other things that Law had never seen before. Basically, it was a beautiful mix of things, in Law’s humble opinion. And it looked positively inviting. “Can I have some of this while you fucking talk to me?”

Exasperated, Kidd grabbed a plate out of the cupboard, a serving spoon and a fork. He placed them on the counter beside the stove and roughly shoved Law away. “Sit,” he said firmly, eyes flashing. He prodded Law away from the stove, not trusting him anywhere near a hot burner. Law went to the table, a quirky, excited grin on his face when he realized Kidd was actually going to feed him.

Kidd quickly dished out a hearty plateful and brought it to the table, placing it in front of him more politely than he had originally intended.

“Oh man, real food,” Trafalgar cheerily quipped, staring down at the pasta Eustass had placed in front of him. He grabbed the fork Kidd had stuck in the pasta so quickly one would have thought he hadn’t eaten in a while.

Eustass snorted. “As opposed to what? Fake food?”

“No, it’s just that this looks so much better than what I have at home.”

“What do you usually get stuck eating? Frozen dinners or something?”

“No, caribou intestines and rabbit’s blood.”

“…And you say I’m the sick one.”

Kidd mulled over what Trafalgar had said while he watched the other eat. Well, eat wasn’t quite the correct word. Inhale through the orifice known as the mouth seemed more fitting to the situation. Surely Law hadn’t been so starved of good food that he would be...yeah, he was probably starved of good food, Kidd reasoned. He shook his head as Law finished in record time. The only person he had ever seen do something like that had been, coincidently, Law’s friend Ace.
And that had been in passing, when Ace was consuming things like a vacuum in the school’s cafeteria. Kidd distinctly remembered losing his appetite after witnessing that spectacle.

“Please sir, can I have some more?” Law held out his empty plate, a cheesy grin curling the corners of his mouth upwards.

“Don’t even try to pull the Oliver Fucking Twist thing because cute doesn’t work on me. But sure, go ahead. Get it yourself.” He was certain, by that point, that Law had not come to burn his house down. He’d let Law near the burners on the stove, just this once.

Law scampered over to the pot and got more pasta, ate that plateful, and then finally sat contented with his hands crossed over his stomach. He looked like a grinning bear of sorts. A scrawny, severely sleep-deprived teddy bear. Kidd found it...oddly charming.

“I thought you were itching to fucking talk to me,” Law stated after a period of silence.

“Yeah, why the fuck are you here?” asked Kidd. It was exactly what he had been wondering in the back of his mind ever since Law had knocked on his door.

Law straightened and fished around in his hoodie’s pocket, producing something under the table that Kidd couldn’t see. “Well, I came to return something. Remember, I did steal something from you besides your handjob virginity.”

Kidd sneered, but all emotion dropped off of his face when Law placed the object he had taken from Kidd’s bedroom two weeks ago on the table in front of him. “A Clockwork Orange? Why the hell did you steal that?” Admittedly, he had wondered where that paperback had gotten to.

“I just finished reading it a third time. Burgess is still a genius. Even if he has always denied it.”

“You wanted to read it? That’s why you stole it?”

“Well, why else would you steal a book? Besides, I think it could be said that I borrowed it rather than stole it, since I returned it to you. Still, I really like that book’s message. About free will...and all that cal.”

Kidd snorted, picking up his well-worn novel from the table. He didn’t quite know what to say to Law at this point. He was still reeling from Law stealing a book of all things. Law could have just as easily grabbed his credit card, his mother’s expensive Jewelry, or something of more value like that, but he instead chose a book. And not just any book, one of Kidd’s favourite books.

Law continued his spiel, oblivious to Kidd’s mounting confusion. “I really like how he makes us question what can make a human less than a human. And whether a man who chooses to be bad is somehow better than a man who has good imposed on him by force, changing him into something he is not and urging him to do things he wouldn’t otherwise do.” Law paused, finding Kidd’s eyes watching him, full of understanding. “It makes me wonder too: does a person become a clockwork orange if they can’t fully express their humanity, like Burgess implies? If they feel pressured by society to suppress their true urges?”

Kidd’s eyes narrowed at that last bit, knowing full well what Law was hinting at. Still, Law fell silent, saying nothing more in that vague way of his about the matter of Kidd’s blundering sexuality.

Finally, Law broke the tense silence. “That pasta was really yummy.”

“Did you just say—”
“I did and I’ll say it again: yummy. Now, I think it’s time we had a little chat without any violence or screaming or, just in general, bloody vicious things. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Depends on what you want to talk about,” Kidd said slowly, not liking the familiar gleam of danger that appeared in Law’s black orbs. The fool was going to say something Kidd was sure he wouldn’t like. Despite knowing this, he nodded that Law could speak.

“Right, well…” Law trailed off, having not expected to be given his voice so easily. “I have been thinking lately about our current state of affairs, that is, me and you. Together.”

Kidd kept silent, watching how Law suddenly began playing with his hands, running his thumbs over his index fingers listlessly. For some reason or other, the motions were irritating Kidd. He couldn’t pinpoint what it was exactly, but nonetheless he reached out and clasped Law’s hands, stifling the movements that appeared nervous in nature.

Looking down at his darker hands covered and held in place by Kidd’s paler ones, Law began to grin. “Ah, so you do care.”

“How do you figure that?” Kidd inquired gruffly. Still, he made no effort to recover his own hands, even as Law’s fingers began to move deftly and latch onto any groove available. Law’s skin was as cold as ice, as if he’d just come in from a wintry blizzard, and in fact he had. He held on to Law tighter, wondering if they would warm up if he only held on a little longer.

“Well, you’ve told me what I want to know,” Law said softly. “That’s all I really came over here for.”

“I haven’t said a damn thing!”

“Sometimes, Mr. Eustass, actions speak much louder than words.”

Then Law did something Kidd certainly didn’t expect: he raised their clasped hands and kissed Kidd’s knuckles, each in turn. His lips glided over Kidd’s skin, the goatee tickled fleetingly, and the other boy trembled before yanking his hands away. He had a limit of what he could take in one sitting.

“Alright, I guess I should be going home,” Law muttered. He laughed as Kidd rubbed his hands together as if he’d lost circulation in them. He was still knee-deep in denial, as Law could plainly see. Still, he knew that it was only a matter of time before Kidd cracked, and when he did, well, Law would be there to witness the explosion.

Trafalgar rose, pushing away his chair with the back of his knees. With him, Kidd also stood.

“Wait.” All movement froze and time appeared to come screeching to a halt. “There’s no way in hell you’re going to walk all the way back to the North Blue district! It’s already pitch black outside,” he said, gesturing to the dark kitchen window, the same one Law had used to break into the mansion the first time.

“What do you suggest then?” Law asked softly, trying to keep a smirk from finding his face.

For a moment, Kidd faltered as if he were surprised at himself for showing an inkling of a caring human nature towards Law. He knew what he was supposed to say, but the words were slow to form on his lips. At last, he suggested, “You should spend the night here.”

“I’d love to take you up on that offer, but Bepo’s waiting outside, and unless that offer extends to him, I’ll have to politely decline. I’m afraid I’m just going to have to walk home in the dark and
hope I make it.”

Kidd grimaced at the mention of Law’s huge Samoyed. That dog was the bane of his existence. He had been chased by Bepo before, in his freshman year, back when he was just beginning to note Law’s trickery. Though he strongly disliked Bepo, he knew that he would have to take the fall. “I guess he can stay too, as long as he doesn’t fucking bite me.”

A wide grin spread across Law’s face and he went to the front door without delay. He had left his marshmallow dog hiding in a snowbank, perfectly camouflaged, just outside the front door. The dog had burrowed into the snow, perfectly insulating himself with a snowy fortification, and had been taking a nap ever since Law had told him to stay put. Now though, he heard a door creaking open, and he raised his head in hopes that his master had come to retrieve him.

Bepo jumped up when he saw Law peek his head out the door into the frigid winter air. He let loose a happy series of yips and trotted over to the steps, but stopped when Law beckoned him inside the house.

Bepo knew the scent that wafted from the bowels of the house, down the steps and into his nose. It was the enemy’s scent. He growled, watching Law with questioning dark eyes.

“Oh, come on, Bepo,” Law said, reaching out to grab his dog by his orange collar. He began to tug, his dog pulling against him feebly as if unable to disobey fully. “Kidd isn’t as bad as you remember him.”

Bepo whined as Law dragged him inside, flurries of snow scattering around the doorway as he tried his best to resist. “Come on Bepo,” Law coaxed, “you just have to trust me.”

Bepo wasn’t entirely convinced by Law’s words, no matter how soft and soothing they were. But he stuck to Law’s side like a good, obedient dog should. Law led him into the kitchen, where Kidd had re-seated himself at the table. He was sceptical that Bepo wouldn’t bite him, especially when Bepo caught sight of him and began to snarl, fangs clicking together in hopes that it would scare the red-haired man away from his master.

“Thought you said that mutt wouldn’t bite me,” Kidd growled, which in turn made Bepo intensify his own snarling. Really now, Law was having quite the time trying to hold onto his dog and keep him from rushing Kidd, likely with the intent to sink his fangs into Kidd’s shin.

“I think you need to gain his trust. Okay, I have an idea. Come over here and pet him.”

Like hell. In case you haven’t noticed, that fanged snowball is snarling at me.”

Law sighed. There was really no reasoning with either dog or man. Still, he would try. “Fine, have it your way. Why don’t you try to feed him something? He likes cheese.”

“If I try feeding him he’ll take the opportunity to bite off my fingers.”

Law sighed again. There was no swaying Kidd. “Alright, I’ll put him in a room until he calms down.”

Kidd directed him (from a safe distance) to the only guest bedroom in the house, despite it being so large. After all, it wasn’t as if Kidd ever really had guests over. After the snarling pooch was shut up for the time being, Kidd led the way upstairs, his mind wondering just what he’d gotten himself into.

At the top of the stairs, Law decided to take the lead, skipping past Kidd and heading down the
hall. They ended up in Kidd’s bedroom, with Law jumping onto the bed. He went about snuggling into the fur of the tiger, feeling the warmth of the exotic pelt.

“I claim this bed in the name of pandas everywhere.”

“You’re not sleeping there!”

An innocent giggle rose up from the bed covers. “Then where else would I sleep?”

“On the floor, like the pest you are,” Kidd said, but his tone was light-hearted. Law peeked out from his position lying face down in his folded arms, seeing a small smile on Kidd’s normally scowling face. He snickered to himself quietly, digging his fingers into the soft blanket under the pelt and snuggling his face into the bed. It smelled like Kidd and nothing else, all man-musk and sharp steel. But, there was an earthy scent too, and as Law sniffed it he wondered just what Kidd did everyday to garnish such an aroma, or whether it was naturally occurring.

He had other things that he was absently wondering too. “Where did you get the tiger?”

“It was a gift from a zoo to my father, after he donated some money to make himself look good in the eyes of society. The animal died naturally, I guess of old age,” Kidd supplied. That gave Law enough information to mull over for the night. He really wasn’t intending to ask more revealing questions. He’d save those for later.

Kidd watched Law closely, noting how his baggy hoodie had sagged against his back, exposing its slightly triangular shape that had been lost under all that fabric. The jeans usually left little up to the imagination, but with Law sitting belly down and ass up, Kidd couldn’t help but notice how perky Law’s little butt was.

He groaned as a sudden primal urge to climb on top of Law surfaced and once again wondered why he had let Law stay with him for the night in the first place.
They agreed to wear their boxers over a pair of pyjama pants. Partially because they both admitted to enjoying the freedom of near-nakedness, and partially because Kidd didn’t own a single pair of PJs.

Surprisingly, Kidd did have an extra toothbrush, so Law cleaned up while Kidd climbed into bed, hoping that he could pretend to be asleep by the time Law came back. It didn’t work, as Law found it great fun to sneak into the dark room and jump on the lump under the blanket when Kidd least expected it.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Oh, just seeing if you were awake,” Law replied, still draped across Kidd’s back. The only thing between them was the fluffy blanket, but with Law gripping so tightly to what he thought must have been Kidd’s shoulders, it felt like there wasn’t much more than a thin sheet separating them. “You’re not going to go to bed this early, are you?”

“I was really hoping to, but I have a feeling I won’t be granted any rest with you around.”

“Aww, don’t sound so desperate!” He rubbed his hands over the blanket, feeling Kidd’s tense form beneath his fingers. Briefly he wondered if Kidd would enjoy a massage.

Just as he was thinking that, Kidd flipped them over, pinning Law under him. He could barely see the other boy’s face, so he reached across in the dark and found the switch to his bedside lamp. The light flooded the room, bathing everything in its path with a sunny glow. With the angle of the shine, only half of Law’s face lit up, but it was more than enough for Kidd to make out the grin. Like a child hiding a box of candy behind their back. Law was bloody well set on messing with him.

Strangely, Kidd wasn’t seething with even an iota of anger. Maybe it was because Law hadn’t jumped on him in a way that had bruised or perhaps it was because it was hard to be mad at a guy who smiled all the damn time. Kidd didn’t know, but he did know he wanted to take a turn and mess with Law. Just for his personal amusement.

He peeled back the blanket from Law’s body, exposing that tan chest with its small though precise musculature. Law didn’t move, didn’t even try, as Kidd’s lower body was much heavier than his. Besides, even if he could move gracefully out of the path of danger, he didn’t want to.

Kidd’s pale fingers brushed across his chest, leaving a tingling sensation in their wake. “So,” Kidd started, his hot breath tickling Law’s face. “What was your real motivation for coming all the way over here from the North?” Law continued to smile, his eyes willing Kidd to guess his ulterior motives. “Were you going to try to seduce me?”

“Well,” Law whispered huskily, “I suppose you guessed the focus of my brilliant plan. So. What are you going to do about it?”

Kidd was silent and heavy, his fingers tapping against one of Law’s pectorals as he thought. Law had brought his hands up from under the blanket and had begun to stoke both of Kidd’s wrists with the pads of his fingers, awaiting the boy’s response.

“What can I possibly do but give you what you want,” Kidd stated, dipping his head so he spoke
against Law’s lips, which had parted as he started to chuckle deeply. Kidd laughed too, at the absurdity of it all. Here they were, two arch enemies, in bed together and teasing one another. As Law would say, it was delightfully ridiculous.

Normally, Law would be the one to initiate any sort of affection. This time, however, he held his desires back, waiting for Kidd to make a move. This was the true test of their relationship so far which, truthfully, didn’t really have a label. They weren’t secret lovers, or boyfriends, or even fuck-buddies just yet. Still, Law was quite adamant about establishing something with Kidd that was more than a simple ‘friendship’. And for that to happen, both parties involved had to be consensual, since a relationship could never work with just one person pulling weight.

Kidd wasn’t making any further progression, as if he were thinking in his mind that perhaps he really did not want this drama after all. Law brought a hand up to touch Kidd’s forehead, which was mostly covered by the black headband he always wore to keep his hair out of his eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, Law hooked his fingers under the headband and lifted it off of Kidd’s head, giggling as Kidd’s red hair fell loose and tickled his cheeks and eyelashes.

Kidd kissed him then, lips brushing over Law’s hesitantly. This time, Trafalgar didn’t rush him into anything he wasn’t fully prepared to do, letting Eustass set the pace for their encounter. The kiss was better anyway, like nothing Law had felt before from Kidd. This kiss was full of exploration, craving emotional satisfaction rather than physical.

That was when Law first felt it; that strange river of emotions that he knew ran within Kidd, the passion he was willing to give. The river had been dammed up so tightly before, and now for the first time in what had to be a long time the dam had cracked and emotions were flowing forth. He could feel the longing Kidd had saved up behind that dam for another person seeping into that kiss. He knew that, for someone who had probably never cared about another person for most of his life, Kidd was taking a big step. He was reaching out and Law knew that he was past the point of refusing Kidd, of being unable to swim to a safe shore and avoid taking his hand or his kiss or whatever.

It kind of scared him. He could only imagine how Kidd was feeling.

They didn’t do anything more than kiss that night before falling asleep. There was no groping or other primal male needs met, nor were there any more words spoken between them. There were just two warm bodies, one holding the other, both perfectly content.

--oOo--

Kidd woke early in the morning before the sun had risen, as he did every day. For a moment, blinking in the darkness, he wondered if he had accidentally messed with the thermostat, as he was warmer than usual. Then, he realized the blankets were shifting slightly of their own accord. Upon closer inspection he realized the reason for that came from the breathing of another human being beside him.

The reason for his warmth also came soon after that other epiphany. Law was beside him on his side, one arm draped across Kidd’s waist, the other above his head, loosely entangled in Kidd’s hair. Strangely enough, somehow Kidd had slept through Law hitching his leg across one thigh and in between his legs. The gauche position reminded him of a koala bear hugging a tree…or a panda clutching a bamboo shoot. Either way, Law certainly had a way of clinging to people when under the influence of sleep.

Awkwardly, Kidd extracted himself from Law’s hold and climbed out of bed. He let his eyes adjust to the darkness and peered down at Law’s peaceful face, noting how calm his expression was.
Trailing a few fingers through Law’s short hair he sighed heavily, resigning himself to his fate. The bastard was too damn likeable for his own good.

Kidd ripped his hand away and stalked to the bathroom, finished his duties there, and went downstairs. On the way down he paused, hearing a soft clicking. He knew for a fact that none of the clocks in his home ticked, so hearing the noise made him immediately go on the defence. If Law could break into his home, anyone could.

Especially, but certainly not limited to, Killer.

Before Kidd could seek out some metal object like a butcher knife or a crowbar, the source of the clicking made itself known by also growling.

Kidd hurried down the stairs, giving himself plenty of space to manuver now that Bepo stood before him baring his teeth like a feral animal. Which he was, in Kidd’s humble opinion.

“Look, you,” Kidd snapped. The snarling intensified. “I know we’re not the best of friends, but it would be a real shame if I had to dispose of your dead body and then think of some plan to explain your disappearance to Law.” Bepo faltered a bit in his growling as his ears picked up his master’s name. Kidd saw this and continued, “Yeah, Law would obviously miss you a lot. Law loves you, you know? But I have reason to think he likes me too. So don’t bite me, or you’ll make Law mad. And I won’t hurt you, because Law would be doubly mad at me if I did.”

The repetition of Law’s name being spoken aloud, in a calm, almost reassuring tone made the dog cease his growling altogether. Now he just stood guardedly, hackles raised. Still volatile, yet slightly more serene than before.

“I’m hungry; you want something to eat too?” Kidd asked, knowing that Law likely fed his dog in the morning. The question of how Bepo had escaped confinement in the guest bedroom nagged Kidd. He worried that, if Bepo had broken out sooner, he would have eventually broken into Kidd’s bedroom and ripped him to shreds, then lay down beside his master, perfectly content. So, he figured it was about time to make peace with Law’s Samoyed, before something like that did happen.

The dog stared vacantly at him for a moment, but his head raised itself to a less threatening height and his fur, which had been standing on end, flattened slightly.

“Food?” Kidd asked. There was a tiny, nearly undetectable tail wag. Perhaps their relationship could be salvaged yet.

Cautiously, Kidd led the way to the kitchen, keeping an eye on the white dog by walking backwards. Bepo followed at a distance, maintaining the furthest possible distance between him and the human enemy, the boy noticed with a smirk. So, was the dog actually afraid of him? It sure seemed that way, and whatever Bepo had done before might have all just been for show. The dog had likely never bitten anyone in his life.

Nonetheless, Kidd was vigilant of Bepo, never taking his eyes off of the white mass of fluff. He made coffee and, with consideration for the dog that poked his head around the corner leading into the kitchen, fried up some bacon. Sure enough, there was something about that smell of sizzling meat that lured Bepo in. Soon, much to Kidd’s disbelief, the dog was sitting next to his feet and looking up at him, smiling in that strange way dogs do. It was uncanny, really, how much Bepo freaked him out because he reminded Kidd of Law when he doggy-smiled. Yes, he was creepily alike to Law except, of course, for the massive amount of drool leaking from the sides of his maw.
He scrapped the bacon into a bowl and placed it on the counter to cool, wondering if maybe the fatty meat would make Bepo sick. He shrugged as he fixed himself his own breakfast, Bepo whining and trying to discreetly climb up the counter whenever Kidd glanced away for even a second.

“It’s hot; you’re going to burn your goddamn tongue off,” Kidd told the white, squirming blob. Obviously, Bepo didn’t get it and was only getting more distressed with every passing second. Finally, Kidd relented and placed the bowl of bacon on the floor. It was gobbled up in the span of a minute, Bepo licking his chops happily.

Bepo was pleased; Kidd figured they had reached a truce at last.

“Well now, isn’t this interesting?”

Kidd spun around, trying to appear nonchalant to Law’s smirking face.

“Man, I followed my nose all the way down here only to find that you fed Bepo all the food!”

“Guess you should have been quicker,” Eustass mused, amusement in his eyes as he saw Law huff, thoroughly annoyed at him. “I am making omelettes though, if you want to wait.”

That sat Law down at the table. He waited, making it no secret that it was fun to stare at Kidd’s rear while he cooked, and sure enough the omelettes were delicious. At this rate, the old hag at home was going to lose his presence in her kitchen altogether.

Afterwards, they sat on the sofa in the living room, Law with his head on Kidd’s shoulder, making no effort to deny anymore what was so painfully apparent.

“See you tomorrow?” Law asked quietly.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” Kidd answered, leaning his face down so he could kiss Law’s forehead.

In front of them, Bepo made a gagging noise, though whether it was general disgust for his master and enemy, or whether for the large sum of bacon he’d ingested, no one knew.

--oOo--

Truthfully, Ace had been quite mad at Izou for giving him such a shoddy plan before. But now, with things progressing quite smoothly, he decided to pay the flamboyant man a long overdue visit.

It had been about two weeks since the incident in the classroom and the ensuing blowjob. It was close to Christmas and Marco had invited him over the next day. The students of Raftel High were on their winter break and, as such, study sessions had been put on hiatus, but Marco and Ace were still keen on seeing one another as often as they could get away with.

They had been experimenting with one another more than studying anyway. Trying out things that Ace had only dreamed of before. Marco was more open to ‘fun’ and received Ace’s advances without the hesitation he had displayed before the ‘incident at school’ as they had been taking to calling that day jokingly.

Of course, things had never progressed past what Ace deemed the third base. They had fooled around without a single garment on, sure, but every time Ace tried to take things all the way, Marco would gently rebuttal him. It wasn’t cruel, but Ace was beginning to get a touch
discouraged by Marco’s refusals.

He wanted to seek Izou’s advice. As strange as the whole concept seemed to him, he knew for a fact that Izou was experienced both in the department of gay love and on the topic of Marco. He figured there was no one else better suited to answering his questions than Izou.

“Alice! Or did we decide on Ann? Whatever, I’m just glad to see you, kid,” Izou greeted him exuberantly. “Get in here, and I’ll go make us some tea.”

For not knowing Ace was coming, Izou was incredibly accommodative. The tea was made and served in record time, and Ace was seated in the living room, listening to Izou prattle on like a lonely housewife.

“–and so, I told him, ‘No, I don’t think so sister!’ and he was like ‘But Izou! You’re so hot!’ but I wasn’t about to be sold for less, see, because that would have been such a disgrace to my mother who has always told me that–”

“Um, Izou, I came to talk about Marco, if that’s okay?”

Izou froze in his ramble, looking sheepish. “Oh, right. How did my wonderful plan go anyways?”

“At first it didn’t work; he rejected me,” Ace admitted crossly. “But then I guess–”

“Let me guess: Marco gave in and apologized, and now the two of you make sweet, sweet love every night before falling asleep in each others’ arms?”

“Uh, yeah, I mean, no. Yes and no,” Ace replied, confusing himself with those contradictory terms. “Yes, he apologized and we’re, um, together.” It still felt weird to say that openly. “But no, we aren’t exactly, you know, doing it.”

Izou frowned. “That’s strange. Marco was such a sex fiend before.”

“He was?!” Ace cried, aghast.

“Yeah, back when we were teenagers we used to go out clubbing, like, every night and he would always…wait, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this,” Izou said, slapping a hand to his cheek as if to reprimand himself. “No, you know what, forget I said anything.”

“Tell me, I have to know!”

“Ignorance is bliss,” Izou quipped. “Besides, let’s get back to the problem at hand here. Tell me what he’s said to you, because I’m guessing the two of you have talked about this.”

So Ace told him. He told him all about how Marco had a relationship built on sex but it apparently fell apart due to the lack of an emotional bond, or something of that nature. “But what I really want to know is what that guy’s name was. I’m curious. And I bet you know.”

“Yeah, I know who he’s referencing. But I wouldn’t worry too much about it. That guy wasn’t good enough for our little Marco, and besides, last I heard the other guy got into another relationship, this time one that seems a bit more mature and long lasting. So you don’t have to worry about any competition.” Izou folded his hands around a teacup and lifted it to his mouth, drinking daintily. He set it back down slowly, watching Ace’s eyes cloud over.

“Still, how am I supposed to move forward when I don’t know about Marco’s past?” he enquired, brow furrowed.
“Everything takes time,” Izou told him sagely. “In time he may open up to you about his past. In time he may decide the two of you have enough of an ‘emotional bond’ to fuck. In time, he may—”

“I hate waiting.”

“Luckily for you, I do too. Now, why don’t we exploit my dear friend’s primal weakness?”

“Which is?”

“Very racy underwear. Now, onwards to the sewing machine.” Izou crooked an eyebrow daringly.

“At last I finally get to show you my talent for creating seductive lingerie…”

--oOo--

Dinner with Marco had an easy-going atmosphere surrounding them, but Ace wasn’t entirely comfortable. It had a great deal to do with what lay between his ass cheeks, but Izou had insisted that he couldn’t leave without the fake leather thong, so thus Ace was stuck sitting at Marco’s table, squirming so that the irritating fabric didn’t creep too high up his asshole. He was really going to have to have a word with Izou after this was over. Surely there could be a more comfortable piece of underwear just as seductive as the one he was wearing now.

“You look troubled, Ace,” Marco said suddenly as they moved to the living room. They had been conversing about a random assortment of things, like how much sleep Spade got every day and whether Jimbei had gotten a larger gut over the three years Ace had known him. Random things. So when Marco switched the focus and threw the spotlight on him, Ace started laughing nervously.

“Oh, you know, just kind of getting worried about the final math exam,” he said, lying through his teeth with the first thing that came to mind. Marco arched his eyebrows, sceptical of that statement. Ace’s mark in his class had risen spectacularly since their study sessions had begun, so Marco didn’t see why Ace would be worried.

“You still have a month and a half. And you know I’m always here to help you, if you only ask for it,” Marco said slowly, scrutinizing Ace’s sheepish face.

Ace saw his opening and jumped into Marco’s arms, which flew up the moment he saw Ace begin to tense and lean towards him. He loved having Marco’s strong arms around him, plus it gave him an excuse to hide his face in the crook of Marco’s neck. Lately, Marco was getting better at reading him, and Ace knew it was because he often betrayed his true emotions in his expressions.

He squirmed in place as his underwear shifted once more to an uncomfortable position, and found that one of Marco’s hands had moved down his back to grasp his buttocks firmly, squeezing him so he squealed.

Marco laughed. “What are you so eager about? You’re squirming all over like an excited puppy!”

Ace really couldn’t take any more of it. He needed his clothes off, now. Like hell if he could stand Izou’s little invention any longer. “To the bedroom!” he cried, taking Marco’s hand in his and breaking out his grip. He pulled the older man along behind him, up the stairs and to the bedroom.

As they left the living room, Phoenix cried out, “Oh yeah, baby!” The context of that was unknown, likely related to the television, and Ace dimly wondered if Marco had a porn stash somewhere. Ah well, questions for another day.

Ace flopped down on the bed, butt first, and ripped off his shirt before Marco could get to teasing
him with it. He had begun to realize how Marco operated; the man enjoyed getting Ace worked up before giving him any relief. Ace had a love/hate relationship with the way Marco did things. On one hand, when he finally came it was nothing short of a momentous sexual satisfaction, but on the other, Marco always took his sweet, sweet time and Ace hated that. He had never been one to take his time at things.

“Eager,” Marco commented shortly. Ace scoffed and pulled his teacher down on top of him, wrestling with Marco’s shirt. Today it was a blue button down, and whenever buttons were involved, Ace would either wreck the shirt or resort to yanking it over Marco’s head, because there was just no way he could take his time to undo every single button.

Knowing Ace’s troubles with restrictive clothing, Marco batted his vicious hands away before fabric and buttons could be torn apart. He pushed Ace down to the bed with the palm of his hand and then straightened his back, taking his time undoing his shirt and slipping it from his broad shoulders.

“Too slow,” Ace commented bluntly. He eyed up Marco’s stunning pectorals, quivering as he laughed at him. Marco just loved to mock him.

“That’s the beauty of the striptease,” Marco joked. Next he loosened his belt, but didn’t go any further, instead reaching down to touch Ace’s feet. He dragged his fingers up Ace’s legs, listening to the sharp breaths Ace took as he inched closer to the belt keeping his shorts up. Even in the middle of winter, Ace still wore his favourite type of clothing.

Marco was glad, as taking off tight-fitting pants had never been his forte.

When Ace began to whine again about Marco’s slothfulness, the older man grasped Ace’s hips and pulled his body to the edge of the bed, where he stood. Ace snickered, knowing that once the action got going, Marco was really quite the intense lover, but his laughing was cut off as Marco leaned down and captured his lips. At the same time as he ravished him, Marco ripped off Ace’s shorts, bending Ace’s legs up to get the garment free of his ankles.

He pulled back, expecting to see Ace standing at attention, but was mightily surprised by the black thong he found keeping Ace restrained. He continued to stare, a sinful grin working its way into his expression.

“This is naughtier than usual,” Marco said at length, running his fingers up and down Ace’s inner thighs.

“Naughtier than going commando?” Ace questioned with a smirk, liking the way Marco’s eyes glazed over as he played with Ace’s trembling legs, going close, but never too close, to Ace’s manhood.

“Naughtier than going commando,” Marco agreed. His eyes followed Ace’s smiling face down his heaving chest and to his bulge encased in black, then further, until the black string that kept the lingerie together disappeared between Ace’s cheeks. Even with Ace on his back, knees bent up, Marco couldn’t see all of him. Not with the leather in the way.

He fingered the leather strap that ran around Ace’s hips, gliding his fingers along under it. Ace shivered, but otherwise wouldn’t give Marco the satisfaction of hearing him beg to get on with it.

“Take off all your clothes too,” he said instead. “It’s only fair. After all, I’m always the first to get naked, so it’s your turn.”
Marco chuckled and drew back, his hands going to the zipper on his slacks. “Very well, if that is what you wish.” His slacks dropped off of him as soon as he loosened them, revealing his navy coloured briefs. Ace grinned; he could already see that Marco was half-hard. It brought him a lot of pride knowing that he was the one who got Marco, normally so calm and passive, worked up.

“Here, let me help you with those,” Ace said cheekily, rolling into a sitting position to grab at what clung to Marco’s sharp hipbones. Marco let him do as he pleased, even ran his fingers through Ace’s hair to encourage him. Not that Ace needed any encouragement.

Marco’s briefs came down easily, Ace slipping off the bed in order to take them all the way to his ankles. Now kneeling in front of him, Ace licked his lips and watched Marco stiffen. No matter how many times he saw it happen, it always fascinated him.

He took Marco in his hands, one on the shaft and the other supporting his soft balls. He squeezed both his hands, hearing a sharp intake of breath as a result.

An alien streak of power flooded through him upon hearing Marco’s shaky breathing. It gave him a bit of courage, much needed, and caused him to consider that now might be the best time to try out that little act of love that had daunted him before.

Ace put his cheek against Marco’s thigh and asked temptingly, “Can I suck you?”

The plea went straight to Marco’s groin and he groaned, grabbing the back of Ace’s head. “You certainly may,” Marco whispered, guiding Ace’s head to just where he wanted it. He never could refuse Ace’s more simple requests.

Truthfully, the first time Ace saw Marco’s length and girth, he had been intimidated. Marco was not average in any way, and Ace knew that he would really have to fake it well in order to make Marco believe he wasn’t a virgin. Luckily for him, the only times they messed around Marco had been quick to dominate the action and please Ace, rather than the other way around. So he had gotten out of giving a blowjob a few times already. He had tried his best at a handjob, but again, Marco hadn’t let him finish him off; he had turned the tables and taken Ace to climax instead. Not that Ace minded that, his teenage hormones being what they were.

But it still left him with zero experience. And there was no way he was admitting that to Marco.

So, slightly worried, he kissed Marco’s shaft, then the head, then moved to kiss his balls that were cupped in his hands. He tried to remember what Marco always did to him, and licked up Marco’s length, earning a tiny moan and a caress at the back of his head. He knew Marco always teased him until he was begging for release, so he forced himself to take his time, licking the tip of Marco’s cock and then down along the underside back to his base. He kept a hand on Marco, squeezing him tightly, as he sucked on the head, twirling his tongue around in spirals all over. He tasted Marco’s sweet pre-cum, which he had expected would be saltier than it really was, and swallowed the first gob he managed to squeeze out. Then he flicked his eyes up to meet Marco’s, noticing how they had narrowed in bliss. Seeing his enjoyment gave Ace another confidence boost.

Marco’s breathing deepened as he began lightly thrusting his hips, helping Ace move his lips back and forth along the ridge that separated shaft from cockhead. He continued his actions, making sure to pay particular attention to Marco’s tip, as that was what he himself liked, and soon he felt Marco tighten. He had just enough time to place his tongue under the v-shaped area of Marco’s head and actually felt the ensuring explosion. It hit the roof of his mouth and slid along his tongue before dripping down his throat, and he tasted the sweet tang of cum as Marco drew back.

Ace barely had time to recover before Marco was hauling him to his feet, only to push him back
down onto the bed. He climbed on top of him and kissed his collarbone all the way up to his lips, hungrily clawing at his chest as if to silently let Ace know how euphoric that experience had been.

It was incredibly reassuring for Ace, as he hadn’t been sure he’d been doing a very good job. With Marco kissing him so enthusiastically, he figured he’d done well. He wrapped his legs around Marco’s hips and flattened his body against the grooves of muscles as best he could, seeking out every bit of warmth and affection.

Marco loved tasting himself on Ace’s tongue, loved knowing that he had been the one to give Ace that added flavouring. Just thinking about it was beginning to make him stiff again, not to mention the extra stimulus of Ace rubbing his body up and down his own, trying to feel all of Marco against him at once. He honestly hadn’t thought he’d be able to get it up again so soon, but Ace certainly had an effect on him that brought out his undeniably primitive side.

He broke their kiss and nuzzled Ace’s cheek, hearing Ace panting in his ear and feeling his hot breath tickling his skin. He looked down at him and felt his chest swell and his insides tighten, exhilarated.

Ace was just as giddy as he was, and lightly moaned every time Marco shifted position. “Think we have enough of an emotional bond to sustain us?” Ace asked, panting hard. He was convinced of his confidence. Ready.

“Yeah,” Marco answered in the heat of the moment, before he could seriously stop to think. “I do.”
Both knew where this was going. Both were ready. The seeds had been sowed months ago in fleeting glances and forbidden longing, and now it was time to reap the fruits of their labour.

Marco had grabbed what they would need from a drawer and the bottle of lube sat on the nightstand along with a few condoms, silently testing Ace. Frankly, the sight of those items brought adrenaline to him rather than fear.

Izou’s underwear had been ripped clean off of him and now lay on the floor. Marco loomed over him, suddenly very dominant. Ace found he had mixed feelings about being the one on the bottom. In fact, he found it quite humiliating to be the woman in their relationship. He wanted a bit more power than that.

He decided he would have to try his luck at changing that. If anything, he wanted to see what Marco would say.

Marco’s hand went to Ace’s back entrance, but Ace slapped him away with a defiant swipe. “Fight me for it,” Ace insisted huskily, his gaze hard.

“Fight… what?!” Marco ran his eyes up and down Ace’s body, noting how every muscle stiffened and bulged out at him. Extending a brutal offer to him.

“I’m not just going to roll over and be your bitch,” Ace growled. “I know you want to top. But I want that too. You’re going to have to fight me for it.”

Marco didn’t know whether to snort at this absurdity and try to laugh it off, or give in to Ace’s sudden demands and start an all out dominance war with him. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he muttered instead, unable to make a decision.

Ace’s eyes flashed and before Marco knew what was happening he’d been thrown to the side rather violently by his student, landing on his back as Ace climbed on top of him. Or at least he would have been on top of him had Marco not reacted, grabbing a fist full of hard muscle and shoving Ace back to the bed in the same spot he’d lain not a scant few seconds before.

Teeth were bared, silent challenges made.

They entered into a struggle then, Marco trying desperately to pin Ace down with his own body while Ace preformed some impressing rolling manoeuvres, getting his body just out of Marco’s grasp each and every time with a little laugh at his own antics. But Ace had a limit to his powerful bursts of strength against the older man, and Marco was dead set on saving his asshole from being mauled by an eighteen year old, so their spat only lasted a few minutes at most.

Marco managed to trap Ace between his body and the bed’s head board. He grinned triumphantly while Ace scowled, unable to even meet Marco’s laughing eyes. The man was much, much stronger than he looked, and he looked impressively muscular to begin with.

“If you thought I was going to let some inexperienced brat have his way with me–”

“Inexperienced?!” Ace howled indignantly. “Like hell! I’ve had plenty of experience! I’m worried about your experience!”

Marco chuckled, the biting deep bass sending shivers down Ace’s chest and straight to his already
half-hard length. “I’ve fucked many a man, Ace. I doubt you have more experience than I do.”

“I’ve fucked a good number of men,” Ace argued back, just as fiercely. But Marco saw something in those dark eyes that said otherwise. There was a slight shake to his pupils whenever he lied, a trait that Ace didn’t know he had but Marco had picked up on.

“Well, if you’ve had a few partners already, I’m sure you’ll find I have a very good technique,” Marco said slowly, watching as Ace’s eyes glazed over. He reached for the bottle of lube and the condoms, ripping one of the little packages open. Ace watched with muted curiosity as Marco wiggled one of his fingers inside of the rubber. “Keeps it pretty clean, this way.”

Ace nodded, his breathing quickening when Marco wet his gloved finger and trailed it down his erection. The wet liquid was frigid cold and Ace shivered, the temperature repulsing his lower body.

Undaunted, Marco prodded a finger just inside the little hole he found between those two sweet cheeks, feeling how Ace jerked away from him. He didn’t relent though, rather increased his force and grabbed Ace to keep him steady. He fingered the rim of quivering muscles again, inserting just a fingernail’s length into that entrance. He began to wiggle it in deeper…

Suddenly, Ace cried out, his asshole simultaneously squeezing out Marco’s finger in complete rejection. “Wait! I-I lied. I, uh, don’t actually have experience with this stuff! Um, I-I mean I–”

“Relax, Ace,” Marco said, his voice smooth and comforting. “I know you’re a virgin.”

Ace turned a bright scarlet that spread down his neck and onto his chest. He scowled to make his anger and embarrassment known. What made him even more pissed was that Marco had the audacity to laugh at his reaction. “S-shut up,” Ace said after a few aggravating chuckles came from Marco’s lips. “And how the fuck did you know I’m a virgin!? It’s not like I wrote it on my forehead or anything!”

“I know,” Marco started, his eyes mischievously playful, “because you just told me yourself.”

Ace swung a fist that connected with a dull thwack against Marco’s chest.

This only made Marco laugh more. Ace cursed and leaned back on the bed, moving his eyes to the ceiling. His heart was beating so strongly that he feared it would pop right out of his chest. Soon though, Marco’s concerned face came into view.

“You want to stop now and leave this to another day? It’s perfectly fine you know; I don’t mind waiting. We can wait for as long as you need to get comfortable.”

Ace’s eyes widened. “No! I just, uh, I’m just nervous. That’s all.”

“That’s good.” Ace threw him a questioning stare. “That you’re nervous, I mean. It’s usually a good sign.”

Ace didn’t entirely understand that, but one of Marco’s hands had appeared on his thigh and then moved upwards, grasped him, and began to slowly jerk him off. Marco had already slicked his hand, and it glided easily over his skin, caressing him back to full hardness.

“I want you to focus on what my hand is doing,” Marco instructed with a low tone. The sight was enough to make Ace moan softly, and the tiny erotic noises were clouding Marco’s thoughts. “I’m going to be very gentle with you.”
“Okay,” Ace said, feeling Marco’s other hand dive between his legs once more. He tensed, and knowing he were apprehensive about the whole thing, Marco picked up his pace with his other hand, effectively diverting Ace’s fear. Marco leaned down to gently kiss Ace’s inner thigh as he pushed a finger inside him.

Ace squirmed. “That feels really weird,” he said, voice quivering. “I, uh… I don’t really know if I like this.”

“Here, let me…” Marco trailed off, moving around as he tried to find the one spot that would cause Ace to re-think his previous thoughts.

He knew he found it when Ace gripped the bed sheets and groaned, throwing his head back on the pillows. He had begun to tremble, and a few prods in the right spot, coupled with a few quick jerks, and Ace was over that brink, coating Marco’s hand and his own stomach. It all happened embarrassingly quick and Marco had to stifle a little snicker that threatened to break Ace out of his exhilarated ecstasy.

“Holy shit,” Ace panted, craning his neck as if doing so would give him a view of what magic Marco was working down there. “What the fuck was that?”

“I take it you’ve never fingered yourself down there before,” Marco said with a slight snigger. He moved his finger upwards in a quick jabbing motion, causing Ace to cry out before he could retort. “But it’ll feel better when I’m inside of you, that I can promise.”

With Ace still riding his post-orgasmic bliss out, Marco inserted two more fingers, one after another, into Ace’s opening. He stretched him easily, all tension having been milked out of him with his climax.

“You sure you still want me to do this?” He asked again, peering down at Ace’s flushed face. The freckles danced as Ace grinned. “This might hurt a little.” A lie, he knew for a fact it would hurt a lot, but something convinced him that he need not tell Ace that tidbit.

“Of course. I’m a big boy; I can take a little hurt.”

With that, Marco withdrew his fingers and discarded the condom, then got another one to cover himself with. He took his time positioning himself, letting Ace feel his girth and tense, then relax once more. He built Ace’s anticipation by pretending to push in, only to pull back at the first sign of Ace clenching. Finally, Ace came under the impression that Marco was teasing him mercilessly again, and fully relaxed enough to curse him out.

Marco slid inside him effortlessly, with a little laugh as Ace sputtered, taken by surprise.

The moment Marco entered him, Ace squeezed his eyes shut instinctively in response to the pain, but his grin grew tenfold. Sure he was hurting, almost impossibly so, but there was also a slight hint of triumph coursing through his blood. And there was something more, something primitive, something that made him arch his back and stare up at Marco, whose concentration was set on adjusting them so that there was as little pain as possible.

That primitive feeling, Ace tried to place it. He figured it was belonging, of being wanted and being claimed that brought a grand toothy smile out of him.

“You okay?” Marco asked, despite being able to see the grinning face under him. His voice was quiet but deep, salacious with desire.

“Better than okay,” Ace answered cheerily.
Marco chuckled, and Ace gasped; they were connected so closely that Ace could feel each minute vibration racing through his body. He trembled and squeezed Marco experimentally, getting a shuddering groan as a reply.

Figuring that Ace was fine, considering he was teasing him, Marco began slowly. His initial movements were haggard as he watched Ace’s face, making sure he wasn’t causing any additional pain. But Ace, once adjusted, insisted he speed things up with a silent buck of his hips to show Marco he was more than alright. So Marco obliged him, thrusting deeper and deeper, breaking new ground in Ace’s heat with every plunge. Before he knew it, Ace was feeling Marco’s balls slapping against him, warm and wet and so damned right. The sound alone was nearly enough to get him off, but he forced himself to hold back until Marco began to grunt, this thrusts gradually becoming sloppier. The control was loosening, the bed under them squeaking and shaking.

Ace could feel with each shiver of Marco’s cock inside him that Marco was close. His hunch was confirmed when Marco reached between them and began to pump Ace’s raging erection, a swollen red around the tip. He was not at all in time with his thrusts, instead he rather jerked Ace as he withdrew, keeping the pressure on him at all times. Without being given a single break from the added stimulation of Marco’s graceful fingers working him over, Ace came with a loud cry, spilling out onto Marco’s hand and across his stomach. Marco didn’t stop his administrations until Ace whimpered with a sated exhaustion and his body undulated, moved about by Marco’s roiling body. Marco, entirely ready to give Ace his seed, picked up his thrusting and finished himself off inside Ace with a long, drawn out moan.

He tangled his fingers into Ace’s sweaty hair and leaned down to kiss him on the forehead, a loving, admiring kiss. Then he arched up again, further taking in Ace’s soaked skin with appreciative eyes. All Ace could think of, or want for that matter, was Marco close at hand, so he pulled him down on top of him again. He wrapped his arms around those strong shoulders and would have liked to wrap his legs around Marco’s hips too, but suddenly he was quite sore and knew he should take it slowly. Besides, it didn’t look like Marco was going anywhere fast.

Marco kissed him gently, tenderly, one hand on Ace’s cheek with a thumb smoothing over his freckles. He was perfectly content to just have Ace under him forever, but he knew Ace had to get home. Still, according to the clock on the far wall they had an hour or so. He resolved to enjoy Ace in his bed while he was given the chance.

“How did that feel?” Marco asked, whispering into Ace’s neck as he kissed him along his jaw. His stubble brushed against Ace’s neck and he giggled a bit at the scratchy feeling. His hand was roaming down Marco’s back, fingers causing tingling sensations to run up his spine, and making goosebumps appear on his skin regardless of the heat in the room.

“Really fucking good. Kind of painful, but fuck is it ever worth it.”

Marco laughed at Ace’s profanity, nuzzling his face against Ace’s face, knowing that his scraggily beard tickled Ace’s sensitive skin. Sure enough, Ace burst out laughing and pushed his face away before drawing him back in for another kiss.

He grasped Ace’s cheek again and drew away to study that youthful, vibrant face. “You’re such a beautiful boy,” he said, stating the first thing that came to mind.

“I’m not a boy and I’m not beautiful. Girls are beautiful.”

Marco chuckled and leaned his head in close, breath hot on Ace’s face. “You need to learn how to take a compliment.”
“I’m a man and I believe the proper term for my obvious charm is handsome, not beautiful.”

“Whatever pleases you,” Marco said. But he looked down and all he could see was beauty in its sexist form. “Words like beautiful shouldn’t be gender specific.”

Ace huffed, and Marco rolled over, off of him, while his guard was down. Ace stared pitifully at him, slightly panicked that their moment was over, but Marco was already on his feet before he could whine and protest.

“Shower?” Marco offered.

Ace grinned.

Standing under the spray with Marco’s hands caressing his head as he washed his hair had never felt more natural. This intimateness, Ace knew he could get used to it, hell, addicted to it. He didn’t care if it was a clingy thing to think about, he only cared that right now he was the only thing on Marco’s mind. He loved this attention, attention he’d never gotten before from anyone, and he could care less if it was ‘unmanly’ to want Marco’s arms to hold him against his broad, tattooed chest.

He had wondered about that tattoo, a cross with a half moon swinging through the middle of it. Standing under the spray of the shower, he finally decided to ask.

“Your chest tattoo is awesome. Does it symbolize something?”

“Oh, so you noticed it?” Marco quipped nonchalantly.

“It’s kind of hard to miss,” said Ace, going along with Marco’s blatant attempt at a joke. He traced the huge mark with the tips of his nails, noticing how Marco’s nipples stiffened with his feathery touch. “So, what does it represent?”

“My freedom and my family,” Marco replied vaguely. He squeezed Ace tighter in his arms, letting his head fall onto Ace’s shoulder. The water dripped over them, the perfect image of serenity.

Ace let the conversation go into a stalemate as he wondered what Marco truly meant. He had a fuzzy idea, but somehow he believed Marco’s words transcended their obvious intent. Rarely was his teacher ever as simple as that when it came to the implied.

They dried one another off after getting out of the shower and dressed quickly, knowing that Ace was likely going to be late getting home. When Ace called to see if Garp were throwing a fit, he just got the answering machine and a pre-recorded message from Luffy, which consisted of him cheerily screaming into said machine. Speaking of Luffy, he had taken Spade earlier on in the day with him to Zoro’s, so Ace didn’t worry too much about his puppy trashing the house.

It left him free too.

“You know Marco, I have a feeling the old man has been called away to work overtime if he hasn’t already tried to crack down on my case.”

“Ace, I have to take you home. If you stay over here tonight, it’s risky for the both of us. If your grandfather gets home and you’re not there, he’s going to wonder where you are. And he’ll find out sooner or later that you’ve been with me. And if you’ve been here the entire night, it’ll make him suspect something…”

Ace huffed; Marco was right. So they pulled on some warmer clothes and prepared to step outside
into the cold, wintry world. Ace could hear the wind howling out there, waiting to inflict frost bite unto some unfortunate soul that didn’t cover up all exposed skin. He was really beginning to miss summertime.

When Marco opened the door, a gust of wind buffeted both of their faces. Blinking away snowflakes, Marco groaned at what he saw. Darkness consumed the world, but a few street lamps and his porch light showed him all he needed to know.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Marco grumbled, facing the blizzard beyond his doorway. From here, he could see his little sports car, low to the ground, held in place by massive snowdrifts. The driveway looked no better and the road in front of his home hadn’t been ploughed yet. They were completely stuck. Snowed in.

“Guess I’m staying for the night!” Ace chirped, Marco’s phone in his hand. He had already called the old man and left a new message on the answering machine stating his predicament. That it wasn’t safe to drive in the middle of the blizzard, that Marco’s car was snowed in, and that he was just staying put. Garp couldn’t complain about that.

They found themselves sitting in front of the television in the living room, watching the weather report. Apparently it had started snowing shortly after Ace had walked to Marco’s, and it hadn’t stopped since. Now it was late into the night, dark, and Ace knew he had the perfect excuse to snuggle into Marco’s side; he could feel it getting colder in the house. Not that the cold bothered him much, but still, it was his excuse to be clingy.

“Guess we were too busy to pay attention to the weather,” Ace said cheekily, leaning his head against Marco’s shoulder. The older man’s arm had snaked around Ace’s shoulders, holding him next to his side securely.

“Guess so,” Marco said softly. “You aren’t hurting too bad down there, are you?”

“It burns a little,” Ace told him truthfully. “But I kind of like that. Reminds me of what we just did.” He leaned up to kiss Marco’s stubbly jaw. The man’s hand had moved from grasping his shoulder to petting his hair, smoothing down those wild ebony locks that had become mussed earlier. Though he wouldn’t say it out loud to Ace, Marco noticed that there were a few feminine things about him, including the softness of his hair and skin. His hands especially were not rough and calloused like Marco’s were, and he liked to hold those hands in his own, touching the smoothness of Ace’s youth.

Suddenly, dark thoughts clouded around Marco, surfacing from the deepest crevices of his mind. He muted the commercials on the T.V., deciding to voice some of them, if only to get them out in the open and off his chest.

“I’ve always wondered: doesn’t it make you uncomfortable knowing that you’re a student and I’m a teacher? There’s an unequal power relationship there…sometimes I feel like I’m taking advantage of innocent feelings, that maybe you simply admire me for my knowledge or some other thing and have mistaken it for romantic, adult feelings.”

Ace fisted Marco’s shirt, then straddled his lap. “Believe me, I know what I feel,” he said, voice firm. “And if there’s an unequal power relationship, I’ve never noticed it.” His eyes sparkled and he let loose a little laugh. “Except when you pinned me.”

Marco looked away, distracted. “It’s just…our age difference bothers me. I’m old enough to be your father.”
Brows furrowed as Ace wondered just why Marco was bringing all this up suddenly, after they finally did it for the first time. Then he realized Marco felt guilty. Really guilty. And insecure. Really insecure. Because Ace was a ticking bomb in his eyes, completely unpredictable. And that half had to do with his young age, at least in Marco’s eyes.

“Look, you’re not my father and you can’t possibly be that old. I’m not experiencing some kind of lack of a father syndrome or something,” Marco’s eyes widened; he hadn’t realized Ace would delve so deeply into his dark thoughts. “So you can relax. As for the age thing: I don’t fucking care. I thought that was clear when we started all of this.”

Marco gulped and turned his head to the side, moving his eyes back to the weather channel, which displayed footage of the blizzard outside. He had spent lots of time thinking about all of this and found why they couldn’t be together, besides the obvious fact that society would certainly care. “Ace, I’ve been thinking lately, even if our relationship did last longer than a few years, you know I would die long before you. I’m past my prime and on a steady decline. Doesn’t that bother you?”

Ace eyed Marco’s bulging muscles and nearly snorted out of disbelief. Marco was gripping the couch hard, the whites of his knuckles showing how tense he’d become. Age seemed to mean more to him than Ace had thought it might.

“I doubt you’ll die anytime soon. I mean, if you’re anything like your bird, Phoenix.”

“Look, Ace,” Marco started crassly, “I’m not fucking immortal or anything, I–”

“That’s a good thing. If you were immortal, you’d probably be deeply unhappy. I, personally, am glad that I’ll die some day. Preferably before I become a really wrinkly invalid. Death is a fact of life. It’s something we should all embrace one day.”

Marco fell silent, but he at least looked Ace in the eye and brought his hands to Ace’s shoulders.

“You know, from the very beginning, I didn’t want to be your after-school fuck-buddy,” Ace lamented. “I always wanted more, and I know that you have always wanted more.”

“Sometimes, I feel like I don’t deserve you. And tonight, you just gave me everything. I can’t help but feel a little guilty about what I’ve done.”

“Oh, shut up,” Ace said, pausing before he let out what he really wished to say. “I fucking love you and you know it.”

The hasty confession that Marco had secretly longed to hear truly shut him up.
Chapter 18

Law and Kidd fell into an easy pattern after that night spent together, with Law showing up on Kidd’s doorstep on a regular basis, whenever the urge arose. These visits, occurring quite often, usually resulted in them starting off slow, either in front of the television or chatting absently about school life. Then they usually progressed into something hardly platonic. Nothing serious, yet. Just a bit of experimental fooling around between boys.

Kidd was hesitant at first having Law around so frequently, but there came a moment where something in him clicked in a different direction. He found himself missing Law’s presence whenever the other boy wasn’t within shouting distance, noticing the silence in his empty house now more than ever and wishing for Law’s body beside his. If that meant he were prodding him obnoxiously, trying to get a rise out of him, then so be it. As long as he was there. Law was always laughing these days, always doing things to fill that void of silence that Kidd could never fill by himself.

It should be said that Bepo, too, was beginning to enjoy his time at Kidd’s mansion. Mostly because he got fed every time Kidd and Law wanted him out of their hair, which was often enough as teenage male hormones were constantly at all time highs. Still, he had come to accept Kidd, begrudgingly, which was more than Law had hoped.

At any rate, today was one of those days where Kidd found himself waiting for Law to arrive. He had found a hastily scribbled note amongst his books that had been slipped inside his locker. It was always scribbles, words that Kidd would only read once. Every note he got he meticulously shredded and disposed of, careful not to let Killer find out their secrets.

Now though, he was waiting longer than Law had specified in his note, slowly becoming worried with each passing minute that Law was a no-show. When at last the doorbell finally rang, Kidd bolted to the door and opened it so violently that it was nearly ripped from its hinges.

As he expected, Law was outside with a sheepish smile on his tanned face, knowing he was late as hell. What Kidd didn’t expect, however, was the medium sized cardboard box tucked under his arm. Law invited himself in, as usual, ignoring Kidd’s prying eyes as he chucked his dirty shoes against the pristine white wall and made his way into the living room. He finally set the box down with utmost care.

Kidd strode over and peered into the box, then cursed loudly.

“W-what the hell are those things?” he stuttered. “God, don’t tell me you found your fellow raccoons on the way here!?”

“I found them sitting on the side of the road in the snow. Half frozen to death.”

“That’s not what I asked! I meant, what the hell are they?! Some kind of rat?”

“No, they are small, shorthaired, black kittens. I’m sure you can see they are not rodents. Nor raccoons, for that matter.”

“Kittens!? The fuck are you doing with kittens!?”

“Rescuing them, of course. They were abandoned by some shit-faced idiot, no doubt. Left to die in the snow. People can be so fucking cruel.”
“Okay, okay, you’ve clearly lost your mind. I want you to take those…those blobs, out of here right now. Give them to that Ace guy.”

Trafalgar shook his head. As much as he liked Ace, he knew the other was too busy already providing Spade with the best possible care. And then there was Luffy to consider, who might as well have been another pet all by himself. “They’re here to stay. I even found a pet store on the way home and bought some stuff with the credit card I stole out of your wallet last night.”

“You stole…you damn scavenging Raccoon! And those things are not staying in my house!”

Trafalgar let his face go slack, his lips drooping down into a pout. It was a vulnerable look, one a disappointed child might lapse into. Its effect on Kidd was momentous.

“Fine,” he grumbled as he looked away, unable to take the pitiful sight in front of him. “We’ll keep one.”

“It would be cruel to separate them after all they’ve gone through together,” Law said sadly, casting his eyes down to look at the wee black blobs on the floor snuggling together for warmth. It had been lucky for them that he’d come along when he did, any longer outside and they might have gotten frost bite. In fact, it looked like they had just been left there on the side of the road when Law found them, as the boot marks around the box had been incredibly fresh and not covered over with leisurely falling snow. If he weren’t so concerned about getting the kittens someplace warm, he probably could have found the person and throttled them.

Eustass Kidd, meanwhile, stared. And stared. And stared some more at those…kittens.

Nothing good had come of letting Trafalgar Law into his house.

“Fine. They can stay,” he said, grudgingly accepting them. “But if they do anything…destructive, or shit all over the house they are going back to living the hard life. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly, dear Eustass,” Law quipped, grinning. Kidd grunted angrily at being so thoroughly mocked by a man who brought home kittens. “However, we still have one problem. What shall we name them? Any preferences for names?”

Eustass looked down at the fluff balls, grimacing as he realized they were all looking up at him with expressions of fright on their little black faces. They were lined up in a row, side by side, staring at him with wide green eyes that bore down on his very soul.

Damned animals.

“One, Two, Three,” Eustass recited, pointing at each frightened fluff in turn.

“I’m glad you remember your basic numerals,” Trafalgar said sarcastically. “But really, if you don’t have any ideas for names I’m going to give them some.”

“I just named them. One, Two, and Three. It’s done. Now can we please do something more, oh, I don’t know, sexually explicit.”

For a moment, Trafalgar sat on the floor, stunned into silence. The cat had gotten his tongue on that one. Finally, he said, “Those have got to be the shittiest names in history. But, we’ll make do with them.”

Eustass cocked an eyebrow. Truthfully, he hadn’t expected Law to give in so easily. He thought he’d have at least a smidgeon of a protest about his less than creative choice. “Really?”
“Yeah. Uno, Dos and Tres won’t mind their new names once they get used to them.” A cheeky smile stretched across Trafalgar’s face.

“…Oh, you think you’re a fucking genius, don’t you? Switching the language like that,” Kidd growled. “Hilarious.”

“Lucky for these cats or they could’ve been stuck with the mundane names you gave them. You’re already a horrible parent—”

Kidd sputtered, “A-a parent!? That’s fucked up. Never say that again!”

“Aw, but honey, they have your creepy ass squinty pupils and my beautiful, luxurious hair,” Trafalgar joked, sticking out his tongue. He ran a hand through his dark locks, just to further piss off Kidd.

Eustass stormed out of the room, intent on locking himself away somewhere until he could figure out what to do with those intrusive animals and his equally intrusive boyfriend.

Trafalgar took the sudden silence as a good time to see if the cats would eat any of the food he’d bought. He went into the kitchen and found a large plate, which he then covered with three piles of wet canned food. The kitchen quickly began to stink like fish.

Law really hoped Kidd wouldn’t come down here and smell the new aroma of his million dollar estate.

He brought the cats the dish and coaxed them into eating it by rubbing a bit on their pink mouths until they licked it off instinctively. After they realized what was in front of them, all three greedily dug in. Law was quite smug knowing he had successfully enticed the kittens into getting some calories into their frail little bodies.

After the dish was clean, the three cats sat in a heap, licking each other’s faces clean of the wet cat food they’d indulged in. Oddly enough, Law felt a strange calmness come over him at seeing these baby animals going about their normal everyday feline activities. It meant that whatever had happened to them in the past, they could get over it and live normal lives.

Eustass chose that special, profound moment to walk into the room. What he saw was a huge black blob on his white carpet, occasional pink tongues darting out of mouths.

“There is a three-way on my rug,” Eustass grumbled irritably.

“You’re really a mood killer, aren’t you?”

Kidd shook his head in disgust and turned to leave again, but before he could get very far he found Law’s arms wrapping around his waist. Panda hug. Great, this couldn’t be good.

“Please come sit with us,” Trafalgar whispered into Kidd’s ear. His throat rumbled on the back of Kidd’s neck as he hummed suggestively. “The cats don’t bite. At least not yet. They’re not as bad as you think.”

Eventually, as with the cats to their food dish, Law managed to coax Kidd into sitting with him on the floor. Albeit he put some distance between himself and the mass of black fur, Eustass appeared genuinely interested in them now that Law was petting each of them with a single, gentle finger. This added reassurance seemed to give the felines energy as they soon began to trot around and explore their surroundings, though they didn’t stray far from their cardboard box and dinner plate.
“How the hell are we going to tell them apart?” Kidd asked, watching the black bodies playing on the rug and darting around excitedly. “They all look the same.”

“I can tell them apart. Their eyes are slightly different shades.”

Eustass snorted. “They all have green eyes. They are all black. They are impossible to tell apart.”

“Well, I did get these,” Trafalgar said, reaching into the plastic bag beside him. He emerged with three bright, tiny, rope-like things. Collars, Eustass noted upon closer inspection. “Yellow, red and blue. The primary colours. Uno, Dos and Tres.”

“I’m glad you know your basic colours,” Kidd muttered dryly. He watched as Trafalgar caught each kitten in his hands in turn, putting the collars that were too big for each onto their necks. Each collar had to be tightened to the last hole in the nylon available so as not to slip off of the kittens. “There’s something else I’ve been wondering too; are they boys or girls?”

“Male or female? Why don’t you check?” Trafalgar waved the question off absentmindedly. “Frankly, they have pretty unisex names. It hardly matters until we go to get them fixed.”

“I’m not looking at their…”

Law raised a brazen eyebrow as Kidd trailed off into an embarrassed silence, then picked one of the cats up. He flipped it over onto its back and stared intently down at it. “This one’s a male.”

He replaced the kitten, then grabbed another. “Oh, another male.” He put that one down as well, grabbing the third and final kitten. “Ah, but this one appears to be female. This is Dos, by the way. Yellow collar, darkest green eyes.”

Eustass was silent, then he said, “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“What, sexed the cats? Perfectly normal if you ask me. A doctor has to be able to tell a mother whether the child that just popped out of her womb is a girl or a boy.” Eustass’ face turned into a grimace at that analogy. “I might as well be the man in this family.”

Kidd stormed out of the room again, for everyone’s safety.

--oOo--

“How are they running around like a bunch of animals? Oh wait, I forgot, they are a bunch of animals! I hate animals!”

“Not too long ago I thought you said Bepo was growing on you?”

Kidd let his head fall into his palms, thoroughly exasperated with the situation at hand. “Dogs are different than cats. They poop and pee and just fetch things for you, obeying without question. Cats just wreck your house. And they know when they’re being bad.”

A loud crash punctuated Kidd’s speech. Law coughed nervously, being the first to see the broken lamp knocked over by Uno. Said kitten was off like a shot already, tearing through the house to create additional havoc. But before he turned a corner and disappeared, he glanced back at Kidd and Law and opened his mouth wide as if to laugh.

“See what I mean? He knows exactly what he’s doing, damn cat.”

“Oh honey, it’s not like all the kids are bad.” Eustass glared at him. “I mean look; the little female
is sniffing at your leg. That one is Dos, if you’ve forgotten already.”

“Yeah, well, she’d better not take a piss on my foot, or I’ll be really pissed off.”

“That kind of behaviour is best suited to dogs, especially if they are not neutered,” Law said with a snicker. He watched Dos for a few seconds. She was sniffing at Eustass, sure, but she was also opening and closing her tiny mouth in a silent string of meows. “I think she wants you to pick her up.”

“No. I don’t want to touch it.”

“That’s so cruel,” Law commented. “All she wants is just a little bit of love.” By now Dos was putting her tiny paws on Kidd’s foot, making him squirm. Law reached down and gently lifted the kitten into his arms, the cat weighting nothing at all.

Eustass watched with apprehension. He was, however, unprepared for Law to place the animal against his chest. Claws sunk in and the cat stuck like a black gob of superglue.

“Hold her so she doesn’t fall.”

“No, no, no! Get her off of me.”

“Oh, stop being a pussy.”

Kidd didn’t know whether to punch Law or laugh at his double entendre. Regardless, he moved his hands up and supported the cat. Law gave him a peck on the cheek for his efforts amid another smash of glass.

“Uh oh, I’ll get Uno,” Law said before Kidd could start complaining again. He darted in the direction of the crash, leaving Kidd standing awkwardly, holding the young feline gingerly in his arms.

He looked down at the black fluff nuzzled into his chest, claws still gripping his shirt. Suddenly he became aware of a strange sensation. He panicked.

“Raccoon Face,” he called, “I think the cat’s broken! It’s vibrating all over!”

He could hear Law’s snort of laughter in the depths of the house. “It's called purring! She must really like you!”

“Fine. Whatever. But if this thing explodes all over the white carpet, I’m holding you responsible!”

Law came back with Uno struggling for freedom in his grasp and laughed at the sight in front of him. Dos was happily purring away in the arms of a very disgruntled Kidd.

“Please take her off of me,” Kidd pleaded.

“She looks so happy there. I couldn’t possibly,” said Law, placing Uno back into the cardboard box. It had been a week but the box hadn’t been moved or thrown away. In fact, Law had laid some towels down inside it and the cats often congregated there at night. Law figured the felines saw the box as some place safe in such a huge mansion.

Kidd tried unsuccessfully to dump Dos in the box, the kitten’s claws steadfast in keeping her adhered to his shirt. He was, in fact, careful not to pull on the black fluff too hard, as Law had advised him not to pull the cat’s claws out. The very idea frightened him.
“Here, why don’t you pet her? She’ll get sleepy and then you can put her in the box for a nap.” Law’s suggestion made sense, but Kidd curled his lip up at it. “Sit down,” Law instructed. He took a seat himself, patting the space on the couch beside him temptingly.

Kidd sat, shoulder to shoulder with him and tried to hand off the feline once again. Dos wouldn’t budge. “Just pet her,” Law urged him.

Begrudgingly, Kidd raised a single finger and put it in the space between Dos’ ears, then made a quick stroke down her head. That was the extent of his affection.

“A little more than that,” Law said dryly, unimpressed. By this time, Uno had escaped his box and was making a mess of the litter tray Law had set out for the cats. Thankfully, each feline had enough domestic instinct to use the litter tray for its intended purpose rather than the carpet. However, Uno found scattering the litter a fun past time. It annoyed the crap out of Kidd and Law was fairly certain that alone was Uno’s intention.

Law went off to capture Uno, laughing as the cat turned on him and jumped on his leg. Not intending to hurt him, or shred his pants, but in play. Earnestly, Law really liked that cat’s enthusiasm. It was such a change from Bepo’s steadfast obedience. Not that he didn’t love his pooch – he just happened to find these kittens simply adorable too.

When he returned to the couch with Uno in his arms he was met by a remarkable sight. Dos had moved farther up Kidd’s chest until she was snuggled under his chin. Kidd looked embarrassed, his face red as a coke can.

Trafalgar couldn’t help but think Eustass adorable as he blushed. “Your face matches your hair,” he pointed out bluntly.

“Shut the fuck up, Raccoon Face.”

“I prefer the nickname Panda if you are going to compare me to an animal,” Law huffed, annoyed.

“Pandas aren’t vermin. Therefore I will call you what I see fit.”

“Hey, watch it, Your High-Ass.”

If that was meant as an insult, it had failed horribly. Kidd burst into laughter, dabbing at the corners of his eyes to collect the laughter-tears that had gathered there. Then he made a face of disgust, blinking out a spattering of black hair that had been clinging to his fingers from Dos.

“Damn fur.” As Kidd made to try and brush the feline off of him, Dos clutched at him with renewed vigour. This made Law laugh harder. “She just won’t let go of me! I swear, if I knew how clingy these things were I’d have never have let you keep them in this house.”

Law flipped so he was straddling Kidd, leaning up against his chest. He snuggled in beside Dos and whispered to her, “Don’t worry. In time you’ll melt his frigid heart. He’s just scared of the morbidly cute, but hey, look at where I am now!”

Kidd groaned. Two months ago he would have kicked Law off of him. Now he found himself petting Law’s head affectionately.

“Mmm, just like that,” Law mumbled into Kidd’s neck. “You know, I like it when you rub behind my ears.”

“You’re like an oversized cat.”
“I thought I was your racoon?”

“Guess you embody several different animals all in one,” Kidd said with a grunt. “Why are you licking me?”

“I’m not licking you,” Law whispered with a smirk.

“…If you’re not licking me…” As Law expected, Kidd let out a loud shriek.

Kidd was squirming as Dos continued to lap at his skin with her bumpy tongue. “Okay, can you please stop her?! It’s ticking me and freaking me out!”

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold up. Did the great Eustass ‘Captain’ Kidd just admit to being ticklish?”

“Stop mocking me and get the damn cat off. It’s not that I’m ticklish, I’m just incredibly uncomfortable.”

“Aw, you’re so cute, Mr. Eustass.”

“Stupid Raccoon,” Kidd barked. “You’re an even bigger asshole than I am and that’s saying something profound.”

Law nuzzled his face into Kidd’s neck in an attempt to muffle his snickering. The amused snorts and tiny wuffs were muffled a bit, sure, but Kidd knew exactly what was up.

“I would punch you right now but I’m afraid I’ll miss and hit your precious kitten.”

“So you care,” Law stated. “Alright, guess I’ll grab the cat now…”

With that, Law worked his fingers under the cat’s body, rubbing its tiny belly. As if on cue, the cat magically retracted her claws and stood up. Law lifted her from Kidd and hurried to put her away in the box, since she was getting quite sleepy.

“You could do that the whole time and you just did it now?” Kidd growled threateningly.

With a grin, Law wriggled his body, getting ready to run. As he expected, since Kidd was often so damn predictable, he had to make a mad dash to save his life. Kidd came barrelling after him, chasing him all the way up to his bedroom where Law flopped down on the bed, surrendering. He couldn’t see anyway, not with the tears that had sprung to his eyes from laughing too hard.

Kidd climbed on top of him and kissed him senseless as punishment, then relished in this position where he so clearly dominated. He ran his hands up and down Law’s sides, slightly surprised when the other boy shivered and let out a tight-lipped giggle.

He ran his fingertips under Trafalgar’s arms once more, trying to see if it would bring about the same reaction as before. The dark haired boy squirmed and frowned at him with contempt.

“Stop that.”

“Why?” Kidd asked with a smirk. He let his fingers trail over Trafalgar’s sensitive underarms once more and was rewarded with a quick intact of breath and a shudder.

“I said stop that, you louse! I’m ticklish there.”

“You’re the one who’s ticklish? And did you just call me a louse?”
“Yes and yes,” Law answered irritably.

Eustass snorted and continued to poke at the boy under him, trying to find out if there were more ways to make Law squirm. He didn’t get any more reactions out of Trafalgar, except when he trailed his fingers once more under the boy’s arms. Law writhed and slapped his hands away.

Kidd caught both of his flailing wrists, put them together to make two, and then pinned those appendages over Trafalgar’s head with a single hand. Now, with one free arm to do as he wished, Eustass began mirthlessly tickling Trafalgar. At first the victim tried to suppress his weakness, but Kidd was relentless and soon Law was shrieking at him to quit his actions.

And laughing. Law was laughing like a hyena.

Eustass found, surprisingly, that he quite liked the sound of Law giggling and screaming while under him. It was oddly entertaining, this new power that he’d found.

Eventually Law kicked managed to kick him hard enough to bruise and Kidd rolled off of him. “So, what are you doing tonight?” he asked as he clutched his knee where the other boy had landed a hit.

“Same thing I do every night. Go home, see if the old hag has overfed Bepo, make sure the old hag has not destroyed anything of value, and make sure the old hag is not scaring the neighbourhood kids. Why?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to stay over,” Kidd said softly. He brushed a hand across Trafalgar’s chest, slowly. Suggestively.

Law hadn’t stayed a night since that first time, so he had to admit that the offer was somewhat unexpected. Not unwelcome though. “Sure, I’ll stay…” he brushed a finger over Kidd’s lips, letting his thumb linger seductively, “…and look after the cats.”

Kidd whacked him lightly for ruining the moment, then howled as Uno came out of nowhere and leapt at him. The red-collared cat was followed closely by the yellow-collared cat, only Dos decided she wanted to cuddle whereas Uno was more focussed on using Kidd as a scratching post.

“Get them off, get them off, get them off!”

Law just laughed and reminded him that they had only two energetic cats, really, so what was he complaining about? Tres, well, in that week they learned he was not a very active cat, instead preferring to nap on the heated vents throughout the house. Quickly, he became Kidd’s favourite cat, if ever a position could be held.
“I feel bad that I haven’t been harassing you much lately,” Ace said one Friday afternoon. School was back in session and at the moment Ace was consuming cafeteria food with Law sitting across from him, leaning back in his chair to avoid the particles of food flying from Ace’s mouth as he talked while he was trying to chew.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been busy too,” Law admitted. “Besides, we’re back into the routine of walking to school in the morning, so it’s not like I don’t see your freckled face then.”

Ace paused in his chewing for a minute, then swallowed before saying, “Yeah. But you weren’t there waiting for me this morning. Where were you?”

*At Kidd’s place. In his bed, if you want to be exact, thought Law. He hid a smile that peeled onto his face by looking away. “Oh, nowhere really. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”*

Ace shrugged and continued scarfing down his hamburger. Law had finished eating about ten minutes ago and had given his leftovers to Ace. It took an additional ten minutes before Ace finished his mountain of food, and by that time Law had finished homework from one of his morning classes.

“By the way…” Ace started. Law looked up from his textbook and notebook where he was checking his answers to some questions. “That bastard Kidd has been looking over here the entire time we’ve been eating. I swear he’s watching either you or me. Or both of us. Maybe he wants to fight me. I haven’t had a good brawl in a long time now. Could be fun.”

“No, he’s just watching me, so don’t you worry your pretty little freckles,” Law said with a knowing chuckle. Ace straightened, thoroughly perplexed.

“Why would he be watching you?” Ace whispered, leaning over the table between them as if asking the answer to some great secret. “I swear, if he hurts you I’m going to…to…drown him in a snow bank or something.”

“Is that the best you’ve got?” asked Law with a snicker. “You’re going to drown him in a snow bank?”

“Well, I can’t say I’ll break every bone in his body or crush his head into the pavement or anything like that since it would be cliché,” Ace replied. “Seriously though, why the fuck is he looking over here? And Killer’s looking too.”

This time Law looked over his shoulder, catching the angle of Killer’s head. Yeah, beneath his blond bangs he just had to be staring. He watched as Killer looked away casually, trying to appear as if he weren’t just gazing in their direction. Kidd on the other hand just kept staring unabashed, so Law threw him a discreet wink. Even from across the cafeteria he could see Kidd’s usual morose frown twitch into a fleeting smile.

He turned back to Ace, who was oblivious to his new relationship. “Kidd’s not such a bad guy.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? He’s the guy who broke your arm in your freshman year. He’s the guy who verbally harasses you. He’s the guy who deliberately tried to kill you with a basketball to the head in gym class last year. He’s the guy who has always made your life *fucking hell*. Don’t tell me he’s ‘not such a bad guy,’ because that’s a load of *shit*.”
“Calm down Ace,” Law advised. He hadn’t been expecting such an explosion to ensue. Just one more time he’d underestimated Ace. “You’re blowing flames from your nostrils. And besides, he didn’t directly break my arm. It was half your fault. If you hadn’t gotten in my way, I would have been able to—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” Ace growled lowly. He reached across the table and grabbed onto Law’s arm through the fabric of his sweater. “I think you’re keeping something pretty damn important from me to have made a statement like ‘Kidd’s not such a bad guy’.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you what you need to know. If you can keep a secret.”

Ace leaned in, eager to hear. “I promise I’ll keep your secret. No problem.”

“Okay. I’m fucking him.”

“…” There was a moment of silence before Ace detonated.

“What!?”

His outburst got the attention of every single person in the cafeteria. Suddenly, the murmur of gossip and casual conversation was stunted, frozen into silence. Everyone looked over at their table, wondering what in the world the boy known vaguely as Fire-Crotch was freaking out about.

“Shush!”

“Don’t tell me to shush! You’re lying, right? That’s got to be the sickest joke you’ve ever told me, and you’ve told me a lot of sick jokes involving corpses! And medical things! And, and, and…” he trailed off, grappling with this new information as it permeated his brain.

“Actually, it’s more or less true. Except we haven’t fucked yet. Not all the way, anyhow.”

Ace gaped, then he scrambled to his feet, his chair skittering backwards. His eyes locked on Kidd with a red fury that promised death and he began to strut forwards with his fists clenched. A hand on his wrist stopped him from getting too far.

“Hey, you promised,” Law hissed. He gave him the single widened eye, the one which told Ace that he’d better watch himself, or Law’s trust of him might be called into question. “Now come on, let’s talk somewhere more private before you tear someone apart.”

“That someone would’ve been Kidd,” Ace snarled, leading the way out of the cafeteria. Many, many pairs of eyes stared after them. Among those eyes, Kidd’s and Killer’s.

Law took him down the halls of the school and into a seldom-used hallway. The walk gave Ace plenty of time to compile his thoughts and fume. Finally, sitting against a wall of lockers, Law nodded at him to speak.

Ace let loose the inferno. “The hell have you been doing with that guy?!”

“Oh, you know, a few handjobs, the odd blowjob, a couple—”

“That is not what I meant! I meant, why did you choose Kidd of all people!? Do you have any idea how much I dislike him?!”

“Why did you choose Marco of all people?”

Ace ground his teeth at that retort. “The difference here is that Marco is a good person and Kidd is...
not. He’s a bad person. I just don’t understand why you’d…screw around with him. He has done way too many fucking shitty things to people, especially you. I just don’t get it!”

Law turned his body around so he could embrace Ace, who cared so deeply for him. Ace was just trying to protect him, Law knew. “Look, I know it’s kind of shocking, but it was a gradual thing. There’s more to him than you realize. Just like how I don’t know all the details of your relationship with Marco, you don’t know everything there is to know about Kidd. Got it?”

“If he hurts you in any way, I’ll kill him. You know I will.”

Law chuckled, despite Ace’s serious face. “You don’t have to worry about that Ace. He’s actually pretty gentle with me nowadays. He may threaten to do a lot of things, but it turns out he can’t even hurt a tiny kitten. At least when I’m around.”

Ace curved an eyebrow up at that one, but didn’t question further. He didn’t want to be rudely surprised any more today. In the lull of their conversation, both of their ears picked up the sound of heavy boots making their way down the hall towards them. Instantly they quieted even further, waiting for the person, whomever it was, to pass.

It was Kidd; his red hair spiked up and patterned clothing as loud as ever. He stopped a few feet off, leaning against the lockers, just watching them. Law’s eyes went to Ace’s face where an expression of grim disgust had taken over. Kidd continued to watch them, waiting for someone to speak. The tension was thick, with Law worried that one or both parties might attack. He didn’t even want to know what the outcome of a Kidd and Ace brawl would look like. He’d be willing to bet there’d be a lot of blood. And a lot more broken bones.

After an excruciating minute of silence that seemed to stretch into an hour, Ace finally stood. Law scrambled to his feet after him, readying himself to hold his friend back. What good that would do, he didn’t know. But, much to his astonishment, Ace just turned to him with a small smile and then nudged him gently with an elbow. Then he walked away in the opposite direction, leaving Kidd and Law alone.

Law was baffled, but glad that he didn’t have to try to separate two of the school’s most notorious fighters. That would have been messy.

Kidd cautiously strode up, wary of any additional people finding them here. “You told him, didn’t you?”

“I think that much was clear,” Law said dryly. “I had to. He’s my best friend. He deserved to know. Granted, I will admit that it was probably not the best time to tell him, but it’s better than him finding out through rumour or whatever.”

“There aren’t any rumours being spread about us,” Eustass said gruffly. “People still think we’re enemies vying to rip one another’s throats out. They know you’re gay and they believe I hate you for it.”

“Which would be quite hypocritical of you, considering your own sexuality,” Law said with a tiny smirk. “Mr. Eustass, don’t you think it’s time you burst out of the closet in a most extravagant way?”

Kidd’s eyes hardened and he sighed. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Killer would not be happy. Not to mention my reputation. You have to understand, I don’t like to
be laughed at.”

“I’m pretty sure people wouldn’t dare to laugh at you. And if they did, I’d give them a bloody nose as punishment.” Law grinned toothily. Still, it wasn’t enough to console Kidd.

“Look, the whole ‘coming out thing’ isn’t for me. Sorry.”

Law cocked his head to the side, moving his body off of the lockers. He had a feeling Kidd would say this. “Alright, how about this: remember how you wanted to do it the last time I slept over? Yeah, well, I’d be willing to give up my ass virginity for your coming out speech. Hell, it doesn’t even have to be a speech. In fact, I’d rather it not be a speech. To come out, all you have to do is slam me up against a wall and kiss me in front of a bunch of random people. Rumours will out you nicely. It’s the least painful way of doing things.”

Kidd’s eyes were narrowed dangerously. The gears in his head were working overtime to process Law’s words. “You really just offered sex in exchange for me outing myself?”

“I just did, didn’t I? So, do we have a deal or what?”

“Why do I get this feeling you’re getting the better end of the bargain?”

“Great, so you agree!” Kidd eyes widened; he hadn’t signed on with Law’s supposedly brilliant arrangement! “Okay, I’ll come over this weekend. Either tomorrow or the day after. See you then!”

And with that, Law bolted before Kidd could so much as howl after him.

--oOo--

All through math class, Ace was silently fuming. Every time he went to go write something down, the lead in his pencil would break with the force he transferred into it and he’d have to get up and sharpen it, only to break it again. Eventually he stopped trying to take notes and his narcolepsy nodded him off. He woke up later to find Marco sitting in front of him on a desk, tapping a broken pencil against the open palm of his hand.

“Something the matter, Ace?” he asked softly, fingers itching to reach out and caress Ace’s cheek. But he had to mind his place in school, since every encounter between them posed a risk of discovery. And there were frequent encounters to begin with.

“Oh, sorry, I fell asleep,” Ace muttered, rubbing at his eyes to clear them. “Shit.”

“It’s fine considering I’m the one who’s causing you to lose some sleep,” said Marco, winking suggestively. Ace blushed, shifting in his seat until he felt a familiar tinge of pain that had been present for the past few days. They had gotten together for sex more than once after that initial time, with Marco claiming that the best way to combat any pain from the act was to keep doing said act until Ace’s body got used to it. Ace didn’t mind the pain; it was a reminder of fun times for him, but Marco was always concerned since he was never on the receiving end.

At least not yet, Ace thought with slight amusement.

“You’re not in pain right now, are you?”

Ace blinked at Marco’s outright question, then flicked his eyes to the classroom door, seeing that it was closed. Marco must have shut it to buy them some privacy. “I’m fine. It’s a good kind of pain.”
“Then what’s wrong? You’ve been acting angry ever since you got in here. Akainu hasn’t come after you again, has he?” Marco leaned in a touch closer to Ace. Any further and the air would heat up. Ace began numbly packing away his things, frowning slightly as he was reminded of the reason for his previous anger.

“Well, honestly I’m just worried about a friend of mine. See, he’s in kind of a strange relationship.”

“I doubt it could be any stranger than ours,” Marco said with a nonchalant shrug. He backed up before he could give in to the temptation of kissing Ace’s frown off of his face and went over to his desk, packing up his own things into a briefcase.

Ace chuckled a bit; there was certainly some truth to that statement. “Guess so. Anyways Marco, Thatch got my phone number somehow. He told me to force you to bring me to his next concert. Says he needs some younger guys around to entice the ladies or something. I had no idea what the hell he was going on about. His enthusiasm overrode some of his thoughts.”

Marco rolled his eyes. “He’s trying to get you hooked up with someone as a favour to a friend. He must really like you if he’s willing to share the girls with you. He obviously doesn’t know about us.”

Ace snickered, shouldered his backpack, and walked over to Marco’s desk. “Do you think he’d be okay with us being together?”

“He’ll be shocked at first, but I think he’ll get over it quickly since he likes you. Though he’ll probably ask me how I managed to score so high,” Marco said, sticking his tongue out to brush across his lips jokingly.

A blush heated Ace’s face. “So Marco, when do you think we can go public?”

“After your graduation, I suppose. I don’t know, it’s not that big of a deal for me, personally. I wasn’t exactly planning on telling the world, just our group of friends. You know, just the people who care about us. The people who matter.”

Ace smiled. “A few months to go then?”

“Yeah, a few months to go,” Marco agreed. He couldn’t resist then, and apparently neither could Ace, as their lips met in a brief brush, more chaste than their usual affections.

As Ace left for his next class with Aokiji, two figures in the hallway and a third outside the class windows scattered, each unaware of one another. But each were very, very aware of the situation within that math classroom, and all three, again, had vastly different opinions on it.

--oOo--

Law ended up choosing Saturday over Sunday for the simple reason of being afraid that Kidd would brush him off. He wasn’t sure if Kidd would actually want to do it with him, not with his pseudo-threat hanging over his head. He knew Kidd was eager to experiment, but also knew he was just as eager to keep his sexuality a secret. Law didn’t know if Kidd would keep his end of the bargain. His ultimatum was pretty harsh, he could admit to that.

The sky was dark when he set out from home, as he had planned to sneak out of his own house after dinner when the old hag was sitting with Bepo on the couch watching the news, and Law had to find his way to Kidd’s place using the streetlamps. If there was one thing he liked about these rich gated communities, it was their commitment to keeping citizens safe. That meant there was an overhead light every few feet and nice sidewalks. Finding his way to Kidd’s place was easy, and
he got there quick with the cold air nipping at any exposed flesh, but a problem presented itself
upon his arrival. He nearly started choking when a sudden panic encircled him.

He really should have set up this date beforehand.

He walked up the driveway, all too aware that he was leaving tracks in the snow that would be
found later. Then he examined the new cars alongside Kidd’s red vehicle, noting that he had never
seen either the beige truck or the blue car before. Briefly, he wondered if Kidd had friends over,
but the fact remained that Killer lived just a few doors down and would likely walk over, not drive.
And Law didn’t know many of Kidd’s more distant friends well enough to know what kind of
vehicles they drove, if they drove anything at all.

So his mind eventually came to the conclusion of yes, the parents were home.

It explained why the house was more lit up than usual, all of its porch lights on and the windows
awash in a cheery yellow glow that chased away the darkness. Though he had to wonder, was it
really cheery in there? From what Kidd had shared with him on occasion, his relationship with his
parents was more or less nonexistent.

He knew he should probably leave the family be for the night and try his luck phoning Kidd on his
cell on Sunday, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that perhaps it would be better to… invite himself
in. It would certainly be more eventful, if he played it that way.

He pulled out his cell phone, knowing full well that Kidd seldom used his or had it turned on for
that matter, and sent a text that would decide his fate.

--oOo--

Kidd jumped a little when he phone vibrated in his pants. He had to resist whipping it out and
checking the message, because he knew his father would not be happy if he did that during dinner.
It couldn’t be helped that he was in a perpetually bad mood.

He ate the rest of his rice quietly, listening to the drone of the television in the background. His
mother, who sat across from him in a white blouse and a dark skirt that kissed her ankles, had
turned it on as a distraction from their reality. It filled the silence and kept a conversation from
starting that would likely end in verbal violence.

Kidd nearly laughed out loud and spit out his rice when a thought entered his head. He repressed
the childish question that seemed to have been asked in Law’s voice. *When are you guys going to
get your divorce?* the voice asked. He really had been hanging around Law too much lately. He
was starting to think like his boyfriend.

Yes, he accepted that much. That Law was his boyfriend. It was a foreign term to him, but it also
came with a prideful ring to it. He almost wanted to shout it in his father’s face, just to see the
different shades of red his father would turn. There would be the red of embarrassment, the red of
humour (for Kidd couldn’t *possibly* be serious), and then, finally, the red of extreme anger.

His father’s anger was the scariest red.

He hadn’t been intending to speak during dinner, but the text that sat unopened in his pocket was
gnawing at him. It could be Killer, or Eddie…perhaps even Law. His stomach flipped at that last
thought. He just had to know.

“May I be excused for a moment?”
His father’s dark eyes flicked to him, the bottomless pits all consuming. Kidd felt swallowed by them whenever his father was home. “If you must,” he grunted.

He glanced to his mother briefly, noting how she shrunk away at the prospect of being left alone with her husband. Kidd was a buffer between them, and without his presence the two were more likely to go at each others’ throats. It was mere chance that both of his parents were home from their respective trips at the same time, and mere chance again that they would be sitting at the table together without fighting, with one or both storming off to opposite sides of the house.

Kidd’s presence kept them docile, since they weren’t as ready to fight in front of him. Over the years, they had found their son had contracted enough problems and neither wanted to add to that list. Still, Kidd knew exactly what went on even when he wasn’t directly in front of him. As long as Kidd was in the next room, fighting was fair game.

Kidd scurried to the bathroom, going to the far end of the house rather than to the one closest. He didn’t want to hear any rude remarks coming through the walls. Once he had locked himself in and took a seat on the floor, he pulled out his cell.

‘Hey. I’m outside. Parents home?’

He honestly had expected Killer after reading that snappy text, but a glance at the ID of the sender revealed the epithet ‘Raccoon.’ He hadn’t dared to put Law’s name in his contacts, just because he couldn’t trust Killer not to pick up his phone one day and idly search its contents. He sometimes dropped his phone, after all. Which was why, after a day of using his phone, he always erased all of his messages, no matter who they were from.

Still, he probably should have picked a better nickname than Raccoon. He had to keep reminding himself that despite how quiet Killer usually was, he was, in fact, a very smart guy.

He sent off a quick text back. ‘Yeah, parents. Fucking hell.’ He got an almost immediate reply.

‘Too bad. Cats?’

‘Locked ‘em in my room. Worried Uno might escape though.’

This time, Law took his time replying. Kidd figured it was going to be a long message. He was right.

‘Freezing my ass off out here. Let me in somehow. I can watch the cats if you like :P’

Kidd grimaced; as much as he enjoyed Law’s company, all sorts of horrible thoughts were coming to mind as to what could happen if he were discovered. Still, he’d rather Law not get frostbite. It was too fucking cold out tonight to just send him home all the way to the North Blue without a pit stop first. Plus, it was already late in the night and he knew Law walked through the Grand Line as a shortcut to get home. A part of him, the protective part, didn’t want Law going through that part of the city at night, alone.

He knew it was irrational, hell, stupid, but he sent the text anyway.

‘Climb in through my bedroom window. I’ll go upstairs and break the screen right now, but I have to go make an appearance so my parents don’t think the toilet swallowed me.’

Law apparently thought that so funny that he couldn’t send back an intelligible response, which was a first.
Kidd exited the bathroom and doubled around his house to avoid the dining room, then went upstairs to his bedroom. He was very careful about opening the door, making sure the cats that he had left on his bed with a dish of food didn’t try to sneak past him.

Tres looked up briefly as Kidd entered, but then went back to sleeping deeper than the dead. Dos immediately came over to try and entice him into picking her up while Uno stared at him with feral eyes, trying to figure out the best way to escape from the room. He was the wildcard.

Kidd closed the door behind him and went to the window, pushing it open. As the cold air rushed in to meet him through the screen, he got another text from Law.

‘I’m on ur roof :D’

Kidd snickered a bit at that, imagining Law’s grinning face as he tiptoed across the shingles. Then an image of him slipping off the snow-covered roof made him choke and he quickly tried to punch out the screen. He made a hole in it with his fist, but the wiry material was not taking kindly to ripping. As he was trying to rip it apart with as little noise as possible, he noticed the tiny, almost invisible, spring-away latches on each side of the window. He nearly smacked himself in the face for his stupidity.

He lifted the latches and popped the screen out. It fell soundlessly into a snow bank below and whirls of snowflakes came in full-force, buffeting Kidd’s cheeks.

Without much of a warning, Law’s feet kicked him in the face. Well, to be fair, only one actually made impact. The other leg went over his shoulder, bringing with it Law’s crotch which, this time quite fully, impacted his face.

He swung back with Law’s lower body attached to him. Instinctively, he grabbed Law’s ass, pulling the rest of Law in from outside. They ended up as a heap of tangled limbs, cats watching with horror, their fur standing on end. Law climbed off of him, snubbing his ensuing laughter with his palm. At least he had the courtesy to stay quiet.

Kidd scrambled to his feet and shut the window while Law got control of himself, likely thinking it had been a brilliant idea to grab hold of the edge of the roof and swing into the window at that precise moment. It certainly had led to a compromising situation.

When Kidd returned to check if Law had broken anything during that little stunt of his, he found himself grabbed and groped. One hand went into his hair while Law kissed him passionately while another went south. Kidd immediately felt the first waves of arousal and quickly pulled Law off of him.

“Not now!” he whispered frantically. “I have to go back to the dinning room table and there’s no way I’m going back with a very visible hard-on.”

Law giggled. “I could blow you really quickly. Then you could go.”

Kidd growled at the choices being presented to him. Though the offer was extremely tempting, as Law turned out to be quite talented with his mouth, he had to decline. “No, I have to go now. I’ll try and get back here as soon as I can, okay? Don’t do anything stupid. Just cuddle with Tres on the bed or something.”

Law pretended to pout, but he understood, even sympathized with Kidd. “Fine. But I swear when you get back we’re going to have some fun, cats or no cats in here with us.”

Kidd shook his head at that, but opened the door to leave. He took one glance back at Law, who
grinned suggestively, then watched as Law’s face moulded into a look of absolute horror. Before he could ask, a black form darted past his feet and out the door.

“Uno!” they both cried simultaneously.

The little black cat was off and running. Law reacted first, sprinting towards the door, but what he could do, Kidd didn’t know. Neither cat nor human were supposed to be seen.

“What are you doing, don’t go out there too!” Kidd snapped, trying to keep his voice down. That was about when he heard his father’s voice calling his name. Instantly his heart sank and he left Law standing in the doorway with Dos clinging to his leg.

He assumed his father had found the cat. His mind started conjuring up possible explanations for its presence, since his father was more or less allergic to anything with fur. The tiger skin on Kidd’s bed? His father had planned on disposing of it. In fact, it had gone in a garbage bag on the curb before making it into the house. Kidd had snuck in through a back door without his father’s permission. He would get a good chewing out if his father found it sitting on his bed. A live cat running around? That was an entirely different thing. That would be seen as direct, complete, disobedience.

He was so screwed.

Law knew it too, since Kidd had casually let slip once that his father did not take kindly to animals within a five hundred foot radius of him. So he knew, quite well, the severity of the situation. And he knew, painfully so, that it was entirely his fault for showing up uninvited in the first place.

So he disobeyed Kidd and closed the door on the two remaining cats, shutting them in the room. By now Kidd was down the stairs, the black kitten out of sight. Law followed quietly, keeping out of Kidd’s hair for the moment as he tried to locate the fugitive feline.

Kidd returned to the dinning room table, his father quirking an eyebrow at him. He was finished eating, but Kidd sat himself down, looking hesitantly at his mother who was equally confused. It was then that he realized they had not yet seen the little abomination of a feline.

“We heard you shout something?” she began tentatively.

“Oh, yeah, I, uh…well, I hurt myself.” He didn’t even believe himself, and he knew there was no way that blabbering was going to get past his father, who was used to cutting down liars within his company. The man slit throats on a regular basis. Not literally, of course, but he might as well have.

“Hurt yourself? In the bathroom?”

His father’s voice was strict and to the point, his long dark hair falling in front of his eyes as he leaned forward in his seat expectantly, placing his arms on the table, crossed and ready for business.

Kidd exchanged glances with his mother, who played nervously with her bobbed red hair. While she was curious about Kidd’s shouting, she was more concerned about her husband freaking out. Obviously, both of them assumed Kidd had broken something expensive.

“Yeah,” Kidd said quietly. He bought himself a few seconds of thinking time before he said, “Stubbed my toe. That’s all.”

His father grunted and didn’t challenge him anymore. Instead he inclined his head and took a long
drink of his wine, then gazed fixedly at Kidd again. He hadn’t really so much as glanced at his 
wife the entire time they’d eaten and Kidd hated that, hated always being the center of attention for 
both of his parents.

Especially his father, who said, “I think it’s time to talk about your future.”

If that didn’t give him a heart attack right then, Law’s wide-eyed face staring at him from behind a 
couch in the next room over did.
With Law’s owlish face blinking back at him from behind his father, Kidd wasn’t really tuning his old man in. He was focussed on more pressing matters.

“Kidd,” Mr. Eustass addressed his son once more, “we shall have a talk about your future.”

Kidd groaned, letting his head laze back and his eyelids slide shut. He knew this was coming eventually. Every time his father came home it was always the same thing. And now, on top of this strenuous talk, Law was creeping around trying to recapture Uno, who was yet another one of Kidd’s problems.

“Kidd, I have been looking into a possible…wife for you.”

Kidd gagged; why him?! Weren’t arranged marriages abolished in this damn city?! Apparently not. Now, though he innately feared a verbal battle against his father, Kidd voiced his true thoughts.

“Fuck no, old man. Like hell I’m going to marry some random chick you picked out.”

“Watch your language,” Mr. Eustass barked. It was rather hypocritical, this remark, as Kidd knew well how his father could out-curse a fucking pirate. “As long as you are my son, then you will do as I say. Kidd threw a harrowing glance at his mother, begging her to speak up and say something to stop the madness. Besides, he needed to stop staring at Law, who was currently crawling around like a centipede on the faux fur rug in the living room. The only reason his mother hadn’t seen him yet was because she bloody well refused to look at her husband.

His father saw him visually pleading with his mother, his eyes begging her to intervene. Though she pointedly ignored him and continued picking at her food, Mr. Eustass snarled, “Oh, relax. It’s not as if I’ll force you to marry this girl if you absolutely despise her.” Both Kidd and his mother locked eyes as if to say, ‘Yeah, right.’

“All I ask is that you honour her by giving her a chance. Surely even you will heed this arrangement?”

Kidd let loose a torrent of air through his nostrils, snorting like a raging bull, his temper flaring up. But even he knew to keep his worst emotions in check around his father. There was no man alive, Kidd thought, that could match his father in brutal anger. The man would rip him limb from limb with a wicked grin on his face. This Kidd knew all too well.

Suddenly, Law darted across the living room in pursuit of a black blur. Kidd swallowed some stray saliva out of shock and nearly choked, but by the time his mother glanced in the direction of the elder Eustass and Law, said boy was gone. His father didn’t suspect anything yet; he thought Kidd was just huffing in his face, like usual.

Kidd knew he needed to make up his own distraction because Law was pushing his luck way too openly. “What’s the girl’s name? And what’s in it for you?” Kidd asked cynically, his emotions pressed away from the surface for his own protection. And Law’s.

His father scoffed, the noise incredibly fake in his son’s ears. “How dare you assume there is something in it for me, as you so eloquently put it.” Mr. Eustass grumbled something more about delinquent sons and then said, voice hard as steel, “Her name is Jewelry Bonney and she is the only daughter of International Jewelry’s head CEO.”
Kidd let a knowing smirk shine through. He knew it. “Oh, so there is something in it for you.”

His father frowned, clearly ticked off. “This particular arrangement was suggested by her father and put through to me. Now all that’s left to do is pick a date for you to meet her.” He leaned in across the table, scrutinizing Kidd’s defiant face up close. “Haven’t I always told you to marry money?”

His mother made a quiet snort of disbelief across the table, but Mr. Eustass plainly ignored her.

Before this precise moment in time, Kidd had never before wanted to out himself to his parents. Now, he seriously considered jumping up and screaming his preference for the same sex, if only to make a scene and stop future marriage plans. However, what held him back was the nagging voice in his head that told him they’d send him to biblical reform camp or some such other place to rid him of his homosexuality. So, he kept his confession to himself.

“Guess nobody gets together these days out of love,” Kidd said. “Well, whatever. I don’t want to meet this chick, and that’s final.”

His father’s nostrils flared threateningly. “Oh, you’ll meet her all right. And you will behave when you do. In fact, I’m sure you’ll get along well with this young woman.” There was a threat in that, Kidd knew.

Just then, as Kidd was glaring at his father, Uno jumped up on the top of the couch. He sat there, licking his paw, and then used it to clean his whiskered face. Kidd heaved in a panicked breath and shied away from his father’s icy glare, turning to his mother instead.

Though this time, unlike any other time before, his mother was staring straight at his father. No, beyond him. At the cat.

Slowly she turned back to Kidd, calmly mortified. Her eyes were swimming pools of anxiety while her mouth was set in a firm line. Since his father never paid any attention to her, he didn’t notice this change in appearance, but Kidd was clearly very, very aware of the kind of thoughts that had to be racing through his mother’s head.

Among those thoughts, she was likely thinking how angry his father would get when he found out there was a creature he was allergic to in the house. Not to mention that both of Kidd’s parents had banned pets because they feared for their expensive furniture’s wellbeing.

He met her questioning stare with a blank one of his own, then smiled slowly, innocently. He was trying to use the boyish charm he knew he already grew out of years ago. He had seen Law use it all the time on him! How hard could it be?

Speaking of Law, he was deathly afraid that he would jump out from behind the couch any minute now to grab the cat, trip, fall, and draw attention to himself. Explaining a cat was one thing, explaining how a raccoon-eyed boy broke into the house was another.

“Why are you two staring at one another like that?” Mr. Eustass made a sweeping gesture to the include them both, clearly not happy. “Don’t go giving that boy any ideas.”

Both Kidd and his mother turned back to the angry one amongst them. Kidd could see over his father’s shoulder that Uno had once again disappeared. Sneaky cat.

“What, can I not look at my son?” Mrs. Eustass finally snapped, though her voice was comparably weaker than her husband’s. She was really going out on a fragile limb, talking to Mr. Angry as she did. Kidd would have to thank her though, since he knew she was just buying him time.
As expected, Kidd’s father did not take kindly to her tone, and they began to bicker irritably. Kidd had, of course, stopped listening to them in favour of watching Uno pad across the living room floor in his general direction. The cat was trotting along, seemingly making a beeline to attack him, and so Kidd rightfully grit his teeth and made to get up.

He got about halfway into a standing position when his father’s hand slammed down on the table. The glasses and cutlery jumped.

“Sit,” he commanded, his tone leaving no room for disobedience. Kidd sat back down stiffly, grinding his teeth as the cat reached his father’s chair, still thankfully silent. His mother was too caught up in her own end of the argument to notice the little kitten then duck under the table.

The real problem came in the form of a young male swiftly crossing the gap between the dining room and the living room, crawling under eyelevel to avoid being seen. The scene would have been comical to Kidd, but he was too far gone in his own silent hysterics to emit even the tiniest of snickers.

As his parents resumed their argument, this time about his future, which he felt he should listen to, he felt an odd sensation on his leg. With due alarm, he realized that Uno had just brushed past him and he had missed his chance to throttle the kitten before he was discovered by his father. He looked down and any coherent thought immediately ran from his brain.

He was certainly finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on what was to be his future with his boyfriend practically under his homophobic father’s chair reaching for a very elusive little kitten.

Suddenly, as if to punctuate his son’s fear, Kidd’s father sneezed. Kidd didn’t move at all, didn’t dare let his eyes stray over the side of the table to see if Law was still down there.

“All of a sudden, I’m feeling rather stuffy.”

“One of my friends got a dog,” Kidd found himself saying, “and I was playing with it earlier today. I haven’t changed or showered, so you might be reacting to it.”

Mr. Eustass’ nose curled up at that. “That is disgusting. A dog.”

Just then, he caught sight of Law moving out from under the table (how he had gotten to that position was a miracle in itself) and holding Uno against his chest. While the cat was struggling and wriggling to break free, Law backed up slowly in the space between Kidd’s mother and father, their backs to him as both parents stared at their son.

The second Law disappeared around the corner into the next room, doubtlessly heading upstairs, Kidd stood up, kicking back his chair. “I’ll just go take a shower and get changed then. So you don’t have any more reactions. Um, yeah. Later.”

Kidd’s mother had some semblance of an idea about what her son was going off to do, but his father hadn’t a clue. Still, Kidd scurried upstairs and ducked into his room, being extremely careful not to let anything past his doorway again.

Law was sitting on his bed in plain sight, all three cats snuggled around his stomach.

“You could at least try to hide,” Kidd hissed, coming over to the bed to glare at him. “What the hell were you thinking?! If my father saw you he would have fucking shit a cow out of his ass.”

Law shook his head, shrugging. “But nobody saw me, did they? I’m a motherfucking racoon.”
“You idiot; my mother saw *that* cat,” he pointed out Uno, who shrunk back against Law’s chest as if to try and hide his face.

Law’s eyes widened in horror at their current situation. “Well, shit. She didn’t rat you out though, obviously.”

“Oh but that bitch *will* have something to say about it later, mark my words,” Kidd grumbled.

No sooner had Kidd spoken when a knock was heard on the door. Kidd and Law both froze, but Law was the first to come out of the stupor, grabbing two cats in his hands – Uno and Tres. He heaved the relatively comatose Tres over his shoulder and reached for Dos, but Kidd grabbed her first.

“I need one of these damned things,” Kidd whispered frantically.

Law jabbed his free hand towards Dos. “That’s the wrong one! Give her here and take Uno!”

“Kidd, I know you’re in there,” his mother called in a mocking sing-song voice.

Law and Kidd dove into hysterics, moving about in a frenzy.

“Get in the closet!” Kidd whispered.

“If I didn’t fit before, what makes you think I’ll fit now?” Law asked sardonically. He was thinking back to the first time he broke into the Eustass family mansion and was trying not to get caught by Kidd. There hadn’t been anywhere to hide in his bedroom then and there certainly wasn’t anywhere now.

Kidd hadn’t known about his concealment struggles before, and looked confused for a moment. Then he growled, “Just get in the goddamn closet!”

So Law did. He tucked Uno inside his sweater to keep him from struggling and breaking loose and threw Tres in his sweater’s hood. Then he climbed in amongst Kidd’s clothes, inhaling the overwhelming scent of man musk. Oddly enough, he liked that smell.

Kidd shut him in, giving him one last mortified twitch of an expression to solidify their situation.

At last, Kidd got the door, opening it to his mother who was instantly suspicious. He tried his best to block the doorway without appearing too overwhelming, but his mother pushed past him into the room anyway, wanting to take the inevitable conversation to someplace private. Someplace where Kidd’s father wouldn’t overhear them.

She shut the door behind her, then glared in a mix of horror and confusion at the little black blob snuggled under Kidd’s chin, whose bottom Kidd supported with the palm of his hand. Dos was happily purring away, completely oblivious to the turmoil surrounding her. She peeked out from under a fold of Kidd’s shirt, caught sight of his mother, and let out a weak, pitiful mewl. His mother visibly softened, though she tried to conceal this effect the kitten’s innocence had on her.

“You’d better get rid of that thing,” his mother warned, though her eyes said the opposite.

“But Mom,” he whined. She suddenly froze, just as Kidd had thought she would. He hadn’t called her ‘mom’ in years. “Look how cute it is!”

Dos was eager to jump into Kidd’s mother’s hands, but Kidd kept her in place, knowing that any stray black hairs on her white blouse would be picked out by his father from a mile away.
Hesitantly, Kidd’s mother reached out her hand and petted the cat’s head. Then she smiled.

“This one has been keeping me company,” Kidd explained softly. He made sure to keep the cat unisex, considering the one he held in his hands was the female, while the one his mother had seen had been male. He didn’t need her finding out about the multiples on a later date.

This soft-spoken statement served to weaken his mother’s harsh resolve even more. She looked between her son and his cat. “Well, if that’s how it is…”

“The cat’s adorable, isn’t it?” Kidd asked as he noticed his mother’s eyes begin to stray and wander around the room. Law hadn’t made a noise, had he?

She looked back at the kitten. “Oh, I suppose it is kind of cute. But, I have to say, I’ve never heard you use the word adorable before.”

Law, who was fighting to stay still in the cramped space lest he make a sound, had to resist the urge to burst out of there and agree with Kidd’s mother.

“Well, we haven’t exactly chatted like this in a long time,” he replied. His subliminal tactic to cause his mother to embark on another guilt trip worked marvellously.

“Yes, we’ve kind of drifted apart, haven’t we?”

While Kidd wanted to say, ‘We were never together to begin with,’ he held his tongue and instead nodded noncommittally.

“I guess all I can ask is that you keep this cat in your room until your father takes off. It shouldn’t be long, if you agree to meet that girl.”

“I’m not too inclined to give him what he wants, but I suppose he’ll never leave me the hell alone if I don’t.”

His mother nodded almost sadly, then turned to leave. She could only stand in her son’s guilt-driven presence for so long. But before she left, she turned back to Kidd and stared at the kitten in his arms. Her eyes narrowed subtley.

“By the way Kidd, I could have sworn that kitten was wearing a red collar.”

“Everything looks red when dad’s in the picture,” Kidd said simply, wondering how much his mother really knew behind her carefully guarded façade. She shrugged, letting him go for now.

--oOo--

There was nothing but darkness outside and the halls were eerily empty when Marco encountered Jimbei.

“I need something clarified, Marco,” Jimbei said, his deep bass tone making Marco perk his ears to try and understand him. “Want to come in for a cup of coffee? I just made a pot.”

Marco shrugged and followed the history teacher into the nearest teacher’s lounge. It was vacant at this time of day, or rather, night, all students having gone home and most teachers having left an hour or more ago. It was pure coincidence that both he and Jimbei had stayed late with the school’s janitors, marking work and generally just losing track of time.

“What is it?” Marco asked, dumping his bags of unmarked assignments on a table and taking a
seat. Jimbei looked as collected as ever, his mouth set into a firm, unyielding line. He poured them each a mug and sat across from Marco, pushing a cup in his direction.

Marco was made to wait for his answer as Jimbei drank down some coffee first, despite it being steaming hot. Then he said, “I have a concern regarding one of our shared students.”

Marco blinked, waiting for Jimbei to continue. Then he realized Jimbei was waiting and scrutinizing him in that serene way of his. His heart beat faster instinctively, something it had started doing a lot of lately as his paranoia peaked at new heights. One of their shared students…he didn’t know who Jimbei had in his history classes, so he tried to think of his own class and who might be apt to take history.

“Oh, one of our students?” he pressed. “Perhaps Basil, who goofs off with his cards, or Moria, who makes shadow puppets all day with that lightbox of his? Or do you have a problem with–”

“You know who I’m talking about, Marco,” Jimbei interrupted sharply. “I’m not really one for dancing around the proverbial bush here, so let me ask you: what were you thinking?”

“I beg your pardon?” Marco asked quietly. He didn’t need the clarification, because he already knew what Jimbei was speaking of and it made his heart sink, but the statement slipped out anyway.

Jimbei shook his head, almost in a morose fashion. There was an air of disappointment, Marco knew, settling around them. “Portgas D. Ace is one of my students as well, and as with all of my other students, I feel a guardianship towards him. Protectiveness, if you will.”

“What rumour have you heard about he and I?” asked Marco, still willing to play coy. If only to hear what kinds of things Jimbei knew about. Surely he couldn’t be all-aware and all-knowing?

Jimbei took a sip of his coffee, Marco watching apprehensively. The coffee in his own hands was cooling nicely; however, Marco didn’t have any desire to drink from his cup. Instead he clutched it tightly, nervously, hoping that Jimbei would throw him for a loop and tell him something different than the dark things he had in mind.

“Listen, Marco. I don’t claim to know everything, because I don’t know the why, the when, or the how, but I do know the what and, to a degree, the where.” Jimbei’s fingers danced around the top of his mug, his eyes trained on Marco’s face, which had hardened in an attempt to keep his emotions in check. “All I know is that I saw something happen between you and Ace, and I can’t write it off as a platonic show of affection when it was clearly more than that.”

“So, what shall you do?” Marco inquired. He was remarkably calm given the situation. He didn’t see a reason yet to panic, though his insides had turned to gooey mush with fear.

Jimbei inclined his head, casting his eyes down to examine the wood grain on the table. He studied it for a moment, deep in thought, until finally he said, “I don’t wish to inquire into the lives of other people, as that is their own personal business, but I feel as though I must intervene for Ace’s sake. I know for a fact that you understand where I’m coming from.”

“I understand perfectly,” Marco admitted. “I’d do the same in your situation.”

Jimbei nodded sullenly. “I’m glad you understand. When I first saw the two of you in a, uh,” here Jimbei faltered, coughing, “intimate situation, I was rightfully angered at you as I jumped to the conclusion that you were taking advantage of a student. But then I realized that I know you better than that, and I wondered then why you were engaging in something so strictly against what I
thought you believed in. I also considered Ace himself, and I know from past experiences with him that he isn’t someone who can be pulled around and enslaved to another, so I knew he chose this situation of his own free will.”

Jimbei paused, gathering himself once more. “And so, I came to a new conclusion and I’m wondering if you will verify or reject it.” He held Marco’s gaze, watching how Marco gulped down a sudden dryness in his mouth. “Do you really care for that child?”

Marco barked out a short, nervous laugh at that. “Ace is hardly a child” slipped through his lips before he could think.

Jimbei’s eyes narrowed at this declaration. “He is not an adult. Therefore, he is a child. Marco, you cannot confuse something like this. It is very serious. Children look up to adults. Adults guide children. Children are easily persuaded. Adults can be very persuasive. You know what the general society will think of this sort of relationship. There is no equality there. And on top of it; you are his teacher, putting you at an even higher status.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. I fought him about this; I really did, as best I could. But he won and got his way, and now I’m all the happier for it.” Marco sighed, thinking back to the first moments of their blundering relationship. “I thought I could control how I felt towards him, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to be selfish and put everyone into a situation like this, but I couldn’t do a thing to stop either of us. He’s a very special person, Jimbei. He has a certain charisma, you know, and I couldn’t help but fall in step with him.”

“I can see that you care about his wellbeing and there isn’t a doubt in my mind he feels the same for you, but I have to ask: what do you think will happen if this scandal gets out? Beyond me, perhaps beyond the school even? Who will be to blame?”

“Which is why it won’t get out. Ace and I have agreed on that much. It will be public when the time is right, and I know that time is somewhere on the horizon, approaching from a great distance. I can only ask that you don’t reach for that horizon and pull it to meet us.”

“I won’t tell anyone, Marco,” Jimbei said, nodding his promise. “I was only concerned for Ace’s sake, and now I know he is in good hands and not being misused. But others might not be so lenient. You must watch yourself, no, watch the both of you.”

Marco nodded and rose with his coffee, dumping it into the sink and washing the mug before setting it on a drying rack. Then he left Jimbei to mull over his own private thoughts, grabbing his things and making a dash for his vehicle.

--oOo--

“How did he find out?” asked Ace. He was sitting on the edge of Marco’s bed, staring at the man who paced in front of him listlessly. “I mean, when?”

“I don’t know; he didn’t really say a specific time or date. I think it’s safe to assume that he saw us outside of school somehow, maybe at the Whitebeard Pirates gig last Wednesday, or something came back to him in the form of gossip. I don’t know; maybe Izou told him? Then again, those two haven’t talked in a while. Maybe he just put two and two together. Though he certainly doesn’t look it, Jimbei is very smart when it comes to deducing things.”

Marco came and sat on the bed, Ace soon climbing into his lap. He reached up and wrapped his hands around Marco’s neck, resting his head against a tense shoulder. Marco hugged Ace to him, feeling his frailty in his arms and thinking back to Jimbei’s words about how the boy was still only
a child. He knew he should feel sick from what he was doing, but the feeling wouldn’t form in his chest. He was too far gone to feel sick at his own actions.

He kissed Ace’s forehead, hearing a subdued but appreciative sigh.

Ace pulled his arms back, starting to knead Marco’s shoulders. Marco looked down, catching the lusty gleam in his eyes. “Not tonight,” he said quietly. “I don’t think I could get it up tonight.”

But Ace gave him a sultry smile that suggested otherwise. “I’m sure I could get you up and standing at attention.”

Despite feeling afraid for their situation, Marco let out a little chuckle. “I’m sure you could. But let’s just give it a rest for today. You know, I didn’t think you’d be coming over.”

“Well, when you phoned and said someone found out, I kind of freaked and booked it over here,” Ace admitted. He snickered a bit as he remembered Marco’s surprised face when he showed up on his doorstep, cell phone still in hand and connected to Marco’s landline. They had been talking while Ace ran over, which resulted in Marco fearing Ace was hyperventilating.

“You know Ace, you’re really cute,” Marco said suddenly. Ace instantly frowned, his stare turning into a hostile glare.

“Not ‘cute’. Handsome.”

Marco turned them and pushed Ace flat on his back on the bed. He ran his hands up under Ace’s shirt, feeling the muscles quivering at his touch. Ace blushed and there was a slight movement of his legs as he subtly opened himself up. It was instinct.

“Sure, cutie. Whatever makes you happy. Just know that to me, you’ll always be gorgeous.”

He kissed the inevitable angry retort right off of Ace’s lips.
“I thought they’d never leave town,” Law said on Saturday night, a week after the kitten fiasco. He was sitting on Kidd’s bed, reclining against a mountain of pillows, legs sprawled out. Walking all the way from the North to the South was tiring and he liked to have his relaxation preferably the moment he got to Kidd’s place.

In his arms was Dos, while he had a hand resting on Tres’ sleepy head. He took turns patting them both, but he saw how Dos kept her light green eyes trained on Kidd, hoping he would sit down on the bed too so she could snuggle up against her favourite boy.

“You and me both. My parents are horrible,” Kidd grumbled. “And you wonder why I don’t exactly have loved ones as you so eloquently put it that one time.” Kidd came and flopped down beside Law, staring at the ceiling with his hands resting lazily on his belly. Dos came over and wriggled her head under one of his hands, urging him to pet her. “Still, I can’t believe I agreed to meeting with that Bonney chick. That is going to be awkward as fuck.”

Law laughed, both at Kidd’s predicament and at the fact that he was already loved by a female. Little Dos was simply infatuated with him.

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll really hit it off with this girl, dump me, and find true love.” He let his hand drift over to Kidd’s chest, rubbing his palm over his heart just firm enough so it caressed him through his black shirt. “Wouldn’t that be funny?”

Kidd snatched up Law’s hand, gripping it possessively. Nails sunk into Law’s skin. “Don’t be stupid, Racoon. I’m not into girls.”

“Oh, we’re openly gay now, huh?”

“Just with you. And I suppose that Ace guy too. God, I hope he doesn’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t worry your pretty red head too much about Ace. He doesn’t have that many people to tell who’ll actually listen to him with a straight face.” Law crooked his head to the side as he thought his words over. “Well, ‘cept maybe Marco.”

“Who the hell is Marco?” Kidd asked, suddenly sitting rigidly upright on the bed. Dos fell off his chest with a shocked squeak. He picked her up and comforted her, feeling the slightest bit bad that he’d thrown her into his lap without a warning first. “Is he a gossip?”

Law chuckled. “Oh come on, didn’t you have Marco as a math teacher…last year, wasn’t it? He and Ace are dating, or something. I don’t really know what they call their relationship. That’s the thing with being gay and seeing someone I guess, most of the time things are kept pretty discreet. It’s a shame, really.”

“Marco? I had Mr. McLeod…” Kidd trailed off. His eyes widened in realization and he opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish begging for food pellets. “W-wait. You mean Ace is screwing some teacher?! And not just any teacher, but McLeod?!”

Law nodded, smug that he could see a mortified blush appearing on Kidd’s face and chest. He could hardly keep his snickers to himself.

“Then that means what I saw that day was….oh God.”
Propping his back off of the pillows with his elbow, Law stared at him, ears perking up with interest. “What did you just say?”

“One day during class change, after period four, I was outside and walking along the building for some fresh air,” Kidd began, using his hands to make needless gestures. “I peered into a class – you know, to check to see if I was late and classes were already back in session – and I saw Ace’s back hunched over. He was leaning into McLeod. If their faces had been turned down it would look like they were looking at a piece of work or something really closely, but they weren’t, their faces were up. So it looked like they were...kissing. But it was so quick that I kind of dismissed it as me seeing things that weren’t there.” He shook his head, forehead wrinkled in surprise. “But what you just said makes me think my first instincts were right.”

Law was silent for a moment, simply contemplating this new information. At last, after he had gotten over his initial astonishment for Kidd catching Marco and Ace smooching at school, he said, “That’s surprising. I didn’t think they’d engage in any risky behaviour while school hours still applied.”

“It’s kind of weird though,” Kidd said slowly. Law could detect how carefully he chose his words. “Why would Ace want to date McLeod? I mean, he’s a teacher.”

“Ace has his reasons. He’s attracted to the guy, that much he’s told me on many occasions, and he needs someone older than him. He’s not like me or you, content just being with a person our age. Ace craves stability, the stability that comes along with being the partner of someone more adult. He’s had a rough life up until now. His grandfather is a marine vice-admiral and his job involved constantly uprooting him and his brother, so he never really settled anywhere. Until now that is.”

“Stability, huh?” Kidd mused, wondering just what that meant. He knew what that word meant to him, personally, but didn’t know Ace’s definition. He had to admit he was curious.

“A teacher though? I mean, it’s not like I care or anything. I hardly know the guy. I’m just curious why he’d choose a teacher. And why McLeod would choose a student to take to the bedroom. McLeod always seemed more reserved. I’m wondering how Ace managed to get with him.”

“We’ll likely never know the details because I don’t think Ace really knows the answer to that either. Ace is a creature of feeling, not of judgemental thought.”

“Huh,” Kidd muttered. “Well, whatever. I was just surprised.”

Dos figured she wasn’t going to get any more petting and cooing from Kidd and leapt off the bed, trotting over to Uno who’d just run into the room. The little scamp nudged her back out of the room with a few playful nips, initiating a game of cat chase. Tres, mildly curious, actually got up off his kitty butt to see what all the fuss was about, leaving Kidd and Law alone with one another.

Now that the cats were gone, Law found himself empty-handed, and thus rightfully bored. He pushed Kidd by his shoulders so he lay flush with the blankets on his bed and crawled on top of him. “Anyways, forget about Marco and Ace and the Bonney chick and focus on my little bum squirming around. I want some attention, and you will give it to me.”

With a deep chuckle that resonated in his chest, Kidd gave Law what he wanted: a firm squeeze of his buttocks, one cheek and then the other. He had learned Law was something of a masochist. He liked being teased and handled roughly. And since Kidd liked being a little uncouth with his affections, the two had a mutual understanding.

Kidd kissed him aggressively, ridding him of his shirt before Law had a chance to protest. Not that
he would given their heightened libidos. They hadn’t fooled around all week, not with Kidd’s parents lurking in the shadows. They had their hands full as it was hiding the cats and only had enough time for a quick peck on the lips if they were lucky. And Law had stated quite firmly that he wasn’t able to ‘host’ one of their encounters. Apparently his old grandmother was quite adept at swordplay and would try to stick him through the heart with the family heirloom.

Kidd made his sexual frustration clear as he bit down on Law’s tanned collarbone. He lapped and suckled up his neck, Law arching his back and sliding his hips teasingly. Kidd flipped them, so he was on top, and held Law in place as he raked his fingers down that smooth chest, stopping just inches above Law’s belt. He flashed him a toothy grin, a warning that he was going to make up for lost time in a way Law would find utterly consuming.

Just as Kidd lost his shirt too, the room suddenly became as dark as the night outside. Under him, Law became rigid and clutched at his skin, very aware that he couldn’t see a thing in the murk.

“What the hell?” he wondered aloud, the disappointment in his voice clearly shining through.

Kidd was careful as he detangled Law from his chest and waist, leaving the other boy on the sheets as he got up. “Power must have gone out again. It was out earlier too. Here, I’ll get some candles…”

With that, Kidd wandered out of the room, returning a few minutes later. He rummaged about, placing the half a dozen small tea lights on his bedside table. He lit each of them in turn, lighting up one side of the bed in a warm, orange-yellow glow. Law blinked at him, taking in the half-shadowed form of Kidd as the flames flickered and danced over his bare chest and up on his cheeks. He found himself swallowing thickly as he realized he’d become aroused just by staring at Kidd bathed in the abstract shadows of candlelight.

Kidd seemed to know it too. He reached for Law, found him, and gave him a gentle clutch through the fabric of his pants. The quick and shallow breathing he could hear from Law was all he needed to convince him to drop his own pants first, then rip off Law’s callously. He wasn’t exactly into prolonging the foreseeable, not when he could see Law’s dark eyes darting all over his body, drinking him in as if he were some kind of divine being.

“You draw me in like a fucking magnet,” Law muttered. He was unsure if Kidd heard, but the other came over to the bed, his full attention on him.

Kidd slid his body over Law’s chest, feeling that first shudder as skin touched skin. Instantly Law clamped down on him, fingers turning into claws as he gripped Kidd’s broad back. His feet sprang into action soon too as Kidd began kissing and nipping his neck, wrapping around muscular hips to close off any distance between their arousals. It brought a grin to his face when Law felt that Kidd was hard as he was, and perhaps even more eager to take things farther than they had in their little encounters before.

Yes, he already knew what they were getting themselves into. Kidd had wanted to try going all the way for a long time now, and only at this moment did Law feel he could no longer keep denying him on the basis of how open they were with their relationship, because he wanted it too.

Badly.

He felt the first waves of nervousness as Kidd flipped him over onto his stomach and kissed down his spine, lightly playing with the curves of his vivacious butt. He hadn’t the foggiest idea if Kidd knew what he was doing, as they’d never talked it over apart from Kidd sharing his desire of wanting to know him on the most intimate level possible, but now Law couldn’t care less how
much experience either of them had. It just felt so damn good, Kidd’s fingers sliding around on his skin, delving between his thighs to grasp him and pump him occasionally.

“Ahh!” Law cried as Kidd’s tongue lapped at his lower back, just above his the divide of his cheeks. The tongue disappeared as Kidd let the tip of his nose graze downwards, working its way towards spasming balls. He licked that soft, trembling skin before opening his mouth wide to encase him in warmth as he continued to jerk him with his hand.

Kidd couldn’t even come up with a reason why he liked doing this so much. He just did. It felt natural.

Law’s upper body slumped forwards until only his butt was in the air, his desperate moan as he came muffled by the soft embrace of the pillows. Kidd made sure to keep up his actions until Law was thoroughly spent, all of his essence milked out of him into Kidd’s palm. Kidd brought that hand back and stroked his own length, groaning as he mixed the opaque fluid with his own dripping pre-come. There was something so primal, so damn carnal, about mixing them together, and Kidd found himself probing at Law’s ass with his fingertips, seeing just how ready Law might be for him. He had played with Law before, but never with the intent to take him. Excitement welled up inside his chest and he could hardly keep his voice from wavering.

“Can I?” he asked the boy shaking from pleasure under him, panting almost as hard.

Law twisted his head around, lidded eyes seeing only flickering shadows that moved across Kidd’s face, highlighting his pale cheekbones and parted lips. He couldn’t see the desire in his eyes in the dark but he knew it was there because he could feel something more that confirmed it; the head of something much too large pressed against his entrance. He had loosened considerably since coming, and he felt that euphoric high of release goading him into allowing Kidd the ultimate pleasure.

“Yeah,” he panted. “You can.” He didn’t know what else to say. Be gentle? Go slow? He had a feeling those words were not in Kidd’s sex vocabulary.

And so, without waiting any longer, Kidd parted each cheek and positioned himself, feeling around in the darkness. He knew Law’s body well enough to know that where Law was twitching was where he wanted to be, so locating his entrance took little time. He was slick with Law’s juices and had slathered on some additional lube in between asking Law’s permission, and felt they were both ready. So he pushed in.

He was met with a hearty resistance. Law grunted gutturally, burying his face in the pillows as Kidd forced himself in. It felt like an agonizingly slow procedure, the penetration, and Law was wondering if Kidd would even fit. He could feel the pressure, but the pain came in full force only when he felt Kidd glide forwards, the thickest part of his organ slipping into him. He opened his mouth in shock at the wave of pain, but any sound he made was muffled by the pillows.

After that initial shock, Law instinctively began trying to push him out, but his contractions had the opposite effect. Kidd swept into him with ease, working himself deeper until he was seated. He draped himself over Law’s back, nuzzling into his neck and breathing in the scent of Law’s sweat, which could only turn him on more.

“Yeah,” he finally said, his voice choked as he tried to suppress the pain. He didn’t want to chicken
out now, not with Kidd finally inside him. He was fine. He just needed to keep telling himself that until he believed it. “Yeah, I’m fine. You can move now.”

That was all the confirmation Kidd needed. He rocked back and forth slowly, getting a feel for Law clenching all around him. He could hear soft grunting as he plunged in, but he lost all sense of himself to the overwhelming want of release. His strokes were sharp and quick, and he focussed on the sensations of being inside such a warm, tight space, and the light dancing off of that slender, muscled back below him. He could feel himself close, and began to move faster, Law’s ass clamping down on him with a new intensity that almost held him in a vice, but Kidd continued regardless until he built himself up to that climax.

He let himself go with a deep groan.

The juices coating Law’s insides were a welcome, pleasant addition to the friction he’d experienced with Kidd thrusting into him. He sighed, feeling oddly content not just because of the suddenly wet feeling between his thighs but because it was over. Done with. Not painful anymore. Until Kidd pulled out.

He clenched his teeth to keep a wounded cry from coming out as Kidd slumped against him, spooning his back. His red locks tickled Law’s sensitive skin as he kissed him on the shoulder, moving to lap dolefully at the shell of his ear and then the underside of his jaw. For a while they didn’t talk, not that Law felt like talking being as exhausted as he was, and soon Kidd found himself dozing off. Some of the candles had burnt themselves out with the accumulation of a wax puddle and the house was as silent as ever. Finally, Kidd broke that silence as he fully came down from his orgasmic bliss.

“Do you want me to clean you up?”

“No,” Law answered immediately. “It can wait until morning. I’m tired.”

“Me too,” Kidd mused cheerily, snuggling into Law’s neck. His lower body brushed against Law’s butt and he winced, biting into his cheek with sharp teeth. But the pain in his mouth couldn’t compare to the pain he felt after Kidd had ravaged him. Faintly, he found a part of him that fantasized about being used in such a rough way, but another part of him snapped back, asking him why he didn’t tell Kidd to slow down and take his time. But he didn’t know if it would matter or not. Maybe he was just naturally tight down there? Smaller than most? Maybe no matter what Kidd did he’d still end up with the same amount of pain?

Idly he registered that Kidd had drifted off to sleep, one arm thrown over Law’s waist to keep him close, to keep them connected. For a long time Law lay still, listening to Kidd’s breathing. It relaxed him and gave him something to listen to, helping to keep his mind off of the pain. Usually, Kidd’s breathing would aid in getting him to sleep. But not tonight. Tonight he was too wired to sleep, even though his body was physically drained.

He lay there through the night, keeping his body as still as he could. Eventually he removed himself from Kidd’s grip, shifting so that he could lay more comfortably on his back rather than his side, but the searing pain started up anew. So he returned himself to his previous position against Kidd and ceased moving, focussing on his breathing once again. The constant up and down of Kidd’s firm chest against his back soothed him as he thought about nothing.

Slowly night became morning as the sun rose. Rays of light came in through the single window in the bedroom. For some reason, Law hadn’t really noticed the hours passing, but he figured it was late morning by now. Kidd was still soundly asleep, barely moving an inch during the night.
Despite his insomnia, this was the first time Law had lain awake in Kidd’s bed, as all of their previous sleepovers had culminated in him actually sleeping. He noticed how true it was that Kidd never moved much from where he laid down, in stark contrast to him. He always woke up wrapped around his bed buddy in a strange position, not at all where he’d fallen asleep. The thought brought him a brief chuckle of amusement.

He figured he needed to get up and stretch. He was beginning to worry that he’d be stuck lying comatose until Kidd woke up. When he moved his thighs together he realized he was also very, very sticky. It was kind of satisfying knowing who had made a mess of him, but also vaguely gross for the same reasons.

Trafalgar managed to get himself into a sitting position on the bed, carefully and slowly turning his body around to look back at Kidd to see if he were still deeply sleeping. His eyes instantly caught sight of the sheets instead, illuminated with morning sunlight.

They were a dull red, almost brown. His breath caught.

Dried blood smeared and stained the area where he’d lain. A relatively prominent pool where his butt had been, one large streak where he’d moved once in the night to check on Eustass’ state of sleep, and several smaller splatters. It looked like a murder scene that lacked a corpse.

“Oh shit,” he mumbled, barely able to contain a sudden wave of panic. “Blood. I was bleeding.”

Faintly, Law realized he still felt wet. He got to his feet in agony, barely able to stand, and discerned that there was blood dropping onto the floor. Running down his legs. Fresh blood. Whatever had clotted while he’d lain awake that night had reopened.

Numbly using the walls and furniture for support, he made his way out of the bedroom and down the hall. He was all too conscious that he was dripping life juice down his legs in rivets. At last, after an excruciating few minutes that felt like his bum had spent an eternity in a fiery hell, he opened a door to find a toilet and shower inside. Already naked, he immediately eased himself into the shower, hurrying to turn on the water to wash away his sins.

He leaned against the shower wall, trying to keep his legs as still as possible. They were throbbing painfully from his short excursion and more than once Trafalgar found his eyes blurry with tears he hadn’t cried since he’d been a child.

He reached a hand down between his thighs, moved it backwards and found his entrance. Then grimaced as it sent a sharp jolt of pain up his spine. Underneath his pain he found it ironic that of all the medical procedures he’d read about he didn’t know the first thing to do with a split asshole gushing copious amounts of blood. He knew the tissue had been torn, but he hadn’t the slightest clue how to deal with it.

A blip in his medical knowledge. That frightened him.

--oOo--

Meanwhile, Eustass had awoken to the shifting of weight on the bed. He didn’t open his eyes for a while, too tired to put forth the effort. When he finally did summon his willpower to do his bidding, he blinked for several minutes, mind hazy, until he remembered the events of last night. Suddenly feeling very awake he rolled over. He didn’t expect to see Trafalgar, figuring the other would take off to play with the cats as he usually did in the morning if he slept late, but the grisly sight that met his eyes in the morning light was enough to make him leap out of bed, fully energized.
He stared down at the blood stains, feeling sick to his stomach when he found horror movies oddly humourous. It was different, he decided then, when the one bleeding was someone he knew and the cause was, obviously, something he’d done.

While looking down he noticed a faint trail of blood on the floor that led out of the room. It wasn’t dried. In fact it looked relatively fresh. He followed it, treading quietly down the hallway until the trail vanished under a door. Recognizing it to be the bathroom, Eustass quickly tried the door handle.

It wasn’t locked. He barged in, panic settling in at this point. He half expected to find Law dead on the floor in there but instead he registered the steam in the air and the noise of running water, confirmation that the shower was running.

He scurried over to push aside the shower curtain, wondering if Law would be found dead in the water instead.

“Yo, don’t you know how to knock?” Law greeted shakily.

Eustass had no retort, his eyes roving the pitiful sight in the shower. There Trafalgar was, standing under a stream of hot water that left him a bright red where it hit and a pale white where it did not. His face was the only part of him not red to some degree. It was pale, a deathly washed out pale.

But the worst part was the bottom of the shower, where the drain was plugged and collected a dull, red-tinged puddle.

“Oh God, oh God,” Eustass started to chant, before Trafalgar cut in.

“It’d really appreciate it if you wouldn’t panic. I’ve currently just come to the end of that phase, so let’s just move on to the whole ‘find a first aid kit’ part, okay? And maybe you should grab some other towels; I noticed that the only ones in here are bright white.”

Ignoring Law’s speech, Kidd dove for those expensive, fluffy, white towels that had been imported from a foreign country and practically threw them on top of Law. Eventually, one or two were wrapped around his body and secured, at which point Kidd found himself forcefully removing his boyfriend from the shower.

“H-hey, gentle! Gentle with me! I’m crippled, you asshole!” Law cried as he tried not to flop over and cause further injury to his already sore buttocks. But Kidd was all too determined to get Law out of the shower and stifle the flow of blood he could see had reappeared.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” Kidd affirmed as he managed to get Law out onto the tiled floor of the bathroom.

“N-no! Not the hospital! Anything but there! I hate being a fucking patient! I’ll never fucking forgive you if you even dare to…to…”

Law trailed off, his voice weakening to a pathetic little pant as he felt a strange sensation come over him that was almost nauseating in nature. With a slight mental groan he realized, all too painfully, that he was losing his sense of place and becoming numb.

Kidd nearly had a conniption when he felt Law fall limp against his body, passing out.

“H-hey, wake up!” Kidd commanded nervously, hefting Law’s form around in his arms. He had collapsed more or less flush against Kidd, throwing all of his slight weight onto the redhead. Quickly, Kidd stopped his shaking, reminding himself that Law had said to be gentle with his
body. “Raccoon Face?! Panda?! Trafalgar?! LAW WOULD YOU PLEASE WAKE THE FUCK UP!”

Kidd’s grip slipped a bit on the towels wrapped around Law’s naked booty and he nearly dropped the darker boy’s unconscious body upon the tiles. In that jerk to save him, Kidd watched as Law’s head rolled from his shoulder to rest on his upper arm and exposed a very faint grin upon his pale face.

“You bastard, I can’t believe you’re playing with me at a time like this,” Kidd growled, all too ready to drop Law on the floor for his idiocy. “I’m not falling for your fainting trick a second time!”

No answer.

“I can see you smiling, you fucker.”

No answer.

“…Oh God, you’re really unconscious, aren’t you?” Kidd cried, noting how Law’s mouth stayed fixed in that creepy subconscious grin. It was apparent that while some people’s facial muscles sagged when going unconscious, Law did not share that attribute.

Creepy.

He didn’t dwell much longer on Law’s peculiar expression, instead setting off to bring Law back to his bedroom. He laid him on the cleanest part of the bed, as gently as he could, and began to dry off his body, unsure of what else to do. His hands were shaking terribly and he wondered whether he could manage to dial emergency services.

Then he remembered Law had said not to take him anywhere near a hospital. As long as he was a patient. He didn’t know whether to honour Law’s last words before passing out or to ignore them altogether and call for an ambulance anyway. As he pondered what he should do, he bunched up many white towels and stuck them between Law’s thighs. Then he draped a blanket over him to ward off any cold.

He sat at Law’s side, stroking his hair and wishing he knew what the best thing to do was.

He was convinced he had killed Law for real this time.

The cats came in, but the smell of blood that hung faintly in the air scared them off.

Kidd listened to Law’s breathing. There wasn’t any change from the norm.

He continued to wait, and wait, and wait. Finally, he was rewarded with laughing.

Law’s laughter.

His eyes jolted to Law’s face, noticing that the other was awake. Still pale as a spectre, but there was some colour returning to his cheeks. He couldn’t make out why Law was laughing though. Not until he divulged the reason.

“Your face!” he cried. “Why do you look like you’re about to start bawling your eyes out?!”

“I thought you were going to die!”

Law was silent for a moment, then he turned his head and saw the dull brownish-red marks all over
the bed. He arched his eyebrows, suddenly remembering. Then it was right back to the laughter, though this time it was slightly muted.

“Wow, on my gravestone you would’ve had to put ‘Death by Overzealous Sex.’ How cool would that have been?”

“I can’t believe you’re joking about this!” Kidd cried, leaning in close to Law’s face. He was a tiny bit angry but mostly relieved, since Law joking around could be taken as a sign that he was alright. He was angry at himself though, not really at Law, since the whole ordeal had been his fault. “I thought I’d killed you! Why didn’t you tell me you were bleeding? When did it even start?”

Law made to shrug, but Kidd had him so packed with towels and blankets that he could barely move. “I dunno,” he said. “Maybe the moment you entered me.”

Kidd choked and took a minute to calm himself down before he could reply.

“Why didn’t you tell me?! I would have stopped!”

“Because I didn’t think I was bleeding, and I didn’t think it would hurt so bad; I thought maybe my level of pain was normal. I just don’t know.” Law blinked owlishly at him. The look on his face was so innocent, so not what Kidd expected when Law woke up. “I’m feeling better though. Nice and toasty warm. But I can’t really get up to obtain food, so would you go make me something good to eat with your brilliant culinary skills and bring it up here? I’d be very grateful.”

Kidd nodded frantically and was off running, glad to finally be of some use, leaving Law thinking that he could very easily get anything he wanted today. Despite the lingering soreness in his ass, he was optimistic that today would be loads of manipulative fun.
Chapter 22

“It’s not like they’re dangerous or anything. In fact, they’re kind of cute.”

Killer stared at him, his eyes wide open. He had pushed his bangs back away from his face for once, giving Kidd a front row seat to his true emotions. “Captain, tell me you’re kidding or something. That you’re going to throw them in a blender and see what happens…or something.”

Kidd screwed up his face with disgust. “Absolutely not. These are my kittens you’re talking about, not some goddamn strays!”

For the past few weeks, Kidd slowly began to fall for the little fluff balls. They were especially comforting to have around when Law was away. And Law had been there for two days straight, sitting in bed and ordering Kidd around like his slave. Not that Eustass had complained, considering a little manual labour barely made up what he’d done to his boyfriend.

He had only let Law go home when he was sure the other was okay, and even then he made Law swear to stay in bed and not go to school, which had taken a lot of convincing. Law actually liked going to school, if only to observe people for an ego boost, not so much for the education.

Kidd had made sure that he would stay home tomorrow as well. Just to make sure everything had healed up. The whole experience had been scarring for Kidd, who had sworn from that moment on that he’d do a little research beforehand.

Law had been scared that Kidd had been turned off of sex completely. He was somewhat justified in worrying about that. Kidd had been paranoid about his wellbeing for days already.

“This one is trying to bite me.” Uno leapt at Killer’s leg, yowling as if he could sense this human’s desire to hurt his brother and sister. “Can I kick it?”

“Absolutely not!” Kidd howled. “Fuck Killer, what’s wrong with you?” Killer shot him a look, one that reiterated his question and directed its full anger back at him. Really, Killer couldn’t fathom what his friend was thinking. It was all so strange and unexpected that Kidd would change so much in such a span of time.

They were currently in the dining room, Kidd sitting at the table with Tres snuggled securely in his lap. Uno was running circles around Killer, who sat opposite Kidd and looked about ready to puke. The cuteness, Kidd figured, was overwhelming for him.

“These things are disgusting,” Killer said, “I cannot believe you’re keeping them in your house. What if they start, like, multiplying?”

Kidd rolled his eyes. “They are cats, not rodents. Besides, in a few weeks I’m going to get them spayed and neutered.”

“What have your parents said about these things?”

“My mother was freaked out, but she’s letting me keep them. Kind of. For now she’s cool with it, so that’s all that matters. As long as I don’t piss her off. And my father obviously doesn’t know, because if he did I’d probably be in the hospital. Or the morgue.”

Killer shook his head, getting up to go to the kitchen. Uno was seriously pissing him off with his constant nipping, even if his little teeth barely made any sort of mark on Killer’s pants, never mind
his skin. He went into the kitchen and removed a carton of juice from the refrigerator. He got down a glass from a cupboard, the soft clinking noise as he put it down on the granite countertop attracting the attention of Dos, who had been slinking around, too nervous to approach the stranger she’d never met before.

Kidd watched with a smile as Dos trotted up, probably thinking that there was food to be had. After all, Law always just grabbed a plate from the cupboard to use as a dish for the kittens. They hadn’t gotten around to actually going to the pet store and getting actual food dishes for them yet. In all actuality, they didn’t want to bother.

If Dos couldn’t charm Killer, none of the cats could, Kidd thought.

She jumped up onto the counter next to Killer, curious to see what he was doing. Reflexively, Killer swung out an arm and knocked the kitten off, but he was much too ruthless with his action. The powerful blow sent Dos skittering to the floor in a heap, rolling across the tiles.

“So, cats don’t land on their feet,” he mused cruelly.

Kidd, however, was seething. He could barely form words as his favourite kitten scampered away with a slight limp, going to hide somewhere safe.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had Killer up against the fridge by the collar of his shirt.

“What. The. Hell.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Killer whispered, all too aware of how Kidd was seeing nothing but red in front of him. Deep red. More than likely a bloody red.

“How dare you,” Kidd hissed. “That thing is just a fucking baby.”

Killer couldn’t help but quirk his eyebrows and explode. He was so damn sick of being left out of the loop. “What the hell has gotten into you? You used to hate animals, especially baby animals! I just don’t get it! I’ve been watching you these past few months and it’s like I’ve been watching someone other than my best friend! You’ve changed! I don’t know how the fuck that happened, but I have this awful feeling it has to do with that fucking Trafalgar Law!”

“Yeah, well, maybe he did open my eyes, who knows? Who cares?! That still doesn’t excuse what you just did to my favourite pet!”

Killer found the strength to push him off, regaining his balance as he slid down the front of the fridge. For a moment Kidd was stunned; Killer never fought back against him. Then he realized, with growing apprehension, that Killer was angry. Killer never got angry. This was new.

“You know what?” Killer quietly seethed. “You’re delusional. I swear that guy has manipulated you into becoming something you’re not! I’m going to find out exactly what he’s done to you. Maybe I’ll be able to save you before it’s too late.” Kidd narrowed his eyes and almost started laughing at the absurdity of that statement. Killer saving him from becoming a good person? That was absurd.

Kidd watched as Killer stormed out of the room and down a hall, heading for the exit. Kidd followed, of course, if only to make sure Dos didn’t get in his way. He didn’t know what he’d do if Killer kicked her out of his path.

Killer got to the door, fully intent on leaving. He didn’t turn around once as he yanked the door open and stepped through it.
“I’m going to find out where he lives, and then we’ll see what that bastard has to say for himself,” he called over his shoulder, slipping from the doorway and out into the snowy world before Kidd could go after him. The unspoken threat hung in the air, clenching tightly around Kidd’s already frail heart.

--oOo--

Ace watched the class flood out of the room, noticing for the umpteenth time that day that Law was absent from school. He was really getting bored not having anyone to talk to. So he closed the classroom door after the last of the students went through and turned to Marco to sate his inactivity, who’d begun marking assignments now that class was over.

Doing a double take, he decided to lock the door. Then he turned back to his teacher, a fiery intent in his eyes.

Watching Marco’s hands glide across the paper, how graceful those fingers were, left him feeling as aroused as he had a long time ago, back when Marco wouldn’t give him a second look. Except now he was fairly certain Marco would give him that second look, if he were to do something…all kinds of ideas were coming to mind, but Ace settled on the option that appealed to him the most.

“Marco?”

“Hmm?” Marco didn’t even look up from his task. He continued marking, oblivious to Ace’s advances on him. Ace sauntered around the desk at his leisure, peering down at the paperwork Marco was going over. It looked boring to him, full of scribbled numbers and smudged handwriting. Marco’s work time needed a little spicing up.

He silently dropped to his knees, something he found he was becoming accustomed to. He often got the sudden, uncontrollable urge to pretend to be submissive, only to try and become the dominant one out of the two of them. They had started to become routine, those blow jobs, and Ace was fairly confident that he was getting much better at giving them.

Marco didn’t notice Ace slide half-way under his desk, not until Ace started fumbling with his belt and revealed the white briefs he wore under his slacks.

“Ace, what are you do–”

Before Marco could finish speaking, Ace’s lips had wrapped themselves around Marco’s flaccid length. With Ace teasing him with his tongue, he got hard embarrassingly quick. Both knew very well that they shouldn’t be doing what they were doing, but with Ace under the desk, the door locked, and Marco sporting a throbbing erection, neither cared too much. They were both just men. They had their needs.

Ace made sure to give Marco as much eye contact as he could as he took him in as deep as his gag reflex would allow. He was still getting used to relaxing his throat enough for this, but Marco was patient with him, a gentle hand threading fingers into dark curls to reassure him. Ace loved it, he really did, when Marco gently grabbed his head and petted him; it was just so comforting. So caring. So sensual.

He worked to establish a rhythm. In, back, suck the tip, breath. Marco gave him full control, didn’t try to guide him, which Ace thought was hugely liberating. He could do whatever he wanted with Marco. Marco was his. Marco’s pleasure was his pleasure.

He felt himself tingling upon hearing Marco’s strangled gasps and deep breathing, shifting his
knees together to avoid getting overly aroused. After all, they couldn’t have full out sex at school. Even Ace could draw that line.

His routine and rhythm was gradually starting to deteriorate though as saliva and pre-come started to drip from his lips down to his chin. He had to swallow, since he refused to let this blowjob get sloppy. So he buried himself up to Marco’s base and swallowed, the muscle contractions of his throat around Marco’s length making him gag. That few seconds of discomfort was worth it though, as the throaty noises Marco made were the ultimate reward.

Fingers tightened in his hair. “Ace, do that again.” He glanced up at Marco, noting the pink tinge on his cheeks as exertion worked him over. It was so hot knowing that Marco had utmost control over his libido. If Marco had been going down on him, Ace knew he’d already be spent.

He tried the swallowing technique again and, the second time around, he didn’t gag nearly as hard. The time after that he hardly had the urge.

Marco’s other hand had begun to stroke Ace’s cheek, a thumb running along the skin just under his eye. Ace knew Marco was just trying to remain in control, just barely resisting the desire to take Ace’s head and guide him until his release. He was trying to make the experience last, trying to hold on while Ace was trying to push him over that line into euphoric bliss. It was a fierce game of tug-o’-war in which both sides were equally determined to win.

But Ace knew, as he pulled back to inhale a sharp breath, that Marco had a weakness to a certain technique. He’d used it on Ace before, and Ace had to admit he learned it as quickly as he could, since he’d never been left as satisfied as Marco had left him that day.

So he lightly dragged his teeth from base to tip, sending a pleasurable tickle down Marco’s veined length. He went back down then, did the swallowing thing that brought such dirty noises from Marco’s lips, and then angled his head so that he could use just a touch of teeth and a ton of tongue.

“Ace!”

It wasn’t often that Marco called his name when he came, so Ace was caught off guard and at the mercy of sharp, tangy mouthfuls of Marco spurting forth down his throat. He had to stop gliding his teeth around to catch all of Marco in his mouth, swallowing as much as he could to avoid having it spill out down his chin. He felt the primal need to prove to Marco that he could handle giving a blowjob. He took all that Marco could give.

When he finished, Ace stayed under the desk and lapped at the fleshy underside of Marco’s softening member, paying particular attention to any little traces of arousal that still came forth from that engorged tip. While Ace could have stayed there for much longer, Marco was quick to button himself back up and sigh wistfully.

Ace wanted to take the opportunity to jump up and sit in Marco’s lap, but they both knew that what he’d done was more than enough for one day. So Ace stood, gave Marco a chaste kiss in the open, and stepped away to grab his things from a nearby desk. All the while he couldn’t help but throw Marco seductive glances.

“You are so very late for next class,” Marco mused. His voice was low, but light, as if weight had been lifted from his tired shoulders. “Want me to write you a note?”

Ace giggled, deciding to narrate. “Dear Mr. Aokiji. Sorry for Ace’s tardiness, he was busy giving me head. Signed, Mr. McLeod.”
Marco got up and gave him a playful box to the shoulder, but he was laughing. “If I wrote that, I’m sure I would scar the poor man. Alright, no note for you.”

Ace shrugged. “Whatever, I wasn’t planning on going to class anyway. I want to check on my friend, since he must be sick to miss school like this. Plus, I haven’t skipped in a long time. I think I should remedy that record…”

Marco gaze hardened. “Oh, you’re going to class alright. Even if I have to drag you there. It’s called getting an education. Plus, final exams start tomorrow! Don’t forget that the exam in this class is later this week.”

Ace pretended to pout. “You’re such a teacher sometimes, Marco! All we’re doing in class is review for the exam and I’m pretty sure I’ve got everything tucked away in my brain, thanks. I do occasionally study at home you know. And how could I forget about your exam since we’ve been prepping for it since my first visit to your house?”

Marco chuckled, wrote him a more respectable note, and then sent him on his way with a little pinch on his behind.

--oOo--

Regardless of Marco writing him a note, Ace only got a few steps out of the math classroom before he got a text. He pulled it out, seeing that it was from Law.


Law’s less than eloquent little snippets spoke volumes to Ace. He ditched Aokiji’s class in favour of walking to the North Blue district. When he got there, he knocked on the little shanty house, expecting the old hag to pop up and pig-stick him, but nobody answered. The door was unlocked, so he went in and up to Law’s bedroom. He found his friend surrounded by a mountain of blankets, looking bored out of his skull. Bepo was beside him on the bed, asleep, and Law used his body as an armrest.

“Finally you have come,” Law said. “Did you get distracted by all the colourful Christmas lights or something?”

Ace shrugged. “Well, its past Christmas so some of the lights are coming down. In a few weeks it’ll be spring.”

“Forget I asked that.”

“So, um, are you sick?” Ace asked, wary of coming any closer to Law in case whatever had him down and out was contagious.

Law shook his head. “Nope. Not sick.”

“Then why are you…”

“You could say I slipped in the shower…”

Ace blinked for a bit, then noticed the particular way Law was sitting. Slipped in the shower? That had to be code for something…

It took him a while, but he finally got it. “HOLY FUCK. You got fucked!?”
“Calm yourself, Firecrotch.” Law withdrew his hand from Bepo’s back as the dog shot up several feet in the air, frightened out of his fur. “I believe the general idea here is that I did indeed get fucked. And what a marvellous fucking it was.”

“I’m going to rip his balls off! Then I’m going to kill him!”

“No, you’re not. I would be quite heartbroken,” Law said in his usual mocking tone.

“B-but, but he hurt you!”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious. My ass is well aware.”

“You’re welcome, Lieutenant Sarcasm. And we’re not through talking about this!” Ace continued to fume as he sat on the edge of the mound of blankets on Law’s bed. It looked as though every blanket-like piece of fabric in the house including the table cloth had made its way to Law’s bed. “I’m fucking pissed! How could he do that to you? He can’t be…he can’t possibly be just that large!”

Law rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to talk dick sizes with you, Ace.”

“But Panda, now I’m really curious!” Ace whined, seizing Law’s foot, the only part of him in the assortment of blankets besides his face that was currently uncovered. “You have to tell me! I’ll tell you about Marco’s if you–”

“What part of ‘I don’t want to hear it’ don’t you understand?” Law wailed as he moved to cover his ears before Ace could tell him details about his sex life that he really didn’t want to hear. “Ace, I didn’t call you over here to talk about gay stuff.” He paused. “Actually, never mind, I did call you over here to talk about gay-related stuff.”

Now Ace was thoroughly confused. He crawled up the mound of blankets that was Law until he was right in his face, spread-eagled over that mound. “What do you mean?”

Law grimaced. This was way too close. “Get out of my face and maybe I’ll tell you. Or, on second thought, maybe I’ll keep it a secret.”

Secrets, as a general rule, really aggravated Ace. He climbed off of Law but didn’t entirely get out of his face. “That’s not fair, Panda Bear.” He quirked a suggestive eyebrow way up on his forehead, grinning merrily. “I can’t believe you’re going to tell me about Kidd’s–”

“No, I’m not!” Law hurried to interrupt. There were a few things that shouldn’t get out into the open. At least not with Ace. If Ace knew anything, he’d casually slip it into the next conversation he had with Kidd, whenever that may occur. Of course, he’d totally screw up the facts and fictionalize the stats.

Ace snickered a bit and started rolling off inches and making obscene hand gestures, causing Law to re-evaluate what virtues he found in his best friend.

“You’re an asshole,” he said finally after Ace compared Kidd’s thing to a broken pencil he found in his pocket. “I’m not telling you this life-changing information I have stored in my brain now. I’m going back to school tomorrow too, just so you know. I think I should tell Kidd what you said and have him beat you up.”

Ace gasped. “Hold up, you never said the information was life-changing! That’s totally different! You have to tell me! Or I’ll…I’ll…”
“You’ll what?”

“I’ll kick you so hard your grandchildren will feel it!”

“Gay.”

Ace scrunched his face up, realizing his mistake. “Right. Touché. Here, I’ve got a better one. I will use a sharpened spoon to dig out your eyeballs and replace them with your testicles!”

“There’s no way you came up with that one on your own.”

“You’re right. I saw it somewhere,” Ace confessed. “Honestly though, you’d better tell me or I’ll go downstairs and find the old hag and tell her what you and your ass have been getting up to.”

“Do that and I’ll seriously consider using your aforementioned threat on you,” Law warned. “But I’ll tell you what you want to know, because I’m just that nice and I don’t want you getting into any trouble. Now cuddle up.” He patted the quilt beside him and Ace took Bepo’s vacant spot, curling into Law’s embrace. Law just wanted to use someone as an armrest. Sitting around for the past few days all alone was boring.

“Tell me,” Ace once again demanded.

“Promise me you won’t freak out.” Ace pinkie promised, squeezing the life out of Law’s finger. “That hurt you idiot!” Ace just giggled like the idiot he not so secretly was.

“Anyways, what I’m about to tell you is a conversation I had with Kidd a few days back.” Ace opened his mouth, but Law cracked him one on the top of the head. “And it has nothing to do with dicks! At least not specifically. What Kidd told me really made me worry about you and McLeod.”

Ace stiffened all of a sudden, the unexpected words shocking him into submission. He lay still, contemplating what Law could say next.

There was weight in Law’s low tone as he continued. “Kidd told me he saw the two of you kissing.”

“Where?” Ace asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “We went to a Whitebeard Pirates gig not too long ago, just before Christmas. He kissed me in the car then…”

“No, the classroom,” Law supplied. “He was walking by the windows outside and he peered in and saw you two. He didn’t believe what he was seeing and shrugged it off, but I told him about you and Marco, since it’s only fair because I’ve told you about him being gay, and he pieced what he saw together. You know, I thought you’d have the sense not to do shit like that at school. It’s dangerous. It might not have been Kidd walking by there. It could have been, like, that blabbermouth Apoo who looks like a barrel monkey on steroids.”

Ace bowed his head, his face containing a trace of fear. “That’s two now,” he mumbled.

“Two what?”

“Two people who should not have found out about Marco and I until after graduation.”

“Who else knows? There’s someone other than Kidd and I, isn’t there?”

Ace leaned his head into Law’s neck, feeling his pulse on his cheek and hearing the rhythmic, calming breathing of his friend. “Jimbei found out somehow too. Marco doesn’t know how it
happened. But now I’m a bit uneasy since Kidd saw us through the windows and all. I had no idea you could see through them well enough to know that stuff was going on within the class. They always looked tinted from the outside.”

“Yeah, well, obviously you’ve never gotten up close and personal with the school windows,” Law said dryly. “He said he just saw you two do a quick kiss-like motion. In fact, he said it hardly looked like a kiss. You haven’t done anything riskier than that I assume?”

Ace was silent, blinking at the wall to his left side. There was still a hole in the wall from where he’d punched it in during his latest sleep terror. Back when he was unsure of whether or not Marco would take him. It seemed so long ago, but looking at that hole he became aware of how short their relationship really was. And now he’d just gone and done something that could shorten it further.

“You okay, Ace?” Law asked, noting the sudden sullenness of his friend.

“Oh. Yeah, I’m cool. I was just thinking about stuff,” he replied quietly. “Sorry I’m spacey; I’m tired today.”

“Me too. Aren’t we always tired though? But we still manage,” Law said, chuckling. Then he grew serious, rubbing Ace’s back in hopes of soothing his friend’s nerves. “Don’t worry too much about Kidd, it doesn’t really matter that he knows. Kidd will keep the secret. He’s trusting that you keep his in return.”

Ace wanted to confess that he’d done something very, very stupid earlier, but he already knew what Law would say. Besides, Law couldn’t say anything that Ace didn’t already know.

“Panda, if anything happens, can I count on you to be there for me?” he asked instead.

“Yeah, Ace, always. So long as you don’t raid my fridge or talk about my man’s dick.”
Chapter 23

Kidd fingered his cell phone’s flat, illuminated buttons, then looked up at his father. Even though
the man had just gotten home, he had already sunk his claws back into Kidd’s throat.

“I know you haven’t called her yet. Her father is beginning to think I lied to him about you taking
his daughter out to–”

Kidd cut him off: “I’m still not entirely enticed to go out with a girl who–”

“I’m not stupid enough to expect you to,” his father said angrily, cutting Kidd off in turn. “In fact, I
have so little faith in you that I have actually prepared to compensate you for your goddamn
troubles.” At this, the elder Eustass threw a wad of paper down on the table in front of Kidd. A
bundle of money.

Kidd did not say, God, you’re so desperate. He did not say, I refuse to marry some chick for your
own gain. He did not say, I’m fucking gay, so I don’t like girls anyway.

Instead, he just looked at the money, then at his cell phone, then up at his father whose eyes glared
into his gay, sinful soul. “Fine,” he said, “I’ll give her a call and hopefully take her out to dinner.
But, if she refuses, then that just sucks for you.”

His father shook his head slowly and sneered. “Oh, she won’t refuse. She can’t afford to.”

Then, as soon as Kidd began to dial the number on the slip of paper his father had placed in front of
him, the older man stalked off. Kidd knew he wouldn’t be sticking around much longer. The big
businessman had better things to do than hang around his difficult son.

He barely had to wait before a pristine, distinctly snobbish voice made his eardrums bleed. This
girl’s greeting was short, snappy, and after just one word Kidd already had his mind made up about
Miss Jewelry Bonney.

“What?”

“This is…” Kidd trailed off for a second, unsure whether he should introduce himself by his name
or by his father’s lineage. In the end, he settled for both. “Eustass Kidd, my father is–”

“Oh, Eustass. The guy who owns the huge steel company daddy has ties with. You’re that son.”

Kidd fiddled with the slip of paper on the table, crumpling it up and smoothing it out. He needed to
do something with his hands. He couldn’t focus on the annoying voice on the other end. “Yeah.
That’s me.”

“Look, I have a boyfriend.”

Yeah, me too, Kidd felt like saying. Still, if he didn’t make this work he was going to get an earful
of angry Eustass Papa. In choosing a date with Jewelry Bonney he was choosing the lesser of two
evils. “Look, I think you’d like me if–”

“Look, I’ve got to please daddy to get my new car, so let’s meet up at the Baratie sometime next
week. Call me later for a time. Or whatever. I’ve got stuff to do now.” Kidd snorted and then
heard, just barely audible in his ears, “Taco’s are ready…”
“Yeah, sure, that sounds good,” Kidd said. He was about to hang up and just end it when a peculiar sound filtered through into his ear canal.

*Munch, munch.*

He had never heard such disgusting eating noises in his life. And on that note, Kidd promptly hung up and gathered up the money, intending to put it into a very personal fund he had started a while back.

--oOo--

“What are you doing over here? Killer’s going to start to suspect some–”

“We had a fight.”

Kidd leaned in closer to Law, sliding his shoulder along the surface of a locker. “We fought about you, ironically. I’ve been waiting for you to get back to school so I could tell you in person.

“Oh, now *that’s* interesting. Why did you fight about *me*? Unless you told him…”

“No,” Kidd said, his tone bitter. He sounded as if he were fighting within himself. His gaze darted around still, looking for any signs of watching eyes or eavesdropping ears, yet his body wanted to reach out and embrace Law. He was still painfully in the closet. “How’s your ass?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Thanks to the abundant medical knowledge I made sure to collect after that hot little incident, it has healed fabulously. My gluteus maximus is completely fine; want to feel it and make sure for yourself?” Law turned around and wriggled his bum in Kidd’s direction. If Kidd weren’t so paranoid of discovery, he would have certainly taken Law up on his offer.

“I’m really sorry. Again,” Kidd whispered.

Law shrugged and leaned back against the lockers that nobody really even knew existed so deep in the school’s core, noting how guilt-ridden Kidd’s entire demeanour was. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not some frail, easily broken chick. Speaking of chicks, when’s your date with the Bonney lass?”

Kidd grimaced. “Next week,” he said bitterly. “I’m supposed to be meeting her down at the Baratie’s in the East Blue district. Don’t know what time yet. I actually like that place too, since there’s the fight ring in the back, but having that chick there is going to ruin the experience for me. I just know it.”

“Maybe she’ll be a hardcore fighter?” Law mused. “Then you two would hit it off quite spectacularly.”

It was stunning just how much Kidd’s face fell just then. “Don’t be stupid Racoon. I fucking lo–” He cut himself off, his face flaming up to match his fiery hair.

Law knew precisely what he almost let slip from his lips. “Good thing you didn’t complete that sentence,” he said rather jovially. He let a smile split his face then, noting how Kidd was blushing. “I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. Your face matches your hair.”

“Shut the fuck up, Racoon Face.”

“I have this odd feeling you’ve said that to me before too,” whispered Law. Suddenly he felt
awfully wistful, like an old man recounting his early days. “Seems like we’ve been together for a while now. My, how time flies when you’re having fun.” He slapped his butt, causing Kidd to blush an even darker crimson.

“It’s only been a few months,” Kidd said, brushing a strand of red hair that had fallen forward into his face. His headband was seriously not doing its job. That or Kidd honestly needed to get his hair cut before it pissed him off so much that he took scissors to it and gave himself a bushwhacking job in front of the bathroom mirror.

“Anyways, I really don’t want to go on a date with Bonney Bitch. I phoned her, you know, to set up the date, and she sounded like a complete bitch. Really bad manners. It’s kind of obvious she got conned into this by her parents too.”

Law laughed raucously, the sound bouncing off the walls of the hallways. Kidd poked him lightly to warn him to be quiet, as they had both snuck out of their classes to meet. Kidd rarely sent him text messages, so Law had thought something was wrong and had skipped out of class immediately. Now he was sure Kidd was only getting him out of class to complain to him about his sexuality issues.

“You know, you could always come out to your parents. Or to the Bonney lass,” he suggested.

Kidd couldn’t meet his eyes. “No. I thought I told you.”

“I thought you promised me you would. After we fucked. My ass being sore for the past week has been evidence enough that shit went down that night.”

“I never promised you. You shouted that promise at me and I never agreed to it. Then you ran off. Like you always do.” Kidd still didn’t look into his eyes, rather at some undetermined point past his shoulders. “Come on Law, you know I can’t just up and scream it to the world. It’s hard for me to even think about, let alone talk about. Yelling about it at the top of my lungs and telling people is unthinkable and undoable.”

“You’re so far in the closet your insecurity is peeking out of your asshole,” Law spat. “And every time I go back there I see it looking at me like a pitiful child.”

Kidd’s temper flared. “Well, fuck, I don’t think you’ve ever gone back there, but honestly I get what you’re trying to fucking say here. And I don’t fucking think I can–”

“Close your eyes,” Law suddenly demanded. Kidd blinked at him, stunned into silence. “Go on, close them. You trust me, don’t you?” Despite his anger boiling over, Kidd slowly nodded, but Law could see that he was having reservations. “Just do it. I’m not going to kiss you or do anything plainly gay. I’m not that much of an asshole. I wouldn’t ‘accidentally’ out you.”

Finally, Kidd closed his eyes on Law’s stern face, plunging his world into darkness.

“Okay, I want you to imagine something for me. Imagine yourself sitting at that table in your kitchen. It’s silent. You’re cold. It’s boring. You’re all alone. It’s nothing but emptiness inside you. You’re drowning in this solitude. It has eroded all of your compassion. You’re–”

Kidd cut him off with his lips, taking his cheeks in his hands to keep him in place. He crushed them together as if trying to channel every emotion he had ever felt towards Law into one simple kiss. All of the fear, torment, anger and, in some messed up way, the love. But mostly, mostly it was because Kidd didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t want things to go back to being the way they were before he really got to know Law. He knew that scenario Law had just described to him. It
was his life before Law and it could very well be his life after Law.

He didn’t want to imagine life after Law.

He broke the kiss, leaving Law stunned into silence. Then, slowly, Law closed his parted lips, still not breaking eye contact. He hadn’t expected this from Kidd, not one bit. This was the open affection that he’d been thinking he would never experience in his lifetime. He had thought that they would remain bedroom lovers, never displaying an ounce of public affection.

He was wrong. For once.

“I get it,” Kidd said softly. “I don’t want to lose you. I get it.”

“I’m not going to suddenly abandon you,” Law quickly assured him, finally breaking eye contact with him to glance around. Still alone. Nobody had seen them. Still, this was a huge, monumental step for Kidd. “I just wanted to see what you’d say to that scenario. If you really cared after all this time.”

Kidd barked out a little laugh. “Yeah, well, don’t think I’d let you go without a fight. Of course I care about you. You’re pretty much the only person I care about.” He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. This was getting a tad too sentimental for him. “Seriously though, there was a reason I wanted to see you. And it has to do with what I avoided talking about earlier. It has to do with Killer and the little spat about you that he and I had.”

“I didn’t think you wanted to talk about it. I thought you changed the subject for a reason, because it skirted too close to your sexuality issues.”

“Yeah, well, we’re talking about it now,” snapped Kidd. “He’s beginning to suspect, I think, that we’re no longer enemies. He might even realize that we’re more than friends. Anyways, he told me he was going to find out where you live. Law, he’s going to come after you with the intent of doing damage.”

“Wow, that’s pretty crazy, even by my standards. He’s nuts, isn’t he?”

Kidd looked away. “He’s as nuts as I used to be,” he muttered. “Still, he’s completely serious when he says things like that. He’s going to find you and I’m worried he’ll hurt you. Really bad. Worse than I hurt you last week.”

“You know, I actually enjoyed that. The sex, that is. In a roundabout way.”

This got Kidd blushing a nice, smooth, fire truck red again. “I’m going to be way more careful next time. Assuming there’s going to be a next time.”

“Oh, there will certainly be a next time. A great many next times, if I have my way,” said Law mischievously. There was a glint in his eye and he slowly dragged his tongue along his lower lip.

“Anyways, enough about that.” Kidd hurried to change the conversation back to the more pressing subject. He didn’t want to get aroused from staring too deeply into Law’s smoky eyes and watching his pink tongue dance around suggestively. Not in public.

“I want you to go home today perfectly aware of your surroundings. Honestly, Killer can come out of anywhere. I don’t want you to be walking around and daydreaming. Not when he’s out there.”

“Yeah, I’ll be careful. I’m not the daydreaming sort anyway. That’s Ace.”
Kidd ignored that. “Call me if anything happens. *Anything.*” The firmness in his tone caused Law to experience a mild case of butterflies in his stomach. Eustass was really serious. About everything.

“I will. Relax. I’m not going to go ‘poof’ into thin air or anything. Now go back to class and figure out what you’re going to wear for your date with the Bonney lass.” Law grinned, but Kidd frowned.

“I’ve already decided I’m not going. I’d rather just hang with you.”

“Well, you’d better call up your folks and tell them that. Tell them you’re not going to flirt with the Bonney lass because you’re too busy screwing your sexy boyfriend.”

“I may just do that,” Kidd mused quietly, half to himself. He left Law leaning against the locker, heading back to class just before the bell rang and students began to flood the halls.

--oOo--

“Just came to drop off something for the old man,” Thatch said, brandishing a bottle of alcohol.

Marco took one look at the murky liquid swishing around in the tubular container and sighed. “Thatch, you’re not supposed to be bringing that stuff into a *school*. You’re not setting a very good example for the kids.”

Thatch pouted, his trembling lower lip out of place on the face of an older man. “But Marco, remember how wasted we used to get in high school? I mean honestly, remember that time we got so drunk you spray-painted your hair blue, did the chicken dance, and then we put on my girlfriend’s dresses? I think I got dumped that night.” Marco screwed his eyes shut; he didn’t want to remember those days of stupidity. Not that he really could remember much, being drunk out of his mind for most of it. “Anyways, this is for Pops, since you’ve sworn off of drinking large quantities of alcohol. Where is he anyway?”

“I’m right here, brat.”

Thatch squealed a little as Whitebeard wrapped a huge muscled arm around his throat, pretending to squeeze the life out of him. It was a friendly gesture, though onlookers might have stopped and stared. The headlock was loose enough that Thatch could do some creative shimmying and slip out of it.

“Pops! I bring you booze and you try to kill me?!” Thatch cried. Marco was laughing, almost as hard as Mr. Newgate. Then the oldest man in the room caught sight of the bottle tucked under Thatch’s arm.

“Is that sake?” he asked, hopeful. “You know, you’re my favourite son, Thatchy boy.”

“I thought I was your favourite son!” wailed Marco indignantly. “I always bring you sake! Every single time I visit!”

“I’m just kidding! I don’t have favourites,” Whitebeard said, seizing the sake from under Thatch’s arm. He pocketed it in the folds of his enormous suit for safekeeping. “But what’s the occasion Thatchy boy? It’s not every day that you come to my work with an alcoholic beverage. Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

Thatch blinked stupidly, then looked to Marco. Marco was just as confused as their Pops. “Um, isn’t it your birthday?”
Whitebeard snorted his amusement. “My birthday isn’t for another two months, kid. I would hit you over the head for forgetting the date, but since you brought me sake you’re off the hook. For now.”

While Marco howled with laughter, Thatch apologized profusely. When he finally got control of himself, Marco began to make fun of his brother’s apparent memory loss, his Pops soon joining in.

“You guys are assholes,” Thatch said with another hearty pout. “At least I make the effort to remember birthdays and other important shit!” He put his hands on his hips, getting ready to strut out of there. “Well, I gotta go. And I swear if you two make fun of me when I’m gone, I’ll die and haunt your souls!”

“What a threat…” Marco and his Pops said in unison, unimpressed.

Thatch flippantly waved over his shoulder, stomping out of Whitebeard’s office. Marco watched him go, collapsing into one of the principal’s many leather chairs. He propped his feet up on the principal’s desk like a naughty child. He was fine acting a bit like a teenager when alone with Whitebeard. His Pops was busy packing things up, still snickering to himself and muttering something about forgetful sons.

“Hey, old man, I took your advice. Just so you know.”

Whitebeard turned around to regard him. “When have I ever given you advice? Except for the time I told you to run for your life when you drank all my sake. Remember? I asked you if you were intoxicated and you screamed, ‘I swear to drunk I’m not God!’ And then you passed out. And your hair was blue. Freaking blue.”

Marco blushed and took his feet down from Whitebeard’s desk. “Why does everyone remember my less than stellar moments? No, I’m talking about the advice you gave me about what to do with Ace.”

“Oh, that brat. Right. Haven’t seen him in my office at all this week. He doesn’t seem to be doing anything too badass lately.”

Marco shrugged. “You told me to ‘be a man,’ so I took your advice and went after Ace. Now we’re together and I’m pretty damn happy about it, even though society will probably try to shoot me for corrupting a minor or whatever. So…I just kind of wanted to thank you.”

“Huh. I hardly remember that conversation. Ah well, I’m happy for you and Ace anyway. I’ve been noticing that you seem to be in a much better mood these past few months. I’ll support your choice to be with him, since you’re finally coming out of your shell and doing the things you want to do. Ever since what happened with that red-haired brat you’ve been more withdrawn when it comes to life.” Whitebeard stroked his moustache thoughtfully. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this about yourself, but you care for people and bend to their needs before looking at what you want. I think it’s great that you’re finally pursuing a relationship and that you’re finally happy.”

Whitebeard blinked, then snickered. “Wow, that sounded less cheesy in my head.”

“Thanks Pops,” Marco said, looking down at his hands as he entwined them. When he looked up again he saw that Whitebeard was all finished packing up his briefcase and other important principal things, his office keys dangling off one of his large sausage fingers. “I’ll lock up your office for you today. I kind of just want to sit here and relax for a few minutes.”

Mr. Newgate tossed him the keys. “Suit yourself, brat. I’m going home to let Stefan out and drink that sake.”
“Okay, see you later, Pops,” Marco said.

Just as he was nearly out the door, Whitebeard turned around and said, “See ya, Pineapple Head!”

Then he bolted, Marco chucking the keys after him in an attempt to do some damage. The keys clattered harmlessly on the ground, nowhere near where his Pops had been. For an old man, he could move quickly.

Marco gave himself a few minutes of rest before getting up to retrieve the keys. He locked the office and walked down the empty hallway, heading back in the direction of the math wing where he’d left all of his stuff.

He didn’t get very far before he heard footsteps. Dismissing it as janitors working especially late, Marco didn’t pay the pitter-patter of feet any mind. That is, until he turned the corner and was nearly face to face with his most hated enemy.

Behind him, a girl no older than twenty-four cowered. She looked awfully familiar. He could have sworn he’d seen her… Before he could place her though, Akainu strutted forwards.

“McLeod. I have been watching your suspicious activity for the past few months,” he started, dark eyes gleaming evilly. “I have been waiting for the opportune moment to confront you as I’ve gathered some rather disgusting evidence of misconduct towards one of your students. You cannot deny you are a sexual deviant.”

Marco’s heart dropped to his shoes and his jaw went so slack that his mouth fell open.

The rather skinny girl with glasses moved around Akainu. She strutted up to him, slightly shaky as if she were worried of toppling over. “Mr. McLeod, we have a warrant to put you under arrest.”

Dimly, Marco heard footsteps approaching from behind. He turned around, hoping that it would be Jimbei, or someone who knew the truth and could back him up. Preferably Whitebeard. But instead Smoker walked up, staring him down emotionlessly.

“As I was saying, I gathered some absolutely vile evidence against you. Your suspicious activity prompted me to place a surveillance camera in your classroom. Just yesterday your deviance made a fatal mistake,” Akainu said harshly. He pulled a tape from his pocket, and on it Marco assumed was Ace’s actions towards him after class. There was no doubt in Marco’s mind. He knew he was screwed.

“I brought it to the attention of the police, who reviewed the tape. This is why they’re here now,” Akainu continued. His voice dripped with malice, but Marco detected a slight hint of excitement. He was glad of this. He had always wanted to get Marco out of his way and here was his chance.

Marco jumped a bit as powerful hands clamped down on his wrists and brought his arms twisting around his back.

“Sorry ‘bout this Marco,” Smoker whispered. His grip on Marco was slack at the moment, but there was an underlying threat that he wouldn’t hesitate to use force if Marco didn’t cooperate. He knew Smoker well enough to know justice came first in his mind.

“Smoker, you really don’t have to do this. I can explain the situation.”

“I don’t think you can explain this in a way society will understand,” the girl said. Now, with Smoker here, he recognized her to be Smoker’s assistant. Tashigi was her name, if he remembered correctly. “I saw a few seconds of that video too and it was pretty horrific. He’s an innocent kid!
You should be ashamed of yourself!"

If Ace had been here, he would have protested that statement of innocence. But Ace wasn’t here. Marco had to face them alone.

“McLeod, there’s nothing you can do at this point but go peacefully,” Akainu advised, stepping forwards. He marched past Tashigi and stopped just short of where Marco stood. His face was pulled into a sneer of disgust. Marco felt a wave of anger and put one foot forward, giving him a bit of leverage should he choose to lash out. His movement caused Smoker to tighten his grip, cutting off the circulation in his wrists.

Marco knew getting violent wouldn’t solve anything. In fact, it would make the already hostile situation worse. Instead, he tried to verbally appeal, hoping to get through to Smoker at least, someone who knew the student in question. “Ace will be so heartbroken. He really does lov—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Akainu hissed, cutting him off. “I have filmed proof of you enticing that boy to do immoral acts. So what are you giving him in return for your sexual gratification? Better grades than he deserves?”

Marco growled and made to lunge at Akainu’s face to try and rip the triumphant smirk right off his flesh, but Smoker’s grip on his arms was unfaltering. He couldn’t budge with his hands behind his back.

Akainu grabbed the collar of Marco’s shirt to keep him motionless and docile, and then leaned in close to whisper a few words to Marco that Smoker wouldn’t be able to hear. “And now that one of Newgate’s sons has so blatantly disgraced him, he himself will have no choice but to step down once the press gets a hold of this. And don’t we all know who’s going to take his place with Sengoku retiring as well this year?” Marco hung his head, beginning to shake. All of his worst nightmares coming true.

Akainu stepped back to address Smoker sweetly. “Guess this is it then. Take the pedophile away.”

Smoker twisted Marco so his hands were exposed to Tashigi, who placed him in handcuffs. Marco didn’t fight; he didn’t see the point. He was just glad Ace wasn’t here to witness this, as he knew Ace would try to take down everyone in the room to ensure Marco’s freedom.

Ace. If he weren’t in such shock Marco would have tears rolling down his face, but right now he was so numb that he barely registered the passing lockers and doorways as Smoker marched him, handcuffed, down the hall. The chilly air bit at his skin through his clothes as they walked outside. Winter was not quite over. Spring was still on its way, but it would be a while.

“Tashigi, stay behind and gather up McLeod’s things. I’ll send a patrol car down here to pick you up later. Fill out the paperwork for me while you’re here.”

“Yes, Smoker, sir,” Tashigi chanted. Marco thought for a moment that she was about to salute him, but she turned on her heel and marched back into the building, intending to fulfill her duties. He could see Akainu standing in the school’s main doorway, looking awfully smug as Tashigi strode up. He was only faintly worried what would happen to his things. His mind was on what would happen to him. And, of course, what would eventually happen to Ace.

Smoker moved his iron grip to his shoulder, loosely holding him in line as they walked towards the patrol car parked up on the curb. Marco knew this was a friendly gesture as they had been almost friends in the past, so he didn’t look at that patrol car as being a mobile jail cell like he would if he’d been arrested by anyone other than Smoker. Instead he looked at that fancy new car and
couldn’t help but idly ask, “Is that new? I could have sworn your vehicle was trashed the last time I saw you cruising around the city.” He was just getting his mind off of the severity of the situation, and he hoped Smoker would assist him in striking up a conversation that didn’t end with him feeling world-worn and ashamed.

Smoker grunted. “I’m not supposed to be talking with guys I just arrested, but since it’s you I’m making an exception. So yeah, that’s brand spanking new. My last one caught fire somehow. Don’t know if foul play was involved or not. You never know in this city, since it’s full of hoodlums and crazed murderers. To tell you the truth, I’d much rather be cruising the Grand Line and picking up thugs than arresting people for who their lovers are.”

He opened the back door of the patrol car and Marco got in without hesitation. It was strange, how often he’d thought about the consequences of being with Ace. He’d always imagined that if the situation did arise he’d fight for his freedom. Now, actually in the situation he’d only dreamt about, he realized that he really didn’t have the effort to fight. He was guilty as charged.

Smoker locked the door behind him and went around and climbed into the driver’s seat. There was a metal mesh cage that surrounded the back seat and made looking out the barred window depressing. Instead, Marco stared straight forward at the rear-view mirror, able to see a little of Smoker’s expression. It wasn’t as hard as he remembered it being when he was first confronted in the school.

“So, you really fooled around with a kid,” Smoker stated after a minute of silent driving.

“Pretty stupid, huh? But I swear I never fooled around with him. It was always serious for me.”

“What about him?”

“He was serious too. Painfully so.”

Smoker shook his head; he had been afraid that this might be the case. “I bet he’ll be finding out where you’re going sometime tomorrow. And I can also guarantee you there’s going to be some brainwashing going on in your absence. Akainu will do anything to get you and the old man out of the way. I’ve been looking into some suspicious activity of his as it is, but the police force hasn’t found anything yet. He’s working overtime to get at something, that much I’m certain of. It’s a matter of figuring out the other key players.”

“Can’t you arrest him if you know he’s plotting something?” Marco asked, a desperate tone entering into his voice. He didn’t want his Pops to take the fall for something he had brought upon himself. “He has to be doing something against the law here!”

“In the eyes of society, you’re the one who has committed the greater evil. The difference between him and you is that he has hard evidence. I couldn’t exactly say, ‘Hey, I’m not going to arrest an old friend for who his lover is’ because he had videotaped evidence that the other one involved was your student. The penalties for a relationship like that in this city, regardless of age, are almost as bad as statutory rape. Hell, they might even be worse. I don’t exactly read the policing guidebooks like some guys so, it’s too much paperwork crap.”

Marco barked out a hollow, emotionless laugh. “Wow, I’m going to be in jail for twenty odd years. Guess you and I will have time to catch up.”

“If you’re lucky,” Smoker said quietly, tone ominous. “If they don’t brainwash Ace into charging you with other counts, like multiple rapes or enslavement. He could, given what Akainu’s got as evidence against you. He might have to, to save his own minor ass. Eighteen is still bordering on
adult and child. To add the school thing in…”

Marco was silently seething. At last he said angrily, “Ace would never testify against me!”

“Maybe not naturally, but his lawyer will want to. His family consists of Garp, whom I know well from my time in the marines. He told me once that he still has custody of him up until his nineteenth birthday, which is in the spring. So technically Garp has to play protective guardian and get his grandson out of the mess you and he created.” Smoker tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Besides, with the kind of evidence Akainu’s got, Ace might not even have to be present at your hearing. You could be sentenced before he finds out the court date.”

“Do me a favour then, Smokey; tell him what’s going on. As mush as I hate the idea of him possibly getting in trouble for my sake, I also know that it would kill him if he knew he could have been there for me and wasn’t. He’ll probably call you a liar when you first tell him, perhaps throw a tantrum and try to hurt you, but I don’t want him doing anything crazy if he hears I’m in prison and he wasn’t notified.”

Smoker was silent a minute, seemingly focussed entirely on driving safely. Of course, he really wasn’t thinking too much about the vehicle at this point. More like he was thinking about his friend in the backseat, two hands cuffed behind his back.

“Shanks would have given you up at this point,” Smoker said suddenly. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s a good guy when he wants to be, but Shanks and you never had that spark, right? I remember back then, when we were all in the same grade, different social groups, sure, but together nonetheless. Shanks and Mihawk were always drifters looking for some new adventure. Guess that’s why they fit together so famously.”

“You know, I never loved Shanks. I thought I did, once, but I was mistaken for some other emotion. Ace on the other hand, he’s special to me. More so than anyone else I’ve ever been with.”

They arrived at the police station. Marco was led in by Smoker and put in one of their holding cells until his fate was to be determined. It was empty, thank goodness. Though Marco certainly wouldn’t mind having a friend with him, he was glad he didn’t have to deal with anyone – strangers especially – asking him what got him behind bars in the first place. Thinking about the why, thinking about Ace, was painful enough for him already.
The Bonney chick, lesser of Kidd’s two current evils, picked up on the first ring.

“Hellooo,” she chirped. “Who is it?”

Kidd guessed she didn’t check the caller ID. If she would he would have received a different greeting altogether. “Eustass Kidd.”

“Oh. *You.* What do you want now?” As she waited for his reply, Kidd heard a soft munching that grew gradually louder.

*Munch, munch, munch.*

“We still have to set up a time to meet, remember?”

“Oh,” *munch, munch,* “right. Hmm, let’s see. I’m busy until Wednesday, so it’s going to have to be Thursday. At seven, because I have important shit to do before then and, to be frank, I don’t want to hang out with you unless I absolutely *must.*”

“Can I ask you something, Miss Jewelry Bonney?”

“What?”

“What the *fuck* are you eating that’s so damn crunchy? It’s like you’re gnawing on a dinosaur bone or something. You sound like a pig. Just saying.”

“Potato chips! God, you’re a fucking asshole!”

“And you’re a bitch. A very-likely-to-be-fat bitch.”

“You don’t know me! I’m not fat; I have an hourglass figure!”

“I don’t want to date you. Truth be told, I don’t even want to know you.”

“Neither do I!” Bonney screamed, and Kidd could hear the fragments of potato chips hitting the receiver. A shower of saturated fats. “You know what? *Fuck you!* Go to hell!”

“I’m going to go to hell anyway; I’m GAY.”

The Bonney lass, as Law referred to her as, choked on whatever was halfway down her throat.

After she got her violent hacking under control there was a moment of silence where neither said anything, only panted out their frustration. Kidd, for his part, couldn’t even fathom why he’d let his Big Secret slip out. Much less to some goddamn fat bitch.

“Oh.”

“Okay?” Kidd questioned. This was new. He had been expecting some sort of remark to degrade his sexuality. Like faggot. Or pansy. Or, God forbid, *fairy.* He had not been expecting *Okay.*

“Okay. I lied. I actually don’t have a boyfriend. I’m a lesbian and my girlfriend can cook way better than any fucking man could. Including YOU. So goodbye, asshole. Don’t call me again. Fuck our fathers.”
Kidd’s cell phone slipped out of fingers slackened by shock. By the time he scrambled to pick up the phone, the line was dead. Well, he certainly wouldn’t be going on a date with a female anytime soon.

He laughed. The whole situation was ridiculous, it really was. Still, he quite liked the rosy warm feeling he got in the pit of his stomach that spread to the rest of his body when he realized he’d successfully outed himself to someone. It was a mighty good feeling.

---oOo---

Ace was so ready for the math exam today. He was going to pass with flying colours. He’d studied hard all term and now was the chance to prove himself perfectly capable of doing mathematics. With Marco’s help during those study sessions – at least the ones where they actually did work – he knew he was going to get a good grade.

He and Law had walked their dogs in the slush that morning before running to school. While Law was disgusted with the melting snow getting all over his pants, Ace was happily splashing in puddles, soaking himself. After that short stint of wearing pants to school in the cold, Ace had reverted back to his usual shorts, preferring the wind against his legs, even if the wind was still a touch chilly. The sun was warm this morning, and that was good enough for him.

“Look, green grass,” Ace said gleefully, pointing out a stray tuff of life peeking out of a puddle on the school’s lawn. Law shrugged, continuing to lean against the building. They were early getting to school, since Ace absolutely could not wait any longer. There were students around, but most were still on buses or at home readying themselves for the day.

“You ready for this?” Ace asked his friend, trying to get Law engaged in some sort of conversation.

“The moment I was fucking conceived my brain was ready to handle this shit,” he answered. Ace snickered, having expected such a confident reply. Law had a near perfect mark in all his classes. Math was no exception.

“Would you stop dancing around like that? People are going to start thinking you’re in dire need of a piss,” Law said, eying up how Ace shifted back and forth in a little jig.

“Sorry; I’m just so excited to finally get this term over and done with! We just have to make it through one more and graduation and then we’re free from high school forever!”

“Amen to that,” Law muttered. “I don’t think I could stand another year of craziness with you.”

“Hey!” Ace cried, pouting. Law turned away from Ace’s puppy dog eyes with an impish, joking smile and walked off into the school. Sure enough, Ace followed him without question. “By the way, Panda Bear, I couldn’t help but notice how your sweater is covered in both white hair and black hairs. What the hell is up with that? Don’t tell me you actually found your panda family and stuff?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha. No.” He pulled his sweatshirt away from his body, taking a closer look. Sure enough, white and black hairs both showed up on the yellow part of his sweater. “Well, that would be Bepo and three little black cats.”

“Cats?”

“Yep, they are mine and Mr. Eustass’ kids.”
“That’s gross,” Ace said, pulling a face. But he was only clowning around. Ace loved anything furry with a wet nose. “So, who’s the father?”

“Me, obviously,” Law snapped. “Anyways, enough about my lovely little darlings. Akainu’s coming over here. I really don’t want him to stop and have a chat with us about wet clothing and tracking mud into the school, so just act busy and stuff, and hopefully he’ll pass by.”

Ace immediately quieted, watching with trepidation as Akainu came towards them. He was tense, returning the glare Akainu discreetly sent him. Then, all of a sudden, Akainu gave them both a little, creepy half-smile, one that was devoid of all positive emotion. He strode past them and turned a corner, disappearing out of sight.

“What was that about?” Law asked quietly. “He looked right at you and smiled. Only it was more like a smirk than a smile.”

“I don’t know,” Ace said, feeling uneasy. Akainu hardly gave him a second look, unless it was to glare or shout at him about something he was doing wrong. He never before made an effort to acknowledge his presence without a reason. “He’s freaky. I really don’t like him. But at least he isn’t trying to kick me out of school right now. Oddly enough, he has kind of laid off on me lately. But then again, my grades have gone up in all my classes, so he doesn’t really have anything to jab me about.”

They hung around until the bell rang, prompting them to go to class. Each took a seat in front of an overturned exam paper. Everyone was chattering excitedly and trying to get any last minute answers to review questions they’d had trouble with. Ace just sat and looked eagerly for Marco’s arrival.

When some woman walked in and sat down at Marco’s desk he nearly got up and told her she was likely in the wrong room of kids to supervise. But then it became apparent that the woman was there to stay, as she began unpacking her things. Ace blinked as he recognized her. She was Jimbei’s student teacher, Ms. Nico.

“Hey, Robin,” he called from his seat. “Where’s Mar–, er, I mean, where’s Mr. McLeod?”

She looked up from the desk and smiled warmly at Ace. She clapped her hands, getting the attention of the rowdy class. “I’m not sure precisely what has come up in Mr. McLeod’s life. Perhaps a sudden illness. It happens to the healthiest of us. I was just called in to supervise you all. Now don’t turn over your exam until I tell you to, okay? Remember, I can’t help you on the exam, so just try your hardest to answer all the questions to the best of your ability.”

The class settled in and Ms. Nico bid everyone to start, wishing them the usual good luck. Ace turned his exam over and flipped through it, recognizing most of the problems as ones that Marco had subtly put extra emphasis on studying. He wrote the exam in a little under two hours, finishing about a half hour later than Law, and turned it back over.

Then he began to really think.

Where was Marco? Was he actually sick like Ms. Nico thought he might be? Or was there something else that had come up? Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t seen Whitebeard all morning. Usually he was standing around the main entrance, chitchatting with students. Perhaps the old man was the one that had fallen ill and Marco, being his son, was with him?

His creative mind came up with a dozen more scenarios, all of them getting worse in nature. When he was down to death, he raised his hand and shakily asked to be let out to go to the washroom. Ms.
Nico seemed to sense something was wrong by the panicked look in Ace’s eyes and took his finished exam, telling him he didn’t have to return.

Law watched him leave, wondering just what had Ace so worked up. Sure, he had noticed Marco’s absence, but sometimes teachers took the day off on test days and exam day wasn’t so different. He figured Marco might have just wanted a break.

At any rate, Ace was out in the hall, frantically texting.

‘Hey. Where are you?’ he texted to Marco’s cell phone, the number of which he had finally gotten a few weeks ago. ‘Worried about you.’

He waited around for five minutes, giving Marco ample time to reply if he really were just at home in bed. Then he called Marco’s landline, standing by a window at the end of the hallway to get the best reception. The phone rang, but the answering machine picked up. While hearing Marco’s voice relaying the pre-recorded message was oddly soothing, it only lasted for a few seconds.

Sighing, Ace ended the call without leaving a message. Perhaps Marco was simply sleeping. Yes, sick and sleeping. Still, that was a pretty outlandish explanation for his lack of response. But he didn’t know what more he could do, save for go over to the man’s house and knock on his front door.

With this firmly taking root in his mind, Ace set off, leaving school property behind. He told himself he was just going to check. Just in case.

--oOo--

Law waited until the exam was over and the class got dismissed. He hurried out of there, charging the door and pushing Basil Hawkins into the doorway, not entirely by accident. He wanted to see if Ace were still around and, if he was, what the status of operation ‘Find Missing Marco’ was.

He weaved around a few students eagerly chatting about how they had done on the exam and a few more that were groaning and lamenting about whether or not they’d passed before realizing Ace was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at his uncomfortable, still wet boots and was about to give up, really he was, when he found himself being lifted off the ground. By his ass, no less.

Instantly he panicked, flailing a bit as he was pushed up against a locker by a much bigger body. There were two big hands under his thighs, and he instinctively wrapped his legs around his assailant’s hips, feeling a crotch pressing into his own. Then he felt the familiar tingling of aggressive lips capturing his mouth at the same time he registered flashes of red. And then the insistent tongue took advantage of his gasp to do combat with his own slippery appendage.

Judging by the way Eustass was passionately kissing him one would have thought they’d not seen one another in a month, never mind twenty-four hours.

When Kidd finally pulled back, he grinned at Law and laughed at his dumbfounded expression. “Woops, cat’s out of the bag now,” he quipped. He made a show of picking off a few stray black hairs from the front of Law’s sweater.

The hall was full of people, yet silence prevailed after Kidd had spoken. Law glanced around, seeing the wide-eyes of all their peers, staring at them. Some had looks of disgust, some of shock, and a few got over that shock to giggle amongst themselves. A lesbian couple down the hall even started cheering. Someone took a photo on their cell phone, a photo that would no doubt end up on the internet. It was all quite strange for Law, who’d never been at the center of attention before.
Hopefully, he thought, he’d never again be in this position.

“I never imagined you’d take me seriously,” he said as Kidd let him down on the ground once more. “Actually, I never thought you’d come out of the closet, let alone slam me up against a locker and kiss the fucking daylights out of me.”

Kidd ran a hand through Law’s short, dark hair, spiking it up. “Yeah, well, I’m just full of surprises, aren’t I? Anyway, after I phoned that Bonney Bitch up and told her I was gay, I felt so liberated. Not to mention the girl’s reaction was hilarious. I mean, it sounded like she was choking on potato chips or something. Quite amusing. I was kind of curious to see what other people would do once I told them.”

“Wow, I’m actually oddly proud of you. But fuck, I was scared there for a few seconds. I thought Killer had come to disembowel me.”

“That can be arranged,” snarled an ominous voice.

‘Oh, shit,’ was what both were thinking, but neither could voice their sudden mortification. In the heat of the moment, it was Killer who spoke again rather than the two lovers.

“Captain, you can’t be serious,” he said firmly, still sticking to that pitiful notion that what he witnessed with his eyes was all part of a ghastly joke. “Surely he fooled you into doing this?”

“Nope,” Kidd said. His bluntness was certainly an acquired facet from Law. “I’m gay.” As much as it pained him to see his best friend for so long buckle under his most recent life-changing choice, he felt incredibly liberated now that Killer knew.

“He turned you gay?”

Law let out a nervous snicker. “You can’t just turn someone gay.”

Killer fixed a glare on him that promised death. “You.” Law stiffened, drawing up his shoulders. “This is all your fault. You and your goddamn manipulative trickery.”

“Hey,” Kidd snapped. He moved away from Law then, whom he’d been shielding behind him out of instinct. He stomped into Killer’s path, making himself a barrier against possible violence.

“Don’t you dare blame him for any of this. I’m fucking gay of my own accord. I was born gay, asshole.”

“Yeah, I bet he’s got you believing that,” Killer growled. “You always have been a gullible person. It’s not hard to believe you’d fall for a little of his deception. Since that bastard’s a complete and utter mindfuck.”

At that, Kidd went on the attack. It wasn’t so much that he been insulted, it was more how Killer had completely debunked his relationship with Law. Killer made it out to be a huge charade, something Law had cooked up in his conniving mind.

He couldn’t stand his worst fear being talked about so openly.

So he strode forward with his fist raised, intending to knock some sense into what was his supposedly best friend’s head. But, he had never fought Killer seriously before, never had a disagreement where Killer actually fought back seriously rather than tried to remedy their dispute with words. He wasn’t prepared for Killer’s speed, his agility.

Killer duped him, evading his punch completely, successfully getting behind the barrier that was
Kidd. He brought his fist back and drove it straight into Law’s gut before the other could so much as form a defensive stance.

Law staggered backwards with the hit but didn’t fall to the floor. Killer had landed a pretty vicious punch full of pent up anger, but he didn’t have his full power behind it. He had been too busy avoiding Kidd.

The second attack was much more powerful, and Law’s spine cracked against the wall of lockers as if he’d been blown away by a transport truck rather than hit with a fist. Law brought his hands up to try to catch and stop a third attack from connecting with his face, this one aimed at smashing his nose, but thankfully Kidd had recovered enough to spin around and grab Killer by his thin shoulders.

To say Kidd flung Killer away would have been an understatement. Killer went flying into the opposite wall, slamming painfully against metal lockers. When he moved off the wall again, Law could see that Killer’s body had dented the metal surface. The blond was clearly pissed.

No, both Killer and Kidd were pissed.

Law really didn’t think he could have solved anything with a few calming, pacifist words. The situation wasn’t salvageable. Not even Kidd would likely listen to him, not when he was seeing red and blowing smoke out his nostrils, embodying an enraged bull ready to charge.

“You little shit! Don’t you ever touch him!” Kidd snarled. Law hadn’t truly noticed until that moment just how possessive Kidd had really become. He hated to think what any guy who accidentally hit on him would look like after Kidd was through with him. He could sense a bit of hesitation when it came to Killer, a friend from his past, but he figured that if a random guy flirted with him, Kidd would likely have no mercy.

That both scared him and made him swell with vanity. He liked being wanted, no, needed by Kidd. He liked knowing that Kidd would fight for him. It wasn’t just an ego boost; it was a genuine show of Kidd’s passion for him. Yes, he liked that a lot.

Still, now was not the time to be fanning himself. Law watched the two square off, each growling profanities under their breaths while waiting for their opponent’s next move. Kidd was heaving with rage but Killer was oddly calm. Then again, Killer always had that element of calm about him. It freaked Law out. It wasn’t…natural.

“I know he’s done something to change you,” Killer said suddenly as Kidd tensed his shoulders for another attack. “All I want to do is change you back to normal. I can; give me a chance to cure you! Just hand him over to me and I’ll deal with him!”

It was a strangled plea, and for a second Kidd faltered as he wound up his punch. Those few seconds of hesitation gave Killer just enough time to leap clear of Kidd’s next attack. His fist smashed into a locker, leaving a round dent.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Kidd grunted. He withdrew his fist slowly, knuckles red and swelling with livid blood just beneath his skin. “I’m his boyfriend, and I’ll protect him from a homophobe like you.”

If Law were a girl, he would have swooned. But he wasn’t, so he held it in and instead shouted, “Kidd! Don’t fight him at school! You’ll get fucking expelled, you idiot!”

With his eyes never leaving Killer’s, Kidd growled, “Yeah, well, I can’t exactly let him think
there’s a cure for homosexuality. I’m not letting him hurt you anymore. I don’t care if some teacher sees this and reports me.”

“There is a cure,” Killer insisted. Law could see him slyly backing off down the hall. “If you get rid of him, you can be cured. I will save you.”

“Get the hell out of here, Killer!” This time, Kidd was dangerously close to losing it. Any scrap of composure he had left, that is. He was just glad that any passers-by and onlookers hadn’t felt safe in the vicinity and fled. He didn’t want to be doing this in front of an audience. “Look. Sooner or later you’ll get along with Law. He’s actually not that bad. I’m sure we can all be friends,” he said, his final entreaty before he really taught Killer to mind his words.

Killer stared at him in disbelief. “I refuse to be friends with him. I don’t want to end up like you.” He ripped a hand through his unruly hair, viciously clawing at it. “But I meant what I said. I will save you. Mark my words.”

And with that, Killer stormed off. Kidd felt an urge to go after him, as he was his best friend no matter how many disputes they had, but the feeling flitted away when he felt Law’s hands grasp his arm firmly. Supportively. He looked down into those smoky eyes and kissable tanned skin and knew he didn’t want to be running anywhere else.

“Maybe he’ll come around?” They both knew that likely wouldn’t be the case.

“Cute words,” Kidd told him, “but Killer isn’t like that. He’s not going to be a fan of our relationship.”

“Yeah.” Law sighed heavily, laying his cheek on Kidd’s shoulder. “Guess we better watch our backs.”

--oOo--

“I feared this would happen,” Marco said, leaning against the cold, unforgiving bars of his detainment cell. “Since the beginning, I feared it would happen. And now it has.”

Jimbei tapped his fingers on his knees. He was seated on the jail’s floor, cross-legged, not mindful of the dirt. Marco sat on the ground as well, with the only difference being the fact that he was truly locked in a cage.

“Now I know how Phoenix feels when I sometimes forget to let him out for a flap around the house.”

“Marco.” Jimbei drew in a deep breath. “I hate seeing you behind bars.” Marco blinked stupidly. “Remember that time when you and Thatch got picked up for being publicly drunk and thrown in the slammer for a day and I came to visit the two of you? This is much more serious than that.”

“That was almost fifteen years ago,” Marco grumbled, irritated that Jimbei remembered his teenage idiocy. “And I thoroughly understand the severity of this particular situation. I may be delusional, but I’m not that delusional.”

Jimbei grunted and shrugged. “Well, I’m just concerned about Ace. And old man Whitebeard. There’s no way he’s going to take this well when he finds out.”

“Who’s the unlucky soul who gets to tell him?” Marco asked, a hint of amusement in his tone. At the moment, he was so despondent that he would literally do anything for a speckle of laughter. Anything that could take his mind off of the outside world and the turmoil his actions had
“Smoker.”

“Ouch. He’s going to get killed,” Marco said. “By the way, how’d you get in here?”

“Smoker again. I used to do a smidgeon of police work, remember? I worked on that side of the law for a little bit, trying to track that damned elusive, double-faced Crocodile down before going back to my favourite subject and making a living off of it.” Jimbei shook his head as if to rid his mind of thoughts of the past.

Now that Marco was thinking back, he could remember a bit of what Jimbei’s old job had been like. He’d been following and abolishing the operations of human traffickers with his an old colleague by the name of Fisher Tiger. That had been gut wrenching work, and the younger ages of many of the slaves they recovered had led them to rely on the Moby Dick’s services. In addition to rehabilitating the youngsters, Whitebeard had helped him get back at Crocodile, one of the men behind the heinous operations, but still the scaly croc had yet to be brought to justice.

“Anyways, Smoker let me in here because of my record. He figured I would be the least likely of your friends to start any trouble. After all, he’s not letting anyone else in here until your hearing passes, save for your lawyer. Not Whitebeard, not Thatch, not Izou, nor Stefan, the dog. And certainly not Ace. He’s isn’t allowed.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I don’t want Smokey getting in shit from his boss. He’s already been pretty hospitable towards me so far. Shocking, isn’t it? I mean really, we never used to get along in high school. We were hardly tolerable of one another. Weird how times change like that.”

They sat in silence, reflecting.

At last, Jimbei said, “You regret being with Ace?”

“Nope,” Marco answered immediately. “I don’t know regret.”

“That’s good. That means you were truthful. But at the same time, you realize that frame of mind will easily get you convicted?”

“They have a freaking videotaped piece of evidence,” Marco said, his tone heavy with defeat. “There’s no way I can plead innocence if they have me perpetually caught in the act.” Marco groaned at his own stupidity. “I should have stopped Ace from doing that kind of stuff at school. Honestly, I should have the sense to be the adult in the relationship. I should have known better. I shouldn’t have let myself be ruled by lust.”

Jimbei shook his head sadly. “What is done is done. I will stand for you if it comes to that, for I believe that hate only breeds more hate. What you and Ace clearly have is what the world should know. For love to be a sin is a very sacrilegious approach to life.”

“I’m glad you’ll stand by me. Thank you. But I might just plead guilty. The lawyer says that would be easiest. It’s the way to go to get the shortest sentence. Not that there really will be a short sentence for the kind of things I’ll be convicted of.”

Jimbei’s eyes narrowed. “Who do you have for a lawyer?”

“Oh, I’m sure you remember old Lucci from one of the other orphanages.”

Jimbei nodded; he remembered Whitebeard’s rivals. Not that they could really be called rivals.
More like simply equal contenders for charitable donations. “Yes, I do remember Lucci. He takes the backdoor to things, doesn’t he?”

Marco snickered at that double entendre, but Jimbei obviously didn’t fully grasp the implications of his words. He continued to stare, awaiting an explanation for Marco’s sudden amusement in his horrible predicament.

“Gay joke. Sorry.”

“Oh. Oh. I get it now. Ace’s influence?”

“Maybe.”

“At any rate,” Jimbei continued, “Lucci is certainly the go-between guy. He used to work as a government operative and though his methods are a bit awry, he is a very determined man. If anyone can twist the law, it’s Lucci. And I’ve heard he’s a real leopard in the courtroom. If you get that far.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’m going to get that far.”

“What about Ace? Do you have no faith in him? Surely he will attempt to come to your rescue. He won’t just simply lie down and take this nonsense.”

Somehow, Jimbei’s words transported Marco back to the first time he had sex with Ace. He remembered, vividly, how Ace refused to just roll over and be had. He fought back then. He would fight back now.

If he could.

“Jimbei. Can I ask you to talk to Pops on my behalf?”

“Of course. What do you want me to tell him?”

“Ask him to take care of Ace. And back him up if he needs it. To stand behind him, like he stands behind any one of his other sons. Including me.” Jimbei could see the tears welling up in Marco’s eyes as he uttered those words. He figured the man needed some privacy, some time to himself before his world completely changed. Forever.

Jimbei rose then and bid him farewell, leaving Marco to mull things over in solitude.
Chapter 25

Ace braced himself for the worst as he stood on Marco’s doorstep. He raised his fist to knock on the door, finding himself surprisingly shaky. He rapped four times and rang the doorbell, then waited. Marco’s blue sports car was in the driveway and it filled him with the slightest sigh of relief, but it wasn’t enough. He needed the reassurance that came with seeing Marco face to face. He needed to grab on to Marco’s chest and kiss him on the lips before he would be satisfied.

He waited for a few minutes. As the seconds continued to drag on he became more anxious, more tense, more fidgety. He knocked again and punched at the doorbell multiple times, sending a long string of chimes throughout the house. He could hear sounds from within and he pressed his ear against the door, making out anxious squawks and caws. Just Phoenix. No Marco.

He began to panic, even though the rational part of his mind (that sounded suspiciously like Law’s voice) told him not to. He withdrew a tiny widget from his pocket, something that Law had once made for their breaking in endeavours. Bringing it to the lock on the door, Ace began to wriggle it in. He fumbled around with it, clicking it here and there, until he was able to jam it in the right way to allow him to lift the locking mechanism. With the palm of his hand he pushed open the door.

Before removing the widget, he was careful to set the lock back in place, not wanting to do any more damage than was absolutely necessary.

He went in and immediately darted up the stairs to the bedroom, barely leaving himself enough time to kick off his shoes. He burst into Marco’s room, words forming on his lips to apologize for his break and enter, but those words died on his tongue when he saw the bed had been meticulously made and Marco nowhere to be found. He couldn’t bear to stand there and stare any longer at the reality that was making itself more and more apparent.

He spun on his heel and ran out of the room in a flash, tearing around the house like the first time Spade had come to visit, eventually ending up in the living room. He panted out a low curse. Phoenix was still cooing nonsense so he went over to the bird’s cage, hoping to console the despondent avian. What he saw was an empty food dish. If anything, this made him panic more than seeing Marco’s empty bed. His heart sank down to his feet; Marco took care of his bird as if it were the god of his religion.

“Where’s Marco?” he asked the bird softly. He went to retrieve the bag of pet food that Marco kept in a nearby cupboard.

“On the moon,” the bird squawked in reply. Ace rolled his eyes, reprimanding himself for even trying to obtain information from the parrot. “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, bitch.”

Again, Ace rolled his eyes, wondering just how desperate he was becoming to resort to conversing with a clueless bird. The parrot was clearly not going to assist him in any way.

He opened the cage and quickly snatched up the parrot’s food dish. He withdrew his arm but left the hatch wide open, figuring that it would only take a second to complete his task. He was only dumping the dish into the food container, no more. Besides, the parrot was pacing around on its fake tree branch that stretched the length of the roomy cage, much too anxious to do anything perturbing.

He seriously underestimated Phoenix’s wit. The parrot seized the opportunity, leaping from its branch right out through the hatch. His plan to dupe Ace had worked wonders.
“Freedom!” Phoenix squawked as he sailed through the air.

Initially, Ace didn’t freak out. He was almost certain the bird was flightless. After all, he had played with Phoenix outside his cage before when Marco was cleaning it out. The bird had never expressed an interest in flight then. He figured he didn’t have to worry now.

“For Narnia!” the bird cried, launching himself off the table where the cage sat. Ace gapped as the parrot started to flap its blue wings furiously, gaining momentum and catapulting upwards towards the ceiling. Ace couldn’t believe his eyes; the damn bird was actually flying! And here he’d assumed Phoenix’s wings had been clipped…

Ace tried frantically to catch the bird, he really did, but the parrot was too swift for him. He couldn’t keep up. It darted this way and that, ultimately confusing and dizzying him.

The bird flapped out of his reach, screeching profanities at Ace every time he got a touch too close.

“Butthead,” the bird cawed after a close encounter with Ace’s open hand. “I’m going to roast your chicken, darling!”

Ace knew the bird was only spouting random nonsense, but he was still getting aggravated at being verbally assaulted. “You damn bird, come back here and get in your damn cage!”

The taunt fell flat on birdy ears. “You obsequious fool! Now, I shall chop your mutton chops!”

While Ace pondered what commercial the bird had heard to barf up such a line, Phoenix flew out of the living room and down the hallway, heading for freedom. In this case, freedom took the shape of an open front door.

“Shit!” Ace squawked. In his haste to see if Marco was home he’d completely forgotten to shut the front door of the house behind him.

The bird tipped its wings sideways, shooting vertically through the space between door and frame. Ace rushed the entrance, but by the time he was out on the front step, Phoenix was down the street and disappearing into the horizon.

“Well, fuck,” Ace muttered to himself. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He almost started crying right then and there. It was bad enough Marco was missing in action – now he had accidentally released his man’s beloved bird. He honestly couldn’t even fathom how angry Marco would be when he found out about his parrot. He really, really needed to get Phoenix back before Marco came home, else the bird could seriously damage their already fragile relationship.

He groaned, looking back at the contents of the house. The food dish was still in his hand, heaped to the brim with bird chow. He deposited it on the nearest ledge, which happened to be a side table near the entrance.

“I have to go talk to Izou,” Ace suddenly thought aloud. “Yeah! Why didn’t I think of this before? And if Izou doesn’t know where Marco is, or how to tempt a parrot to come back home, I’ll phone Thatch. There you go Law, I can make plans.”

He was well aware of how crazy he must have looked standing in the doorway of someone’s house and talking to himself. It was the anxiety, he supposed. It was doing things to him.

Before he could dwell too much on his dwindling sanity, Ace slammed the door to the house
closed before any more horrific things could happen, and darted across the lawn. He bounded up
the steps and pounded on the carmine door, too wired to be polite.

At last he finally got a response, the first successful one today. Izou opened the door, but when he
saw whom it was standing on his doorstep panting, his face contorted into a grisly mix of
emotions. Ace wasn’t entirely sure what all of them meant, but he just knew that whatever Izou
was going to tell him was going to crush him.

“It’s Marco, isn’t it?” he asked, voice cracking pathetically. He couldn’t hold it in any longer. All
of the uncertainty, anxiety, worry, and dread flooded out of him in one turbulent, gushing river.
“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“Oh God, Ace, you don’t know, do you?”

Izou ushered him inside, barely giving him enough time to take off his shoes. He was pushed into
the living room, sputtering and trying to get an answer out of Izou. But Izou’s grim face revealed
nothing but vague speculation.

While Izou revealed nothing of use, the people sitting in the living room told him volumes.

Firstly, he noticed the most prominent figure in the room, Whitebeard himself. He was perched in
an armchair, leaning slightly forward as if in anticipation for some great event. Under that bushy
white moustache Ace could see he was fuming – angry at what, Ace didn’t know. Beside him was
Spade’s doggy friend, Stefan, whose hackles were subtly raised. He quivered away, the fur shaking
as if the dog was on the brink of letting loose a growl. It was likely an influence of his master’s
unease, but still the sight of Stefan on edge unnerved Ace.

The second person he locked gazes with narrowed his eyes as if to scrutinize him. Thatch sat on the
couch, and he was clearly biting his lip, showcasing his apparent worry. His white suit was
rumpled and his hair, normally so prime and pompadour, was down and unkempt. Ace found he
couldn’t hold Thatch’s gaze for long as there was a tiny element of unspoken accusations within
his expression.

The third person confirmed all of Ace’s fears. They sat next to Thatch on the couch, at a healthy
distance. Though this person was the most relaxed out of the group of them, he was also the
tensest. His face and posture were peaceful, but his shoulders held knots of discord. His presence
was the final piece to the puzzle for Ace.

“S-Smoker.”

“Hey, brat,” he replied awkwardly. His heart wasn’t in it. “It’s probably good that you’re here right
now. Did you call him, Izou?”

“No, he showed up,” Izou snapped. Already Ace could see the animosity between him and Smoker.
“Lovers’ intuition, maybe,” he growled.

“Izou, you know I had no choice in the matter. I had to do it,” Smoker said. Though his voice was
hard and unrelenting, his face was soft. Compassionate.

“Do what?” croaked Ace. He tried to clear his throat, and asked again, “Do what?!”

Everyone stared at him, not one person speaking. Then everyone present exchanged glances all
around him, each not inclined to be the one to break the news to Ace.

But Ace already knew. In his head he had already figured it all out. Smoker’s appearance had just
solidified the theory he had. His worst theory.

“He’s in jail, isn’t he?”

The silence stretched on and the shifting gazes, all looking away from him, pierced his heart. It wasn’t a sharp piercing, but a blunt needle being wrenched through and twisted. Their silence told him everything he needed to know. It was a confirmation, a validation, for him. A wake up call.

Ace sank to the ground, curling into himself. He brought his knees up to his chest, suddenly feeling a wave of claustrophobia. Then a tingling sensation ripped into him, starting from his toes and snaking through his blood and along his nerves, finally settling into his brain.

He closed his eyes for what seemed like a second to blink away the tears that he refused to let anyone see. When he next opened them someone had moved his body to the couch and he was lying down. A terrible pain was throbbing away as if he’s been hit with a blunt object to the back of his head.

“Fuck,” he mumbled as he blinked away the damned narcolepsy. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

As his vision cleared, two concerned faces came into focus. Thatch and Izou. They were peering down at him, trying to gage if he was really conscious.

“Ace…” Izou muttered. He had a hand in Ace’s hair and was moving it about as if petting him would bring the boy back to life. All of a sudden his fingers brushed over a tender spot and Ace cringed. Sometimes that happened. His narcolepsy made parts of him easily breakable.

“Fuck, don’t touch the back of my head. It hurts,” Ace snapped irritably, sitting up before anyone’s good intensions could cause serious damage.

Thatch and Izou both moved off, looking extremely unnerved. Ace continued to glare as the events before his sudden blackout came rushing back to him. As he began to stubbornly swipe at his eyes, both Thatch and Izou were shoved out of the way.

Whitebeard sat himself down beside the couch, his hulking form still towering over Ace even though he sat on the floor. He reached out and snatched Ace from his perch, pulling him off the side of the couch and into his lap. Ace let out a little yelp as the older man crushed him to his chest, stealing all of the air from his lungs.

Ace scrambled away as soon as Whitebeard released his hold on him. He thought he ought to whack the older man, but then he saw the sad creases of wrinkles under the older man’s eyes and down his cheeks and thought that maybe he should return the hug.

Before he could think of what to do, Mr. Newgate spoke.

“Don’t worry too much Ace; we’re going to get him back. There’s no way in hell I’m letting one of my sons go so easily.”

Ace stared at him. Then he swallowed his tears and put on a mask of grim determination. “You fucking bet we’re going to get him back.”

That cracked Whitebeard up in such a dire situation. He couldn’t help himself; he let out a great gale of laughter that shook any furniture and wall hangings Izou had in his living room. “You really are a saucy brat!” He paused his idle snickering, regarding Ace with a kind, sympathetic smile under his moustache. “I like you, Ace. You remind me so much of a certain son of mine, you know that?”
While Ace stared at him quizzically, Thatch sidestepped his Pops and crouched in front of Ace.

“Okay, look. I admit I was mad at you, but now I really see that you are as important to Marco as any one of us so, uh, I’m sorry.”

Ace blinked at Thatch, wondering why the other was rushing to apologize. Then he realized that the man was quick to blame others for the misfortunes of his family members, but ultimately he was simply as worried as Ace was. “It’s okay. I just want to get Marco out of there.”

“It’s not likely that he’ll get out,” Smoker said softly, choosing now to capture everyone’s dedicated attention. “He’s not in jail for something as simple as a robbery or assault. And after his court date he’ll be moved south to the high security prison, Impel Down. What he’s done is something that can’t be taken lightly.”

Ace stood up while everyone stared at Smoker with varying degrees of horror.

“I have to see him!” shouted Ace.

“I can’t allow that. He’s behind bars and under the law now. It’s against the code to let people see him. Apart from his lawyer and the staff at the police station, nobody is supposed to be speaking to him. With something this serious, we can’t allow other people to interfere with Marco’s—”

“Then arrest me! Put me in handcuffs too! I’m as much at fault as he is! More so, even!”

“If you can call love a fault,” Izou snarled. “Fuck. I can’t believe you won’t let the kid see Marco. I was pissed that you wouldn’t let me, or Pops, or even Thatch, but Ace?! Fuck.”

“Didn’t you hear what I was just trying to say?”

“I’ve got to see him!” Ace hollered. His temper was an inferno bursting forth. Soon he would be at Smoker’s throat, attempting to squeeze the life out of him. “There’s no way in hell I’m just going to sit here and wait for the fucking court date! You authority guys have got everything fucking wrong anyway! I love Marco! It’s a consensual thing between us!”

Smoker shrugged off this angry confession, already knowing Ace’s feelings. He was just content that Ace wasn’t attacking him. That was the only good in this dark situation.

Izou was gripping Ace’s shoulder, feeling the tremors underneath the fabric of his shirt. “Don’t worry, Ace; Pops has got more connections than a mob boss! He’ll figure something out. You have to trust him.”

Ace shrugged out of Izou’s grip, even if it was oddly reassuring to have him there.

Just as Ace was ready to verbally attack Smoker once more, the doorbell chimed and silenced his thoughts of maiming. Izou rushed to answer it, coming back with someone in tow. Ace’s eyes widened when he saw it was Jimbei, his history teacher and someone whom Marco had told him knew about their relationship. Immediately he jumped to conclusions, his emotions too out of whack to tell him to take it easy.

“You! You told them, didn’t you?”

Jimbei arched his eyebrows at this heated accusation, but before he could clear his name, Smoker cut in.

“Mr. Akainu was the one who brought the issue to the attention of the police. He then proceeded to
gather and provide us with evidence, and we had no choice, again, but to take Marco into custody. It comes with the job.”

Ace hung his head. At first, it looked like he was ashamed for accusing Jimbei, who had always been kind to him and fair, but soon the others realized he was seething and gritting his teeth.

“I hate that man. He has always hated me and Marco. I don’t understand why.”

“That’s just the way he is. I strongly dislike him as well, Ace” Whitebeard said grimly. “I would have fired him if I had reason to a long time ago.”

“He wants to take your place, Pops,” Izou said angrily. “He has always been plotting to take over. You told me about that before all this shit!”

“Yes, he is certainly plotting something,” Jimbei acknowledged. “That much is clear. He’s trying to take you down from within. He figures that by disgracing Marco he can get you to step down.”

“How do you figure that? There’s now way in hell Pops will just ‘step down.’ That’s idiocy.” Thatch shook his head, disbelieving Jimbei’s words. He crossed his arms over his chest as he thought about the hidden motives of the man they all despised. They all had something against him now that Marco was gone. “Right Pops?”

“Well, he might be forced out, because of his relation to Marco, by the Board of Education. It’s very possible,” Jimbei said, tone hard.

“Still, Akainu is certainly using unethical means to get what he wants. As of right now, his recent activity is suspicious. We have a few agents in the field observing him, as we believe he might be working alongside one of your old enemies,” Smoker said, his pointed gaze directed towards Whitebeard.

“I have made many friends and many enemies over the years,” Mr. Newgate said carefully.

“I cannot tell you any more than that,” Smoker said firmly. He drew himself up to his full height, yet he would always dwarf in comparison to the other man. “It’s confidential at the moment as our investigation is ongoing. Normally, I’d say screw the rules, but this investigation could cause a negative impact on the lives of many more people than are just in this room.”

His cryptic response made Ace’s face contort, and he wondered if he should go outside and threaten to set Smoker’s new cruiser on fire. Yes, now that he thought about it, he had just been in too much of a panic to really take in his surroundings and notice the fine details.

“Besides, if I know you correctly, you’ll put some kind of plan into action. My superiors would shit bricks if you started to move. You do have a lot of influence in this city. Especially after the Do Flamingo and Crocodile Auction House incident.”

Whitebeard didn’t budge a hair, but Stefan bristled beside him, the only sign of Whitebeard’s distress. “I know I do, and you can bet I’m not going to be idle. But I won’t cut too deeply into your little investigation, got that brat?”

Smoker nodded, wary, and excuse himself, tired of being in a room with a bunch of people who glared daggers into his skin. He needed to get back into his cruiser and have a smoke. A cigar or two would do him good.

After Smoker left, Izou immediately began bad-mouthing him, but nobody was really listening.
Ace was about finished with the situation as well, since it seemed all talk and no action. Ace was all for action, and he wouldn’t sit around on his ass waiting for miracles to happen.

“I’m going home,” he announced over Izou’s cussing. Thatch gave him half a hug, pulling him into his side with one arm wrapped around his shoulders. When he released him, Ace headed to the door, stuffing his feet into his sneakers, making no effort to conceal his anger as he stomped them into the ground to get them on.

“Hey, Ace, don’t worry too much. I will take care of the legal side of things,” Whitebeard said quietly as he came over to stand behind Ace, who faced the door and wished to make a hasty getaway. The older man, who towered over him, placed his large hands on Ace’s shoulders, giving them a little squeeze. “I know it’s hard to trust someone after all of this, but you should know I take my son’s wellbeing very seriously. And, since you’re Marco’s little fledgling, that makes you my son as well.” He leaned in to whisper into Ace’s ears then, so nobody else could hear. “If you’re going to do anything stupid, do it with a real bang, ya hear? I’ll back you up if you get into problems later.”

Ace allowed himself a tiny smile, then left the house before Izou could rope him into anything or Jimbei could stop him with sound advice. Besides, Whitebeard’s blessing was all he really needed. He had his own damn plan, one that would be action, not talk. All he needed now was an accomplice. Someone to help him refine his plan, help him shape it up to be something respectable.

Walking away towards the Grand Line, Ace dug out his cell phone and called Law.
“That’s your brilliant plan?”

Ace nodded, his dark hair tossing about and falling into his eyes. “Yeah. I just want to see if I can break him out of jail. You know, a jailbreak.”

Law sighed, moving his backpack so it sat more comfortably upon his shoulders without putting too much strain on his back. He really should have packed lighter than this. But when he got that phone call from Ace earlier, the boy had told him to bring along all of his break-in materials for something serious. Now he was really regretting not asking Ace for the plan over the phone.

“He’s not going to want to do that.”

Ace’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“I said he’s not going to want to do that. McLeod. He’s not going to want to break out of jail. Eloping like that doesn’t work in this century, Ace. Ever hear that song that goes: ‘I fought the law, but the law won’? The authorities will catch you without fail. Marco knows that he has no choice but to stay put where he is and hope the courts will be merciful on him.”

Ace grabbed the front of Law’s sweater, tugging the boy towards him. He buried his face in Law’s neck, dry heaving sobs that had been threatening to brew over ever since they’d met up in person. He had no problem crying in front of the boy who knew just about everything there was to know about him. “T-then what t-the hell am I supposed t-to do?”

Law hugged him close and said, “Just visit him. That’ll be enough for now. You don’t have to do anything crazy, or stupid.”

Ace withdrew, swiping at his eyes and regain a bit of his former anger to replace the tears. It just wasn’t fair, but he knew Law’s reasoning was sound. They could only go so far.

Seething, Ace stormed off, kicking at rocks on the ground and slush puddles, the only remnants of winter. Law followed, flipping the hood of his black sweater up over his head. Even though it was midnight, he still didn’t want to take any chances. Ace was already suited up and eager to commit felonies in his black attire.

They took a back route through the Grand Line, going along Elbaf until they got to Little Garden. They were in the industrial sector, a place where workers were present only from nine to five. The streets here were vacant and their footsteps echoed as they walked down the cold concrete. The eerie atmosphere was starting to get under Law’s skin and he hurried to catch up with Ace, not happy that they were out so late at night without any sort of light on them.

They were just two hoodlums stalking around, trying to find their way to the back of the police station. Law wasn’t even sure if Ace knew where he was going, because he sure as hell didn’t. Ever since they turned off of Little Garden and down an unnamed alleyway he’d been wondering if they would fall into a pit in a construction zone or something equally disastrous. He was beginning to feel as though he should have phoned Kidd when he had the chance to tell him where he was going. Just in case.

“Hey, you know where we are?”

Ace didn’t answer at first, which increased Law’s dismay with the way things were turning out. He
caught a piece of Ace’s sweater, the little sliver of a moon giving him just enough light to make out the general shape of his bulky friend.

“Hey—”

“We’re here,” Ace interrupted. “This is the back of the police station. Remember how we broke in the last two times?”

“We went in through the front, and we weren’t really breaking in so much as sneaking around to scare the crap out of Smoker when he finally found us.” Law rubbed his hands together, heating them up. The temperature had dropped a little bit, and they weren’t wearing much for clothing, just black sweat pants and black hoodies. It was still jacket weather; even Ace could admit that much.

“Yeah, well, it’s serious now and I’m glad we’ve had some practice. Did you grab the crowbar from the garage?”

“It’s fucking heavy. Why the hell am I carrying all of this shit again?”

Ace chuckled hollowly, but he couldn’t make out if Law was annoyed at him or just joking around. His flat tone revealed nothing. “Come on. We don’t have all night.”

“Well, technically it is only half past—”

“I don’t want to wait any longer to see Marco.”

They set about forcibly removing a low-lying window using a mortar pick, a wedge, and the crowbar. There was a bit of cracking and an ear splitting puncture through the silent air when they removed the glass pane and set it down on the ground, but otherwise the whole procedure went smoothly.

They waited crouched under the windowsill for a few minutes in case anyone within the police station came to investigate the odd noises. Nobody showed up and Ace was quick to hurtle his body through the opening they’d created. Law followed quickly. He didn’t want his friend to run headfirst into trouble. That was how Ace always got them caught. He didn’t check corridors before he raced down them, didn’t stop to wonder if he could hear any movement from within a room, and he certainly never thought to be quiet.

Law grabbed his arm and forced him to slow down into a tippy-toe across the room. They had landed in an office, one that looked like it belonged to a very organized officer. Immediately, he ruled out Smoker. That was good; he seriously did not even want to think about what could happen if they’d made a mess of Smoker’s place.

They were wearing gloves, and that would be their saving grace when it came time for the police to search the dust for fingerprints to try and discern who their break-in artists were. Still, while Ace went off to search for the holding cells, Law went in the opposite direction, knowing that there was still a security system to ransack. He knew where it was located too; after two previous encounters with the jail’s inner workings courtesy of Ace’s abundant curiosity, he’d gotten well acquainted.

The Den Den Mushi security system was a lot easier to dismantle and render useless than he thought it would be. After Law finished and watched the last of the cameras flicker off, little red lights that signified their life bleeping out, he sat back on the leather chair and thought he’d done a fine job as Ace’s accomplice. Now all Ace had to do was watch for the singular cop that usually stayed at the station for most of the night.

They’d likely be asleep wherever they were anyway, so he wasn’t worried. Much.
He was restless though. He would have liked to have his phone on him, if only to text Kidd and annoy him, but he had left his phone on his bed at home. He didn’t think he’d need it. Besides, if they were caught and interrogated his phone would identify him as well as Ace’s purpose, and that just wasn’t good. Still, he was restless.

He paced around the room, searching for something to occupy his time. He’d given Ace an hour or so of alone time with McLeod, figuring that they needed to be alone in order to say all that needed to be said to one another before they were wretched apart. Likely forever, Law mused sadly. It was such a pity, too, in his opinion. Finally Ace had been happy. The thing most people didn’t understand about the boy was that he was deeply unhappy under all of his smiles. Law knew that McLeod had been slowly warming Ace up to the world, and he was grateful to the man for all that he’d unknowingly done for his friend.

He wished he could do something for McLeod, but he didn’t know what he could possibly do that could put the odds in his math teacher’s favour.

He continued around the room, sifting through documents that held no interest to his tired eyes. Eventually he was back where he started, and no more amused than before. This was going to be a long hour if he didn’t figure something out…

He began picking at a map on the wall that showed the expanse of the Grand Line, or at least what the police knew about it. He couldn’t help but noticed that a few of the buildings were lacking notes about the occupants of the basements, that is, the tenets that owned underground alcoholic pubs. He and Ace had visited a few of those when they were bored.

He finished with the map and moved on to the singular painting in the room. He touched the curves and dips of thick, wallop on paint, concluding that it was an oil painting. But he couldn’t be sure what the hell it was of, so he picked it up around the corners to hold it on an angle, to see if that would help to determine what the subject of the painting was.

As he lifted it, he became aware of a dark shape behind the canvas. Curious, he pushed the painting up off its hook and brought it down against the wall, scrutinizing the black rectangle he’d found. Then he noticed the silver dial off to one side. Now that was interesting.

A safe. A safe meant important shit was kept inside. A safe meant adventure.

Law smirked as he found his task for the next hour. He pressed his ear against the door of the black box and spun the dial, hearing the clicking of the mechanics inside.

Chink, clink, chink, clink…

He wriggled the dial back and forth for many minutes, noticing the slight nuances in sound whenever he got close to what had to be the correct combination. He had learned how to deal with safes from that one run in Ace and he had with a little orange-haired woman. They had been intent on raiding the refrigerator, and that Catburglar as she’d called herself had been intent on grabbing some jewels. It was purely chance that they’d hit the same house at the same time. While Ace had pigged out in the kitchen, Law had caught a glimpse of the burglar’s identity when she pulled down her scarf that had been obscuring her face to get a better look at a safe she intended to rob. He’d traded his secrecy for a bit of knowledge.

He loved acquiring knowledge. At last, the triumphant click that punctuated his smile just made everything so much more satisfying.

He opened the safe with prying fingers and peered inside. There were a few papers stacked up
neatly and Law went for those first. He read a few, noting that it was about the city’s mafia problem. Everyone had heard about Crocodile, but nobody really had much information about him. Law decided, for his own safety, that he didn’t want to know anything about Baroque Works or the Human Auction House and shoved the papers back inside the safe, but his fingers brushed over something cool and hard. He snatched it up and withdrew it, curious of what he’d found.

It was a video camera of sorts. A rather small one. One that could be easily hidden.

He flipped the screen open and turned it on. Once it loaded up, he went into replay mode and skimmed through what was recorded on the tape. He furrowed his brows when he realized it was a classroom, and the ever-changing lighting determined that much time passed before anything happened.

He nearly choked when watched students file in and realized it was his classroom. And not just any class either: his math class.

He watched himself on the little screen as he took a seat next to Basil Hawkins and beside the window on the far side of the room. After a while everyone was seated and he watched as McLeod got up from his desk and began to teach. There wasn’t any sound, and since Law didn’t care to re-experience the rest of the lesson, he started fast-forwarding once more.

He watched the class empty out until only Ace, sitting on the opposite side of the room from where he usually sat, was the only one left. He slowed down the video and watched, until it became apparent that what he was viewing was likely what put Marco in jail.

He covered the screen with the palm of his hand and averted his eyes, a mix of disbelief and a blush covering his face. So that was what Ace had done. His friend had only mentioned the bare bones when they were speaking earlier, none of his usual gossipy details.

“Fucking idiot,” he muttered to himself, yet his words weren’t malicious. He had a smidgeon of admiration for Ace’s daring. Just a teeny-weeny bit.

He paused the film and hit the rewind button, going back to the beginning. Rather than turn off the camcorder, remove the tape, or throw it back into the safe to forget about later, Law looked down at the screen again. The classroom was dark and he could just make out the shapes of chairs and tables. This was as good a time as any to hit the record button.

But first, first he placed the video camera back into the safe, on top of the papers about Baroque Works. He positioned it to face the wall. Then, and only then, did he press the record button. After making sure the little device was going, he closed the safe quietly with a small smile.

He had completed good work tonight, he assured himself. Even if they had multiple copies of the tape, he was confident that he had at least given the cops a harder time of it. Maybe he would come back and wreak havoc on a later date. But, for now, it was a start.

--oOo--

Ace opened the steel door and a chill swept over his body. As he walked through the threshold he immediately noticed the drop in temperature. The holding pens – as the police nicknamed the room that housed all of their temporary prisoners – were frigid cold.

Barely able to contain himself, Ace bounded forward, looking into each and every cell. All were empty, and when he did finally come across someone wrapped in a blanket and snoring loudly, he was disappointed that their hair was long, black, and curly. For some reason or other, they were
eerily familiar, but he couldn’t afford to dwell on them for too long. Before he moved on though, he did note that the person was excessively fat. Certainly not his Marco.

He continued, reaching the end of the cells. He didn’t know when Marco was going to be deported to Impel Down, but he had thought it wasn’t going to be until after the trial…whenever that would take place.

He swallowed harshly when he found the last cell empty. He was just about to spring out of there and find Law, tell him that there was either a secret room they didn’t know about or that Marco had been moved, when a voice startled him.

“You really shouldn’t have come here, Ace.”

He spun around in a circle, trying to discern where the echo had come from. His eyes eventually lighted upon a hunched form pressed into the corner of one of the cells, blond bangs falling into red-rimed eyes.

“Marco.”

The older man chuckled weakly as Ace immediately adhered his body to the cell’s steel bars, trying to get as close as he possibly could. Marco staggered to his feet, using the wall behind him as support. His thin blanket fell off of his shoulders, but Marco didn’t stop to pick it up, only continued until he reached Ace.

Ace put his wrists through the bars, grunting as he had to violently jerk his lower arm to get it through. He reached out for Marco, falling short as the man stopped a few feet off. Frustrated, Ace continued to push forward.

His upper arms could barely slink through the bars.

“Don’t get yourself stuck,” Marco cautioned.

“I don’t care; I just need to hold you! Come closer!”

Water gathered in Marco’s eyes and he looked away, blinking harshly. “You know, I don’t want you to get into any more trouble. There are cameras in here and they’re always watching.”

Angrily, Ace whispered, “My friend took them out! Nobody’s watching us.”

Marco stared incredulously for a bit, under a spell, then padded up to the bars of the cage he was in. He extended a single hand, one that Ace grasped in both of his eagerly. Ace gasped; Marco’s hand was freezing.

“Why is it so fucking cold in here?!” asked Ace, angry at the state Marco was in. He could see goosebumps dotting his flesh, making the blond hair on his arms stand on end. “Are they trying to fucking kill you!?”

“Everything’s made of steel. It doesn’t heat up,” Marco supplied, moving in closer so he could lean his forehead against the bars of the cell. Ace rubbed Marco’s hand between his, trying to work some warmth into him. His skin was just unbelievably cold, and it felt like the iciness was seeping into Ace rather than being fought off.

“Put your hands through the bars,” Ace said. Marco raised his other arm from his side and Ace took hold of each hand, then drew him through the bars while withdrawing his own arms. He wrapped Marco’s hands as best he could around his chest, under the fabric of his hoodie. Ace
wasn’t cold just yet, so he would give Marco what he could of his heat while he still had that much
to give.

He put his hands back through the bars and reached up to grasp Marco’s shoulders, sealing the last
bit of distance between them. Ace put his cheeks against the bars and, slowly, Marco lowered his
head to kiss the tip of Ace’s nose.

“I can’t believe you came. Well, I can believe it. Only now I’m both relieved that you’re okay and
worried that you might get into an unbelievable amount of trouble.” Marco sighed deeply and
settled for rubbing his nose against his partner’s. Ace’s entire body was always hot to the touch,
and after being in the same cold cell all night, alone, he desperately wished to get as close as he
possibly could to someone warm. “I guess I’m just glad you came. As much as I want you to forget
about me, I already miss you so much and it’s only been a day and a night.”

“F-forget? Forget?! Marco, I-I, I can’t just, no, I won’t! I won’t forget you!”

Marco rubbed his frigid fingers up and down Ace’s back as he trembled with emotion. Ace had
retracted his arms and was now mindlessly clawing at the cage as if it would bend to his will if he
only tried hard enough.

“Ace, sooner or later you’re going to have to forg–”

“No! I won’t! I’ll have nightmares every night without you. I’ll never sleep again knowing that
you’re locked up somewhere and it’s my fault. I’ll–”

“Ace, it’s not your fault. Don’t you dare think it’s your fault.” Marco lifted one of his hands out
from underneath Ace’s hoodie and grasped his chin lightly, making watery eyes look up at him.
“Show me a smile, Ace. I want to remember you smiling, not frowning or crying.”

“I’m not crying,” muttered Ace as tears began to steam down his face. Marco couldn’t be sure if
those tears were unconscious or consciously shed. Maybe he simply didn’t realize his emotions in
that moment. “And how can I smile when you say things like that?”

“Just smile for me. If you won’t forget me, then I want you to remember my smiling face and I
wish to remember yours in return. When I think of you, I want to picture you grinning, nothing
else. None of this sad stuff.”

Ace blinked to clear his blurry eyes and tried to force a smile, but he could not seem to hold his
mouth in that position for long. It was physically painful. Marco put his hands up to grasp Ace’s
soaked cheeks, rubbing his thumbs over the tears that fell from dark lashes. Then he smiled,
because Ace was here with him and that was enough of a reason to be happy, even if the
circumstances would eventually separate them.

He smiled; Ace frowned. He was not about to be persuaded to be happy when a chunk of his
person felt as though it had been ripped out of him.

“I’ll never see you again. How can I smile, knowing that?” Ace asked quietly. He finally broke
down into a silent sob that shook his shoulders, the zipper on his hoodie rattling against the bars of
the cell and sending an eerie sound down the corridor. A sound like chains rattling.

“Well, I’m sure you could visit me,” said Marco, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced
himself.

Ace’s face crumpled and fresh tears clouded his vision. “Yeah, only I’ll never be able to hold onto
you, and you’ll be wearing awful prison clothes. You won’t have your freedom! All you’ll have left
of your freedom is that tattoo on your chest…”

“Freedom is an abstract thing,” Marco mused. “Even if I don’t have physical freedom to do what I want, I’ll always have freedom in my thoughts. And my thoughts will always be on you.”

Ace stroked Marco’s chilled face, felt the stubble along his jaw, and was about to try to talk Marco into leaving with him when his ears picked up footsteps. Marco stiffened and pulled away, leaving Ace’s hands icy cold.

At the end of the hall, both heard frantic whispering.

“Ace! We have to go! The guard is shifting and the new one is going to be making his rounds soon!”

Marco cursed and went to step further away, fearful that Ace would get into a deeper and more problematic situation if they were seen close together. But before he could get out of arm’s reach, Ace grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him back to the bars, grabbing onto his face and bringing it down to his.

It was all desperate tongues and clashing emotions, Marco having reached to grab a fistful of Ace’s hair in order to pull him flush with the bars. The primal side of Marco kissed Ace with the intention of bruising him, wishing to leave him with marks that would last a lifetime. But the other side of him, the side that was content to cuddle with Ace on his couch or bed wanted an unbreakable connection to be forged. As much as he told Ace that he was better off forgetting him, he knew in his heart that he never wanted that for either of them. And he also knew that forgetting was easy to do. He knew he would, over time, forget what Ace tasted like. He knew he’d forget what Ace looked like. He knew he’d forget what Ace felt like in his arms. Or how he felt with Ace wrapped around him in the most intimate of embraces.

He never wanted to forget, but he knew he would.

“Now, Ace! We have to leave!”

With an anguished snarl, Ace tore himself away from the cold metal and Marco’s icy, quivering lips. All at once, Marco felt the loss, not just physical contact, but emotionally as well. Those dark eyes staring at him through a wash of tears just killed him inside. He couldn’t bear to look, yet he couldn’t look away, as he knew very well it could be the last time he saw Ace. Ever.

He watched as a trickle of blood ran down the side of Ace’s mouth, gathering in volume until it reached his chin where it collected with watery tears. Then the droplet fell, and Marco imagined its pitiful drip, just another drop of water on the concrete floor, but one that meant more to him than any liquid. A part of Ace would stay with him after he’d gone.

All at once, Ace tore out of there, his lip bleeding from where he’d bitten the inside of his mouth. He couldn’t take any more of Marco’s sombre eyes and affectionate caresses. If he stayed longer his feet would have grown roots and never left. And his presence would put Marco in an even worse state than he was already in, and Ace couldn’t do that to him. He couldn’t get him into any more trouble.

As the footsteps along the unrelenting concrete faded into silence, Marco stared down at the barely visible splotch of dark red on the dirty ground, a stark reminder of what he’d just lost.

--oOo--

Law took Ace home with him, partially because he knew Ace could not be left alone when in
emotional distress, and partially because he needed to bandage Ace’s many wounds. The first thing Ace had done after they’d climbed out of the window in the police station – not even bothering to replace it properly – was punch a concrete wall. His knuckles were completely bloodied, and Law had ripped the bottom of his shirt off to use as a makeshift bandage, but Ace wasn’t having any sort of medical care in his current state. He wanted to bleed. And bleed he did.

Only when Law had gotten Ace up to his bedroom had he been able to wash the wounds on his hands with a cloth and a cup of water. The old hag hadn’t heard them come in, for Ace was now deadly silent and physically exhausted, the only sounds coming from him being his laboured breathing and the occasional muttered curse. He had curled into a half moon on Law’s floor, his knees drawn up but his limp hands outstretched, allowing Law to clean him up.

When it came to trying to wipe the stream of blood along the side of Ace’s face though, he jerked away and rolled over. Neither boy spoke, and Law let him alone.

Law didn’t know what to say, and hardly knew what to do. He was scared to embrace Ace, in case it triggered an avalanche of emotions that he couldn’t deal with. But he was more afraid still to leave Ace without someone to hold onto, so he swallowed his nerves and hauled Ace to his knees, helping him crawl onto the small bed. At first, Ace just leaned against the wall, seemingly unaware of Law’s presence even though hands clasped his wrists, but eventually he toppled over so his head lay in his friends lap.

Law stroked his hair gently, very aware of how wet his pants were getting, but also very aware of how, if Ace weren’t so exhausted, he’d be screaming and lashing out, doing more damage than Law could ever imagine. He felt Ace’s heart, its beating calming down to a dull thud against his ribcage, and eventually discerned that Ace had fallen unconscious.

He had a feeling that, when morning came, Ace would come out of his loss-induced stupor and erupt like a volcano. And it was his job to make sure the lava and toxic fumes didn’t fly everywhere.

As he fell asleep sitting upright against the wall, he wondered if Ace’s wounds were too deep for even him to clean and repair.

--oOo--

A shadowy figure pulled out a cell phone from his pocket, the screen illuminating his shaggy bangs. He quickly typed out a message, standing under the window of a tiny, two-story house. The phone made a harsh click, signifying that the text was on the way to its recipient.

‘I’m going to kill him.’
Chapter 27

Harly an hour passed before Ace woke up, thrashing every which way in an attempt to escape his nightmare. Law felt the brunt of the hits on his chest, and was jolted from his dreamless state. It wasn’t a full out sleep terror, because the first thing that came out of Ace’s mouth wasn’t delusional jargon, but merely a weak apology.

Law just sat up and held him, laying his back against the wall and placing Ace’s head in his lap. It was a while before Ace’s breathing became calm and he dozed off. By that time Law found his joints stiff and sore from putting himself into such a position against the unforgiving surface of the wall beside his bed.

He was just popping his joints to relieve them of a build-up of pressure when he heard it. Branches scraping against the glass pane of his window. It was an odd, eerie sound, one that his ears hardly ever heard. Only on nights where the wind was ready to tear the shingles off the roof did the branches scrape against that window.

Law couldn’t hear the wind at all. It was strangely silent, save for the tip-tap of branches hitting the pane and bouncing back. The more he thought about it, the more he came to realize that only one other thing could cause such a sound. Ace climbing in through his window bent the tree to tap against the pane…

A scream tore out of his throat and he jolted as the shattering of glass into a million pieces destroyed the quiet, an object that he couldn’t see striking his ankle. Ace stirred as Law grabbed onto his friend’s shorts, the first thing he could grab to steady himself as he scrambled to his feet. He slipped to one knee though, his ankle having given out on him. For a second he crouched there, gasping for air, trying to blink away exhaustion from sleepless nights and control his raging heart with deep breaths.

“Ace. Ace!” he cried as he looked up at the remnants of the window. The jagged edges of glass glinted in the moonlight but a black silhouette, clearly not part of his tree, was quickly obscuring the moon. “Ace!”

He pulled on the fabric of Ace’s shorts again, desperately trying to wake him, but he couldn’t seem to make his legs work so he could climb back on the bed. “Ace, please get up!”

Heavy boots crunched fragments of glass as the silhouette climbed through the open window and, to some effect, Law’s palpating heart was crushed as well. The invader kicked at the glass underfoot, sending up a spray that made Law flinch. He turned away just in time to avoid having his face pelted, but he felt some splinters run down his shirt and prick his back. He knew there would be cuts, but pain wasn’t his greatest concern.

“Ace. Ace is here with you, huh?” rasped the voice of the silhouette. “Faggots ‘til the very bitter end.”

His blood chilled and the hairs on his arms stood on end, skin prickling with tiny bumps. “You.”

“Killer.”

Law startled at the voice to his right, then relief washed over him. Ace was awake, and more importantly than that, Ace was responsive.

“What the hell do you want, Killer?”
“Retribution,” the man answered almost immediately. “Retribution for what he’s done to my best friend.” Then he ignored Ace, turning all his attention to Law. He could see how the whites of his eyes narrowed with anger, even in the dimly lit room. “You will die.”

No more words of explanation were spared, none needed. The intent was clear. Killer lunged at him, and as he took those first few steps, Law’s eyes landed on a glinting fragment near his side, clutched in a fist. It was not a piece of glass. It was, distinctly, a metal object.

A knife, he realized with horror.

“You’re not going to touch him!” Ace snarled, leaping off the bed to throw himself into the path of the danger he wasn’t fully aware of. “I won’t let you hurt my friend!”

Killer faltered for a few seconds, considering his options. Ace was in the way to his goal, and anything that stood between him and Law was to be obliterated. So he made his move, amid Law’s incoherent howling.

Ace wasn’t listening, even though a voice in his head said to look before he leaped. But he couldn’t just stop to weigh his options, not when Law’s life was so obviously in peril. He didn’t want Law to be strangled to death by Killer, or pummelled, or worse. Not when he was here to protect him. Besides, he would never retreat.

“Ace, don’t, he has a kn–”

Killer raised his hand to his chest and pumped outward, striking as quickly as a venomous snake.

“Don’t worry, I can take him. No probl–”

The knife slid through Ace’s ribs, parting the skin with ease and cutting off his speech. Ace gasped, his hands rushing out to propel Killer back after he realized the source of his pain, but Killer had both of his hands on the knife and was pushing back fiercely, intending to run him completely through. The metal slunk deeper, the wound oozing blood that dripped down Ace’s front, streaking his bare chest with bloody tears.

“There,” Killer whispered to himself. “Justly crucified.” He gave Ace one final push, throwing all of his weight into it and feeling the wet liquid of life pouring out over his hands, coating them with sin. He was losing his grip on the knife as Ace thrashed, barely uttering a sound, with blood slicking his knife handle. He clung desperately, trying to recover his weapon from the other’s body, but somehow he couldn’t withdraw it.

Then he realized something; Ace was holding him in place. He wasn’t letting him budge away with the knife. Why? Why would he do that? Killer wondered, an odd sensation of fright coming over him as Ace chuckled at his suddenly feeble attempts. He had thought he’d taken Ace by surprise with the knife but, as it turned out, it was Ace that had taken him for a ride instead.

He had taken the hit for Law. Seen it coming. And now he was trying to make sure there wouldn’t be a retaliation, a second strike, by keeping Killer’s only asset close at hand. Lodged deeply in his body.

Killer let out a grunt of pain as Ace’s nails closed around his wrist, digging in. His other hand covered Killer’s, gripping him in order to keep the hilt of the weapon steady underneath. With mounting horror as Ace started to claw the skin off his arm, Killer realized he needed to do something fast, or he wasn’t going to be able to reach his goal. And all would be for naught.

He twisted against Ace’s hold, the knife twisting with each movement.
It was then that Ace cried out, for the first time, and relinquished his hold on Killer, bringing his fingers towards his bloodied chest. The weapon was ripped free, a gush of fluid previously held back flowing forth and staining the shattered glass on the floor.

Killer looked down at what remained in his hand, a wooden hilt bathed in red and nothing more, the metal completely gone. Then, with horror, he realized his knife had broken and half of it was still lodged inside Ace’s body, cutting away a bit of him with every breath he took.

Ace’s ears pounded as he lost blood to the floor and Killer staggering back to slam against the window frame. All he could hear besides Killer’s low curses was Law’s garbled shrieking for him to get back, and barking. Lots of frenzied barking.

Law was trying to get to his feet and failing miserably, his ankle swelling up to the point of being unable to support his weight. It was all he could do but watch the scene in front of him fold out, inching backwards towards the door. He could hear a body throwing itself against the wood and knew it was Bepo who was snarling on the other side, begging to be let in so he could rip Killer to pieces with his fangs.

With great difficulty, Law managed to get to his knees and make a grab for the door handle. He pulled it down, the lock releasing. Before he could try to stagger back to pull it open, Bepo’s black nose was wriggling through the tiny opening, inching it wider and wider and pushing Law across the floor. First Bepo’s angry eyes emerged, then a head, then his chest, and finally he was through. He didn’t stop to check on Law, just kept powering ahead, past Ace who had dropped to the ground, panting heavily and curling in on himself, hands over his chest.

Without sparing Killer a warning growl, Bepo jumped on him, sinking his fangs into the soft skin around Killer’s arm as he flinched to the side in futile avoidance. Killer screamed as Bepo bit deep, drawing out a stream of gore that flowed down his throat. Killer had never been bitten by a dog before, never thought he’d see the day when Law’s dog did anything but snarl pathetically, but here he was, shaking his arm back and forth, trying to dislodge Bepo’s iron grip on him.

The dog wasn’t going anywhere; no matter how hard he kicked it in its ribs or which way he swung its heavy body, the dog held fast. Bepo’s ears were pressed flat against his head, coal black eyes glaring intently up at Killer, daring him to cause any more damage to his friends. The almost human look of rage Bepo was giving him frightened Killer, and he crawled along the wall as he tried to free himself, back grating along the surface until he began to fall backwards, the wall suddenly vanishing from behind him.

Only when he began to fall backwards through the cracked remains of the windowpane did Bepo relinquish his catch, letting Killer topple through the frame and to the hard ground below with an anguished screech. Only then did Bepo allow a whimper, bits of shattered glass clinging to the tender pads on his paws. But the enemy was still out there, and Bepo wouldn’t be satisfied until he was sure he’d run the enemy out of sight of his master. So he took off, around the hunched form of Law over Ace, limping down the stairs and leaping out the doggy door flap into the night, leaving bloodied footprints behind.

Law wanted to go after Bepo and shut him in the house before his injuries worsened, but the dog was gone so quick that he couldn’t reach out and grab his orange collar. Besides, Ace was his biggest priority now, with blood running down the edge of his lips, dribbling down his neck as Law positioned him on his side so he wouldn’t choke.

“Oh God, Ace,” Law muttered, trying to cup Ace’s stomach to steam the flow of blood. His hand wasn’t working well enough against Ace’s bare chest, and he withdrew it to reach for the quilt that always lay on his bed, bringing it down to cover Ace. But, before he did, he took stock of the
puncture wound and gasped. It was much worse than he thought.

“He…he twisted it! Oh God, he twisted the fucking knife!” Law growled to himself, fitful tears blurring his vision as he applied pressure to the wound on Ace’s chest.

“Aw, Panda Bear, what’s a matter? I’ll be fine,” Ace told him, though his voice didn’t hold any of its usual colour. He choked a bit on the blood that was rising up and leaving his body, a puncture in one of his lungs, Law thought. “I’ll be…I’m okay.”

“Ace, shut up! There’s a fucking hole in your chest! You are not fine!”

Despite the immeasurable pain Ace must have been feeling, he still managed to laugh. A weak, pitiful laugh that made Law want to scream at him.

“I think the knife is still stuck in there,” Ace whispered.

Law withdrew the bloody blanket, and studied the wound again, vision distorted with tears that he swiped away. He could watch a million gory movies, a thousand emergency room operations, and a hundred women giving birth (arguably disturbing for a gay man), but he could not stomach looking at one severe wound on his best friend. He nearly retched when he saw the oblong object sticking an inch or two out of the parted flesh. He didn’t know how long that knife had been, but he knew there was more than a few inches wriggling around inside of Ace.

Should he attempt to pull it out? Should he leave it in? He didn’t know, despite reading the answer in several different books. It was different when the person suffering was one’s best friend. He didn’t want to cause any further pain for fear of screwing up and killing Ace, so he simply repeated his actions with the blanket, trying to ebb away blood that was leaking out from his chest, almost perfectly in the centre of Ace’s pectorals, which heaved with the effort of keeping conscious.

A shadow fell over Law and he looked up with bared teeth, fearing round two of the fight, but a calm hand on his head told him he was in the company of someone who cared for him.

“If he can walk, get him to come downstairs. I’ve already called an ambulance,” said Law’s grandmother, her face grim. She was oddly serene, pulling back the blanket Law had been using to cover Ace’s wound and replacing it with a towel that had come from the bathroom down the hall. “Hold this over his chest.”

He wanted to ask her how she knew what had happened, because the understanding was clear on her face though she hadn’t witnessed a thing, but Ace was his first priority. Besides, she never gave him straight answers anyway. She’d tell him that Bepo told her everything. If she told him that she and Bepo shared an uncanny connection, as she’d tried many times before, this time he might actually believe her. He was in the right mindset to believe anything at the moment.

“Ace, can you walk?” he asked softly. Ace grunted a bit in reply, and coughed violently, beginning to shift his arms so he could sit upright. Law took one heavy arm and draped it around his shoulders, and with a little help from his nearby reading chair, managed to get them both upright, despite a shooting pain in his ankle. But the initial searing burn from whatever had knocked his ankle out of alignment had worn off, and had been replaced with a dull ache. He could manage with a limp. He had to. Ace’s life depended on him.

The stairs were extremely slow and rough, Ace letting out pained grunts every time he had to pick up his feet and drop a foot to the next stair. Law didn’t like to think about what might be happening inside his body as they moved along, where that broken knife might be shifting to that needed to be surgically removed. He couldn’t bear to.
When they were about halfway down the stairs the paramedics arrived, taking charge of the situation. They, too, were slow going. They took Ace, who had fainted, from his hands and carried him, though it took two burly men to do so. His grandmother held open the door as they took him out outside, and straight into the back of the ambulance Ace went, Law staggering at length after them. Too late to have any say in the matter.

“I have to go with him to the hospital!” Law cried as one of the paramedics grasped his arm to keep him from climbing into the back of the vehicle beside Ace. He heard a growling and knew that Bepo was here with him, but he wouldn’t turn his head to see if his dog was alright. His dog was well enough to growl. Ace wasn’t even well enough to keep conscious.

“Are you related to him?” the man asked. His grip on Law’s arm tightened as the boy tried to ignore him. It became so tight that there was no way to shake him off, much as Law tried.

“No! Now let go of me. I have to be with him!”

The paramedic shook his head. “If you’re not related to him, then I can’t take you along in the ambulance. Besides, we don’t have much room back there to begin with.”

Law sank to his knees, his ankle giving out again. The paramedic turned away so he could climb into the back of the van, taking Law’s fall to be the result of traumatic shock and defeat rather than injury. Not that Law would have wanted to be looked over by the paramedics, not with Ace in critical condition.

Still, he would not be left behind. He didn’t trust Ace to be taken care of by strangers.

“Let me go with him! He’s my best friend!”

He could only stagger to his feet uselessly as the back door slammed closed with a metallic click and the emergency sirens continued to ensure his plea went unheard.

--oOo--

‘I’m going to kill him.’

That text ran through his mind continuously, an unwelcome nightmare, never stopping to give him a chance to breath. It had come from Killer, and with it the unspoken plan for revenge. Kidd knew precisely what Killer was going to do, and he knew that if he didn’t do something, he stood to lose someone dear to him. The only ‘loved one’ he’d ever had.

Currently he was racing along the Grand Line, taking all the shortcuts he knew to get to the North Blue district. He rarely drove in this direction, and didn’t know the area north of his position very well. He sped through a few stop signs with his little red car, making drivers honk their horns but not causing any major accidents.

After all, he couldn’t afford to be in an accident. Not with Killer out there going after Law with murderous intent.

He increased his speed, pushing on the gas pedal with renewed anger. When he found Killer, he was going to rip his head off, but only after mercilessly torturing him. The fact that they weren’t best friends anymore meant he didn’t have to apply any sort of handicap to his capacity for violence. He would go all out and nothing less.

When he found him.
That, *that* was the problem. Though he was driving with obvious purpose, he was driving aimlessly. He hadn’t the slightest clue where Law lived. All he knew, based on what Law had told him in snappy conversations, was that it was a tiny, two-story house that his crazy grandmother owned, and that Bepo was often in the front yard acting as guard. He had no idea of the street or even the general area. He just knew it was somewhere in the North.

He grit his teeth, frustration at his ignorance and anger at Killer making him see in shades of red. He blew through another stop sign that he hadn’t been able to detect with his infrared vision until it was too late to grind to a halt. Luckily, it was so late at night that most people were in bed sleeping, not out on the road driving like lunatics.

He rounded a tight bend at a dangerous speed, feeling the wheels on the left side momentarily lift off the pavement. There was a method to his madness, as he had decided to start on the easternmost side of the North and work his way west street by street. He was lost, sure, but working in a grid formation, hoping that one house would speak to him or that he would be given a sign by some sort of ethereal force.

It was in his nature to believe in the impossible when faced with problems he couldn’t solve with brawn alone.

He continued twisting and turning around junctions, dodging parked cars and other objects in the streets, occasionally glancing over to the passenger side seat where his cellphone sat illuminated. He needed to hear from Law to put his mind at ease, or to give him directions to his house for backup. Again he picked up the cellphone, dialled Law’s cell number, the only piece of contact information he had, and listened to the beeping that signified that the phone was not currently on. He cursed and tossed it back to the leather seat.

He even wished that Killer would call to taunt him. At least then he could attempt to persuade a location out of him. But nobody called him, and he was beginning to get desperate as the minutes ticked by and the miles became fruitless.

He was getting nowhere fast. Literally.

He passed a few cars as he turned onto a heavily used street, some that honked their horns to warn him of his daring speed, but nobody would be able to get his license plate. Not with how fleeting the encounters were. One flash of the headlights and he was gone in an instant, racing over the next hill, staring at every little shanty house he passed, of which there were numerous, often in tightly bundled packages. Seeing how these people lived modestly just reminded him of how different Law’s background was from his. He really didn’t have the slightest clue what they had bonded over, initially. He couldn’t remember. After a few arguments, a few half-assed fights, they just clicked.

Kidd cursed as someone’s unchained dog darted out in front of him and he slammed his breaks, hissing to a stop and tapping the mongrel with the bumper on the front of his car. He didn’t know how hard he had hit the dog, and he didn’t plan on getting out to see if it was dead or not, as he was in a hurry and an animal’s life seemed insignificant when placed next to Law’s. Instead he backed up, hoping to see the extent of his damage that way. At the same time the dog staggered out, and Kidd got a better look at it in his headlights.

A reflective collar made him curse again.

The dog blinked at the headlights and limped away from the vehicle while Kidd parked his car and leapt from the driver’s seat.
“Bepo! Bepo, you dumb mutt, come here!”

The dog instantly recognized Kidd’s gravelly voice, but didn’t come towards him. He didn’t run away either as Kidd approached, cursing himself for likely giving Law’s beloved dog fatal damage. The damned thing was shaking and limping, not looking at all healthy.

He didn’t know what to look for or what to do, having hit the animal. He wondered if he’d broken Bepo’s ribs, but then he thought back to that moment of impact and wondered if such a seemingly gentle touch could have broken ribs. Then again, how could he judge speed when he’d been going as fast as he dared since he’d gotten Killer’s text? Besides, if he had hit the dog hard enough to break its ribs, wouldn’t it have flown a few feet at least? Or gone under his bumper, never to rise again on its own?

But the dog was snarling and bleeding from its mouth, frothy with saliva. It looked to Kidd like the dog was deranged, but his brain reasoned that the dog had been running previously. This made more sense, as Law’s Samoyed had appeared from out of nowhere, running at breakneck speed.

Surprisingly, Bepo didn’t bite him as he opened the dog’s mouth. He found it strange that while Bepo’s muzzle was stained a dark reddish brown, the dog’s tongue and mouth was relatively clean. So the dog wasn’t bleeding internally, he reasoned.

Bepo shied away then, limping and leaving strange stains on the pavement. Before he could get very far, Kidd grabbed one of the dog’s back legs and held it up, looking for signs of injury. By this time, he was starting to doubt having hit the dog, and instead expecting something else had happened. Sure enough, when he examined the dog’s back foot, he found blood seeping from cuts on the pads that didn’t look like normal wear and tear from asphalt. Then he noticed the bits of glass sticking out and grabbed onto a particularly large slice, pulling it free.

The dog yelped and staggered away, Kidd dropping the glass on the pavement and rushing to grab the dog, intending to take Bepo to get some kind of veterinary care after he found Law. But Bepo danced out of reach like a trained martial artist, and eventually left the glow of his headlights.

At that point, Kidd got back in the car. He knew it would be impossible to catch the dog on foot, even though he was injured. After all, he couldn’t even catch Bepo’s owner on a good day.

He started driving again, figuring that that would be the last he’d see of Bepo, but nearly slammed his brake pedal to the floor when the reflective collar turned up once again, farther up the road. As soon as he stopped, Bepo took off, bounding up the street just in sight of his headlights.

He followed. The dog was following the road, and so was he. They were headed in the same direction, so why not?

He went all the way to the end of the street and faltered as Bepo crossed the intersection and turned left, in the opposite direction of where he had come. He hadn’t been planning on going in that direction. It messed up his grid pattern.

Then he saw that the large white splotch had stopped and was looking back at him. Expectantly. Waiting. So he made up his mind and crushed the pedal to the floor, swinging around the turn and approaching the dog, who’d begun to move again at a leisurely pace, limping as fast as he possibly could.

He didn’t need Bepo’s guidance to lead him to Law. The flashing lights and shrill siren of an ambulance was enough to give him an indication of Law’s whereabouts.
He passed Bepo by, noting how the dog leapt the curb to traverse people’s lawns instead. The fresh spring grass probably felt better on his paws. Kidd sped up, then slowed down, eventually parking his car at the side of one of the houses farther down the street, about two away from the driveway in which the ambulance was parked.

Getting out of the car he began to jog towards the scene. As he was a house away and at an angle to see what was going on behind the vehicle, he noticed an old woman standing there whilst two men loaded a stretcher into the back of the ambulance. He almost sank to his knees right then and there.

He had been too late. Law was dead and it was his fault. He had failed to protect him, despite knowing that Killer would be out in force, that Killer held grudges against Law for things he couldn’t control.

He almost didn’t want to approach. He wanted to turn around and go home, wake up the next morning, and find out that it had all been a sick dream. And if not a dream, then he wished to turn on the television and see the incident, and learn that it hadn’t been Law, but someone completely unrelated.

But he knew he had to know. So he struck out, fearing for the worst and coming up behind Bepo, who rushed to the old woman’s side. She first looked at the dog, then at him, but she didn’t seem to form an opinion about his presence.

That was about when ghosts walked for Kidd.

He watched as Law staggered down the front steps yelling frantically and favouring one leg. His heart rose out of his stomach and he almost jumped for joy just then but stopped himself, wondering, *If not him, then who?*

*Killer?*

Law didn’t see him. Instead he headed straight for the open doors of the ambulance. The paramedics rebuked him, and in the end closed the doors to the vehicle and drove off. Law sank to the ground, and Kidd approached at last, crouching down beside Law, afraid of scaring him with his sudden company.

“Law.”

He received no answer. He tried again, but the boy was spaced out and staring at the dark gravel underfoot.

At last he just wrapped his arms around Law, feeling a jolt of surprise that only made him want to hold Law tighter to his chest. After the initial shock and full body tension, Law relaxed, leaning into Kidd’s embrace. He turned around to grab hold of Kidd’s face in both hands then, looking him in the eye with tears running down his face, he said:

“It’s Ace. Killer stabbed him when he got in his way. He wanted to kill me.” His words were strangely monotone, despite his appearance suggesting that he’d be the exact opposite. It must have been the post-trauma setting in. He’d seen this look on Law before, when he’d discovered him bleeding in the shower. He had been pale and faint. Feeble. Kidd clutched him closer.

“How did you get here?” asked Law, barely audible.

“I drove in my car.”
“Then drive me to the hospital,” Law commanded, his tone recovering some of its usual strength. “Ace, he’s going to…h-he might not…make it.”

Any strength that Law was beginning to recover fell from his face as suddenly as it had appeared. Law began to come out of his calm stupor, anguished sobs wracking his body, making him shake and convulse. “H-he, he was so fucking stupid! And then t-the knife broke and it’s swimming around inside h-him, cutting h-him up, and fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Before Law could start hyperventilating and physically lash out at his surroundings blindly, Kidd pulled him to his feet. He had to hold on tightly as Law thrashed, reliving the moment that he had not been there to witness. Law had wanted to go to the hospital before he started breaking down, and that was where Kidd was going to take him.

It seemed that as soon as Law started to take a few steps and stumbled, he came out of his livid rage and regained some of his sense. As he hissed and grabbed for Kidd’s sweatshirt, Kidd realized that Law was falling all over himself, something clearly bothering him. Then he remembered the limp.

“You’re injured?!”

“My ankle. My ankle’s fucked up.”

Kidd didn’t even falter. “Fine, I’ll carry you.” And with that, Kidd picked him up as if he were nothing but skin and bones, carrying him half over his shoulder unceremoniously, not because he didn’t want to carry Law more artistically, but because they were in a hurry and Kidd could jog with him like that.

They reached the car and Kidd opened the passenger side door without ever putting him down. Law scrambled to orient himself in the car, muttering about not being a complete invalid, and Kidd rushed to the other side, getting in and starting the vehicle before he even had a chance to close the door. Soon, they were off.

It was a quiet ride as neither spoke, Law too preoccupied with crying silently into the sleeve of his sweater and Kidd unable to find the right words to console him. He reached over and tightly grasped Law’s hand, securing himself to Law’s side and making him a silent promise that he’d never leave again.
Law wouldn’t stop fidgeting, and Kidd knew that if his ankle weren’t wrapped in a towel holding a heavy pack of ice against his bruised flesh he would be pacing the waiting room. The surgery had been postponed an hour longer than expected because of a shortage of surgeons so late at night, and Law was frantic but not showing. His tears had long since dried up, and he hadn’t spoken a word to Kidd yet. They just sat in silence, Kidd with his arm wrapped around Law’s shoulders, and the other with his hands in his lap, twiddling his thumbs and tapping his one good foot on the hard linoleum floor.

“This is all my fault, you know.”

Finally Law was speaking. But those words were not what Kidd had hoped to hear. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is nobody’s fault but that bastard Killer’s.”

“No, it’s entirely my fault,” Law insisted. His eyes flashing and a grim expression told Kidd he was deadly serious. “If I had never pressured you to come out, Killer would have never decided that I needed to die, and Ace would never have gotten hurt so bad.”

“I came out because I wanted to come out, not because you press—”

“It still doesn’t change the fact that he’s in there dying!”

“Law, listen—”

“Alone! He’s dying alone! That’s his greatest fear, you know? That he’ll die by himself, with no one by his side to tell him he was loved.” Law began to struggle to his feet, using the arm of the chair he’d been dropped into by Kidd when they’d first arrived as support. He nearly flopped over, and instinctively Kidd grabbed a hold of his elbow, uncertain as to whether he should assist Law or pull him back down into the chair so as to avoid aggravating his sprained ankle. That was what the nurse had instructed him to do when she’d taken a gander at it. It hadn’t taken a doctor to figure it out. Law had already known anyway.

In the end, Law’s determination won Kidd over and he helped him rather than deterred him. They walked over to the emergency room door, Kidd praying that they wouldn’t immediately get thrown out of the hospital by security for barging into a place where people were bleeding and dying.

Just as Kidd was about to bust them through the intimidating white revolving door, a man emerged holding a clipboard, his white smock stained with blood. Kidd felt sick as he wondered whether it was Ace’s blood or some other unfortunate victim that had come in at around the same time.

“Are you Trafalgar Law?” asked the man, staring pointedly at Kidd who appeared the saner of the two.

“That’s me,” Law piped up, eying the morose man who looked to be the harbinger of bad news.

“We were unable to contact Mr. Portgas’ grandfather and his home telephone brings up the answering machine. We did, of course, leave a message for his family. Luckily, you come up as a third contact on his records, so you’re going to have to decide whether or not to sign for a blood transfusion. He’ll need two, maybe three.”

“Of course I’ll fucking sign,” Law snarled, ripping the clipboard out of the doctor’s hands. He snatched a pen out of the man’s pocket next, found the appropriate slot to fill with his hasty
signature, and shoved both pen and paper back to the man. “Here.”

The man took them and hastily scurried away, back into the emergency ward.

Kidd managed to convince Law to sit back down and rest, and they began to watch the clock the moment a nurse told them Ace’s surgery would start. After that, they were left alone to wonder what was happening inside the white walls of the ward. Four hours passed them by, in which time Law began to get anxious.

Surgical removal of a knife should not take this long. He knew exactly how long it should take, and the time was half what they’d already endured.

Something was wrong, Law just knew it.

“AAAAacceee!”

Law looked up just in time to see a streak of red, blue, and black dart past, making a beeline for the emergency room. Behind him was a stocky man with short-cropped hair, desperately trying to keep up. Something crazy was about to happen, and Law felt the innate urge to be there to see it. He would follow these two into the emergency ward, let them fight their way through and just cruise in their wake. He would get to Ace no matter what, even if it meant using Ace’s little brother as a shield.

“AAAAAAaccccee!”

Luffy was here.

--oOo--

“Your court appearance date has been abolished.”

Marco panicked. He’d been biding his time in prison, thinking about possible appeals that he could make, and now Lucci had to shut him down? He wouldn’t have a chance to redeem himself? He was going to straight to Impel Down and there was nothing he could say or do to avoid his fate?

“No, there’s got to be something I can say,” Marco whispered through the bars of his cell. The man standing on the other side, clad in a neatly pressed black suit shook his head slightly, long black locks barely moving. “Anything! I mean, the whole thing was consensual, and Ace could vouch for that! Honestly, there just has to be something I can say!”

“No. It’s over.”

“But I can’t even—”

“You’re free.”

Marco blinked stupidly, waiting for Lucci’s face to change into a spiteful glare that told of his joking. But it didn’t. Lucci remained as morose as usual, golden eyes twinkling dangerously under the top hat he often wore.

“W-what?” Marco finally rasped out. He had to have heard wrong. “What did you just say?”

“You’re a free man again,” Lucci affirmed with a slight nod. “Smoker’s just finalizing the lengthy paperwork for your release from custody. Turns out that their evidence failed to remain evidence. Or something of the sort. There’s nothing to convict you with, and words alone only go so far in
court. Besides, no one’s talking now anyway. The attention is no longer on you. In fact, you look like a victim of a much larger plot.”

“What?” Some days it felt like all Lucci did was talk in rhymes that didn’t make sense. “I’m free? How can that possibly be? I’m guil–” He cut himself off. No. He wouldn’t say that aloud.

Lucci leaned in towards the bars of the cage, prompting Marco to lean in as well until there was no chance of anyone overhearing them. “Someone tampered with Akainu’s evidence. No one knows who did it, but rumour has it that it was one of Whitebeard’s men. A friend of yours, maybe. Or something. I’m not so sure though. Whitebeard is out there mounting a different type of attack. It doesn’t add up that he would try to spring you at this point in time.”

“What do you mean he’s mounting a different attack? What is Pops doing?”

Lucci looked towards the door as if he’d heard something, tensing his shoulders and pulling back. Marco mimicked his caution, drawing himself away from the bars. He knew Lucci’s ears were much more powerful than his, and it was likely that he’d heard something abnormal with them. The noise, whatever it was, passed, and Lucci leaned forward again.

“Whitebeard got a tip about Akainu from one his old contacts. One that led back to Crocodile. And you know better than anyone how Whitebeard’s got a bone to pick with that man.”

Marco drew in a shaky breath. Crocodile. That damned man that caused so much pain to many of the orphans at the Moby Dick. “What does he have to do with Akainu?”

Lucci’s eyes flicked back to the door nervously, and Marco inferred he wasn’t supposed to be divulging this information. “Business partners, as it turns out. I don’t know all the details, but Akainu’s in deep water and sinking fast. The special investigations team will be on to him. And since he’s the one who has convicted you of your crimes and has been slated for arrest himself, his word is about as good as Crocodile’s as verbal evidence. In short, there’s nobody else who wants you behind bars right now. Not even Smoker’s little assistant, who in fact admitted to me that she hadn’t actually seen the evidence. Besides, the police hardly have time for you with this storm breaking. There are blood trails running all along this city, and they’re only just discovering them.”

“What about Ace’s grandfather? Garp?”

“Doesn’t know exactly why you’re behind bars.” Lucci smiled smugly. “Whitebeard got to him first a few days ago and told him all about the situation, but conveniently left out some of the details. He just knows that it’s his grandson and you together. His full custody of Ace ended slightly before they threw you in here under Akainu’s orders. So Ace is a free man too. His grandfather can’t interfere. Not that he seems to want to. Apparently he just laughed about it and hung up.”

Lucci poked him in the chest through the bars and locked eyes with him. “You haven’t committed a crime. Not by the books. But remain wary and don’t end up here again. Next time Lady Luck may not favour you.”

His message complete, Lucci slunk away, moving smoothly and with feline precision as he exited the holding cell room. After he left, the door opened again almost immediately, and Smoker came through, dangling a set of keys from his thick fingers.

He unlocked the jail cell and swung the door open, motioning for Marco to get out.

Marco hesitated, partly because it didn’t feel like he deserved to be let off the hook so easily, and
partly because the grey expression on Smoker’s face told him that something was wrong. Was he really going to get out of here, or had Lucci been bluffing with everything?

He followed Smoker out, who didn’t say a word. Marco didn’t open his mouth either, too fearful that if he said the wrong thing he’d end up right back in that cold metal cell. At length, when they were out in the main lobby and Smoker handed him his old coat, the police officer finally spoke.

“We got a call late last night from the 911 dispatchers.”

Marco looked up from fumbling with his zipper. “Oh?” He wondered what this could possibly have to do with him. Probably nothing. Smoker was likely just tired of the silence and looking to make conversation.

“There was a young guy we got tasked with tracking, and I just got another call a few minutes ago from an agent in the field who said they’d found and apprehended him. He’s wanted for attempted murder.”

“That’s…disconcerting. It must have happened in the Grand Line, didn’t it?”

“Surprisingly, no. But according to my men, this guy is completely nuts, and looks like he got mauled by an animal. He fought arrest, hurting one of the guys pretty bad, and it took Tasers to bring him down. There was something strange about him, so he’s being sent straight to Impel Down, if only to determine if he has any sort of mental illnesses.”

Marco grimaced. He could have gone to Impel Down too and been housed with the same man. He couldn’t imagine being amongst murders, even those that had only attempted to kill. “So another mad-man is locked away. That’s good, I guess.”

“It distracts even more from your case, certainly. It isn’t too often that we get a violent youth attempting to kill someone. It was a hate crime, too, to make matters worse.”

Marco perked his ears at this, playing with the cuffs on his sleeves. He had been somewhat daydreaming at this point, about what he would do when he got home. He would tend to Phoenix, first off, and then he’d phone Ace to tell him the good news. Then he’d relax and take a little time to himself to calm down, preferably while wrapped in warm blankets. The chill of the prison cell was still ingrained into his mind and body.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m telling you all this.”

“Yeah, I was beginning to wonder why you were getting chatty with me,” Marco said, a slight laugh forming on his lips. But Smoker wasn’t at all amused, and Marco let the laugh slip away from him.

“Ace was the victim of that guy we just arrested. He’s in the hospital.”

--oOo--

Marco drove carefully, minding the legal limit even though he was in a hurry. He’d seen enough of jail and people in police uniforms to last him a lifetime. After Smoker had dropped him off at his house he’d immediately run to his car and ripped out of his driveway.

Despite the adrenaline he was feeling coursing through his veins, his hands were shaking on the wheel. He just couldn’t stop trembling with the fear that Ace was not going to be there by the time he arrived. Smoker had told him it had been a bad stabbing in the chest, and based on what he knew about stabblings, he knew it would be a risky wound to aggravate. And Smoker had told him
that Ace was undergoing surgery.

Smoker didn’t have all the details. He could tell him everything about the assaulter, but nothing about Ace, the only person who Marco cared to hear about. His mind was scrambled, all thoughts tinged with rage, and the midday traffic was bogging him down. He eventually crawled to a stand still at a traffic light behind a never-ending line of vehicles, some of them bumper to bumper.

He slammed his hands against the steering wheel, held them there, and then took a deep breath. He needed to be calm. Getting upset would only make his driving more dangerous to everyone around him.

With a low curse, Marco grabbed his cell phone out of his coat pocket. Luckily, everything that had been on him the day he was arrested had been kept at the police station and returned to him the moment he left the cell behind in his wake. Surprisingly, his phone still held a charge, and Marco was intending to make good use of the remaining battery power by calling his family.

He called his Pops first, listened to the dial tone while he inched up another foot or so with the vehicle in front of him.

“’ello?”

“Pops, it’s me.”

“Marco?!” Whitebeard was genuinely surprised to hear his son’s voice. “I didn’t think they were planning on letting you out until tomorrow morning!”

“Yeah, well, Smoker told me he finished the paperwork in record time. Because something happened.”

“What hap–”

“It’s Ace. Ace got really badly hurt. He’s in the hospital and I’m stuck in fucking traffic. Oh God, he got stabbed by some, some fucking homophobe last night!”

There was a grim silence on the other end, and Marco heard Whitebeard shuffling around. Finally, his Pops’ voice once again came crackling through.

“You’re heading there now, I presume? Which hospital is he at?”

“The one just outside of the North Blue district, on the edge of the Grand Line. He was stabbed in the North. I have no idea why he was over there in the first place. Ugh, it frustrates me so much that I couldn’t be there for him last night!”

“But you can be there for him today, and that’s what counts.”

“If traffic allows,” Marco growled, inching up again despite the line of cars not moving. He needed a distraction from how little progress he was making towards his destination. “How did you know I was getting out at all?”

“I got the call from Smoker yesterday. Was damned surprised. They still didn’t let me come visit you though. Some damn ‘no-contact’ rule. Suppose I could have busted in, but I figured it would be best if I didn’t jeopardize your freedom.”

“Lucci said someone destroyed the evidence. Did you send someone to do that? Was it your plan? Oh God, don’t tell me Thatch got involved!”
Whitebeard laughed loudly and Marco nearly dropped his phone as he went deaf in one ear. “No, no, no! I have no idea who the hell did it, but they did a damn fine job of it, apparently. Everything was gone. They left a beautiful film of the inside of a safe. Not very exciting, I gather. And I guess Smoker and the bastard were the only ones to see the film, and even then Smoker told Jimbei they only watched a few minutes of grainy evidence when that bastard handed it over. It was supposed to be viewed in its entirety at the court hearing, apparently. But there’s no chance of that now!”

Marco smiled, though he was still embarrassed that he’d gotten himself into such a mess. He had been worried that Whitebeard would be ashamed of him, and was still worried that his friends and brothers would think ill of him. “What did everyone say when they found out about my incarceration?” he asked quietly.

“Well, Izou thought the reason was stupid, but you know how he operates. Thatchy was surprised that you and Ace were even together. Then he was somewhat mad at Acey-boy for getting you in trouble; he thought it had been intentional, but Ace set him straight. The others were more concerned about the fact that you were in jail as opposed to what you were in jail for.”

As Marco smiled faintly at the loyalty of his family, Whitebeard laughed away. His Pops then said, “I’m a bit mad at myself though. Made a stupid mistake.”

“What? Why are you mad? If anyone should be mad about their stupid mistakes, it should be me.”

“Oh, I’m just mad because I didn’t punch Akainu when I got the chance. Or fired him, for that matter. But what’s done is done. Besides, he’s going to get some tough time in the slammer anyway. Did Smoker tell you anything? Or is it still top secret?”

Marco inched up again as some cars made it through the green light only to clog up the other side of the intersection. He was about ready to scream, but talking to his Pops was keeping him sane. “Well, my lawyer tried to explain something to me, and Smoker just said Akainu got involved with Croc. Which is…weird. What have they got in common, interest wise?”

“Money. Akainu was lending Crocodile money out of the school’s system. He intended to get Croc close to him so that he could get him arrested, which would apparently give him Croc’s money and position in Doflamingo’s mob, according to Smoker and his higher ups. You gotta understand, they’re power hungry bastards, the lot of them. I guess by taking my position within the school he was supposed to gain a low profile and the money he needed for things to run smoothly. His plan backfired when Thatchy-boy got a tip from someone on the inside. One of my old pals. Came at just the right time, too.” Whitebeard laughed riotously again, an earthquake in Marco’s eardrum.

“Pops, to tell you the truth, I don’t care too much about Akainu or Crocodile and what they’ve been up to right now, or how you and I seemed to be pawns in Akainu’s game and nothing more. I’m just trying to take my mind off of Ace. But it’s not working.”

“I know,” Whitebeard said softly. “My little pineapple-head is worried. But Ace is strong.”

“I know.”

Traffic suddenly started moving again, faster than before. His blood started to boil as he scooted the car along as quickly as he could. “I’m gonna go. I’ll call you soon.”

“You’ll forget when you get to Ace’s side. You know Marco, Acey-boy has grown on me too. Like a son.”

“…I think I told you how he doesn’t have a father figure.”
“Don’t worry; I’ve already got that remedied.”
“AAAAccee!”

“Luffy, no matter how much you scream at him, he’s not going to wake up. The doc said he’s in a narcoleptic sleep.”

“AAAAAccceee!”

“Ah, just give it up Zoro. Luffy’ll always do what he wants,” Law said as Luffy let loose another shriek in hopes of waking his brother. He’d been sitting at the foot of Ace’s hospital bed for the past half hour with Zoro trying to reassure him, and the nurse that had let the four of them in earlier was pacing the hallway outside, freaked out. But Law was confident that with Luffy here, nobody would dare to forcibly remove them from the premises.

The little D brother was the kind of energy ball nobody wanted to deal with. Save for Zoro.

Ace, apart from being unconscious and a touch pale, was looking good considering the circumstances. The nurse had advised that nobody touch him, which had been excruciatingly hard for both Luffy and Law, but she had told them that the exploratory laparotomy to determine if anything had been seriously damaged had gone well. Ace would leave the hospital with a permanent scar and pain in his chest for a few weeks. He would be weak from blood loss as well, but Law figured that Ace would recover quickly enough surrounded by his friends. The knife blade had been extracted, though it had apparently been difficult, and the entry-point had scrapped close to a lung but had just missed it puncturing. The blood pouring from Ace’s mouth that night, as Law soon found out, had been from one of Ace’s teeth puncturing his lip. An accident.

He would be fine. Just fine.

Law could see that. Still, he would grip Kidd’s arm painfully until the moment Ace opened his eyes. Then, and only then, could he ever be convinced that Ace was going to make a full recovery like the doctor suggested.

“Zoro! I’m hungry. I bet Ace’ll be hungry too when he wakes up.” Luffy pondered this a minute, giving everyone’s ears a rest. Then he looked up at Law, a spark in his eye. “I got an idea.” Everyone flinched, even Kidd. Luffy and good ‘ideas’ didn’t often go hand in hand. “Why don’t Zoro and I go find food and you keep watch?”

Law got a finger pointing at his face, right between his eyes.

“Sure, Luffy.”

Zoro made a face as Law agreed, knowing the inevitable was to come.

Sure enough, Luffy rocketed off, rushing out of the room in hopes of finding something to fill both his stomach and Ace’s, who had yet to know what was going on. Now for Law, this was amusement, Luffy would cause pandemonium downstairs and leave them all be. But for Zoro, that meant keeping up with Luffy, which was a feat in itself.

“Luffy, wait!”

“Meeeaat! Come out, come out wherever you are! You can’t hide from ME!”
Zoro stumbled as he leapt to his feet, his earrings letting out a tinkering. He threw Kidd the evil eye, not at all fond of him, as he heard snickering. He didn’t mind Law, but Kidd he had never been on particularly friendly terms with. So his guard was up and he was hesitant to leave Ace in Kidd’s presence.

“You should go find your boyfriend before he obliterates the kitchen,” Kidd said lowly. He wasn’t trying to mock, but Zoro didn’t know the difference between one tone or the next. It took a smile from Law and a silent reminder that involved a scissoring motion, implying how he had once extracted scissors from accident-prone-Luffy’s chest, to coax Zoro into action.

Zoro narrowed his eyes once more at Kidd, but nodded his stiff agreement to Kidd’s words. Law couldn’t help but notice the animosity between them, since they were both strong, manly men. God, it made him chuckle when they sized each other up like territorial tigers. Curious, not intending to fight right then and there, but filing each other away into memory just in case the situation arose.

Law watched Zoro leave the room, observing how he went left when Luffy had gone right down the hallway. Oh well, he wasn’t in the mood for trying to give Zoro directions. He knew how well that usually played out. The man needed a GPS strapped to his neck like a dog collar in order to get anywhere. There was no way in hell he was going to be able to follow directions in a white-walled hospital.

Kidd shifted his legs and Law squirmed as the motion nearly unseated him. He was sitting on Kidd, who was in turn sitting on the only chair in the room. He had pulled it right up next to Ace’s bed, because Law wouldn’t have anything else.

“See how that line on his heart monitor is changing? He’s going to wake up pretty soon,” Law said, pointing at the beeping device on the other side of the bed. All Kidd saw was a black screen with a greenish, jagged line running down the length of it, shuddering and fluctuating constantly.

“And how do you know this?”

“Interested in becoming a medical student, remember? Besides, I know Ace’s sleeping patterns better than anyone.” Law smiled sadly as images of Ace flip-flopping in his sleep and punching his bedroom wall in response to his hallucinations flickered around in his mind. “Ace has always been my study subject.”

“I didn’t know that.” Kidd leaned his head down and nuzzled into Law’s neck, laying a quick kiss there. Just as he was about to turn Law’s cheek so he could deliver one to his lips, Kidd’s side began to vibrate.

Law laughed pretty hard as Kidd scrambled to withdraw his phone. It had already rung multiple times by the time he brought it up to his face, so he didn’t waste time checking the caller ID as he should have for fear of the other person hanging up. So he answered the call.

“Hello?”

There was a pause, and then Kidd’s heart flipped when his father’s voice came through. “Kidd.”

“Hey. Father.” In his lap, Kidd felt Law tense up, turning around to give him a concerned stare.

“I just got a call from your friend’s parents, about their son being in Impel Down for stabbing someone. Care to explain what you’ve done now?”

“It didn’t have anything to do with me!” Kidd blinked, realizing the lie in his statement. “Well, I
wasn’t on Killer’s side, okay. When I got there, it was already over. He tried to fucking kill my boyfriend.”

Law’s worried face morphed into one of horror as Kidd slipped up but, surprisingly, Kidd wasn’t fazed with his mistake. Rather he was grinning evilly to himself.

“Your…your what?!”

“My boyfriend. His name is–”

“Are you trying to fuck with me?! This is serious, Kidd; I don’t enjoy your sick humour at a time like this! You are joking and I don’t find it remotely endearing like your mother might.”

Kidd snorted, wrapping his free hand around Law’s shoulders to give him a reassuring squeeze. Law had pretty much stopped breathing and was listening to every word of the conversation. “Oh, I’m not joking at all. I’m gay.”

“…Take that back.”

“No.”

“I will fucking disown you, you insolent li–”

“Not if I disown you first. I don’t care if you kick me out of the house. I’ve survived everything else you’ve thrown at me so far, and I’ll survive this too.”

Law gaped; he couldn’t believe Kidd was going to throw his whole life away, just like that. Then again, he could believe it. From what he saw of Kidd’s dysfunctional family, it was no wonder that he’d dive into the first opportunity to get away.

“Oh, yeah, and my boyfriend says hi.”

Then Kidd hung up, just as his father began to loose a wretched scream of frustration.

“Wow,” was all Law could say. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe I just did that either. But man, does it ever feel good to be free,” Kidd said, a grin splitting his face. He tilted his head back and laughed, really laughed. His laughing bordered on the edge of lunacy, and Law had only seen him laugh like that when watching the Saw series, where bodies got hacked to bits and blood coated three quarters of the television screen.

He put a hand to Kidd’s chest and applied just enough pressure to get his boyfriend’s attention. “But what are you going to do now that he’s going to disown you?” Law asked. He had heard every word of that loud conversation. He wouldn’t be surprised if everyone in the hospital had heard it, including an unconscious Ace who hadn’t woken up to Luffy’s yelling.

Kidd gave him a quirky grin. “Like a bad ex-wife, I’m not going to leave with nothing. I’ve been stockpiling these monthly allowances from my mother and this wad of cash I got from calling Bonney into a pretty sum my father doesn’t know exists. Talking to Bonney made me realize exactly what I could do with the money. You’re not the only one with a bit of a brain around here, Mr. Racoon. And perhaps I can strike a deal with my mother, who’s been waiting for an opportunity to divorce and sue my father for all that bastard is worth.”

Yep, Law was sure he had rubbed off on Kidd in some distinguishable ways.
Law watched as Kidd’s eyes darkened and he frowned deeply. “I’m still fucking pissed off, though.”

“About what?”

“So I’m still not there to stop him.” The grip Kidd had on Law’s arm intensified, and Law drew in a sharp breath as he felt nails dig into him. He could feel Kidd’s anger, loud and clear. It hurt.

“I wonder what happened to him,” Law mused, trying to keep his tone neutral. He didn’t think any more anger was necessary. Together, he and Kidd could likely cause an explosion of emotions. So he tried to stay calm even though he bubbled underneath the surface.

“He’s in Impel Down, the high-security prison. I receive updates on my phone every time he so much as raises a finger from one of the employees I know who works there. They’re testing him to see if he’s sociopathic.” Kidd sighed and began to pick at a piece of lint on his shirt. “Still…if he does turn out to be a bit…awry in the head, then I feel kind of like he could be…well, I still don’t know if I could ever forgive him.”

“I take back what I said before about you being a shitty businessman. I see you have fostered a few connections that have proved useful.” Law pointedly ignored Kidd’s other mumblings. He knew he had no reason to forgive Killer, as he did try to take the life out of both him and Ace. He would leave forgiveness for another time, if ever a time would come.

“I believe you said salesman when I threw that lamp at you,” Kidd replied. He caressed Law’s cheek as the other laughed, but their humour was cut short as another person burst into the room. Law turned his head, expecting Luffy’s explosive return, but nearly fell off of Kidd’s lap when he saw it was none other than his math teacher, Mr. McLeod.

Marco looked between Kidd and the boy who was currently straddling him like some sort of panda on a stalk of bamboo, slightly bemused by the sight. But his amusement was short-lived as he realized he’d found the correct room, as Ace lay in front of him covered by a white blanket and hooked up to a respirator. He rushed over, placing his hand over Ace’s heart and feeling the dull thumping that made him sigh in relief. He collapsed in on himself with a haggard sigh, taking a seat next to his lover on the edge of the bed, resolving not to move until he was sure of an improvement in Ace’s health.

“He’s going to be fine,” Law informed the man quietly. He averted his eyes as Marco leaned down and placed a kiss to Ace’s forehead, then ran a hand through Ace’s matted hair. “I had no idea you were going to be let out. Ace is going to be so happy when he wakes up. We might have to hold him down to prevent him from reopening his wound.”

Marco threw him a highly concerned look, but upon seeing Law’s smiling face, relaxed his shoulders. He didn’t dwell long on Law however, his attention drawn to the soft moan he heard emanating from Ace’s stomach. The moans gradually turned into a fierce growling, one that Law thought rivalled Bepo’s snarling the night of Killer’s attack.

Ace was hungry.

“Someone helped me get my freedom back. I have no idea who.”

“Probably someone who cares about Ace just as much as he cares about you,” Kidd piped up suddenly. Law felt his ears redden as Marco glanced their way, but the truth in that statement
didn’t register in his mind, not with it being occupied by thoughts of Ace. He didn’t garnish much more attention than that from Marco, but Kidd affectionately squeezed his shoulders.

It was frightening how well Kidd knew him. Or so he thought. He’d have to get confirmation on his suspicions later though, as Ace’s arm began to twitch and his fingers grabbed onto the sheets bunched around his hand.

He was waking up.

Everyone expected a gradual awakening, expected to have to fill Ace in with everything that had happened since he’d lost consciousness in Law’s house, but they were proven spectacularly wrong. Ace didn’t open his eyes to tear the respirator out of his nose, and half of the wires attached to his heart and wrists were next, including the IV. Law was appalled. Kidd, highly amused. Marco, extremely horrified.

The first words out of Ace’s mouth, his eyes still closed, were: “Food. Need it now.”

The second set, with eyes blinking and focussing on what was in front of him: “MARCO! Holy fucking shit! H-How? How?!”

He sat up with vigour that Law hadn’t seen any patient exert after surgery, and threw his arms around Marco’s neck, hugging him close and bringing his teacher down with him as he collapsed back into the pillow. Marco sputtered for air, protested that Ace would injure himself further, but soon relented and allowed himself to be snuggled into and his face kissed all over. Hell, he returned it with his own vivacity.

He couldn’t remember ever being this happy to see someone. Not Izou, nor Jozu, Thatch or even his Pops had the effect Ace had on him. He was truly delirious with joy, mindful of Ace’s chest but overindulging him with peppered kisses and soft mutters of gratitude just for being granted the freedom to be there with him.

“This is the part where we leave them to their fun,” Kidd muttered into Law’s ear. Law could only agree. Ace, however, caught a glimpse of them trying to sneak out.

“PANDA BEAR!” he hollered into Marco’s ear. Marco flinched, wondering how Ace could have lungs the size of two hot air balloons. Especially after what had happened to him. “Panda! Oh, and you too, Kidd.” Kidd managed a feeble wave as Ace’s face darkened, then brightened again spontaneously. “Well, I’m guessing you had nothing to do with Killer, but just remember I’m keeping my eye on you and if Law comes back to me walking funny again, I’m going to rip your balls off. Both of them. At the same time.”

That calm assertion shocked all, and Kidd stomped out of the room red in the face with embarrassment, even though he secretly wished he could punch the grin right off of Ace’s face. Ace laughed at his victory, but he cut himself short as he began to cough, holding his bandaged chest. Law bolted over, ripped off the bandage, and started examining his stitches, but Ace waved him off.

“I’m fine. Seriously. Fine. Honestly, you should have seen the concern on all your faces when I woke up! You’d think I nearly died or something.”

“You did nearly die!” Law shouted in his face, throwing his arms around Ace’s head and pulling him into a panda hug. “Fuck, you were bleeding all over my room and there was glass everywhere! Why the hell did you just jump right into a fucking knife?! Are you really that fucking stupid?!”
“To protect you,” Ace said softly, reaching up to pet Law’s head as salty tears began to stream down his friend’s face. He furrowed his brow and Law covered his face, hurrying to conceal his weaker emotions. “Hey, this time I don’t have to replace your window though, right?”

“You fucking idiot.”

Law rushed out of the room, irritated that anyone should see his tears, and ran into Kidd in the hall. Without a word Kidd took him into his arms, letting him wipe his face on his shirt. Law was going to be okay, Kidd knew, but it might take some time to get over this episode.

Back in the room, Marco cradled Ace’s cheeks in his hands and resumed kissing him. He would have been content to just hold Ace in his arms, but Ace was suffering withdrawal and made it known by inserting his tongue into Marco’s mouth, smoothing away rough edges between them as he clutched the front of Marco’s shirt.

A tapping against glass made Ace pull away suddenly, his thoughts immediately going back to what happened that night. He lost his breath and his eyes darted across the room to the window that let in some natural light. Marco followed his gaze, clutching Ace possessively and highly aware of his tension.

“Ohoho, shit,” Ace mumbled before breaking out into a rolling laugh that aggravated his chest as his stiches pulled his flesh around.

Marco blinked, disbelief written across his face. “Is that…is that my bird? Is that Phoenix out there??”

“But Marco was already across the room, opening the window and reaching out, letting his beloved pet leap from the windowsill onto his arm. He brought him inside and walked back to Ace’s bed, bewildered.

“I didn’t want to tell you right away, but he kind of made a break for it out of jail on his own and I—”

“Jailbreak!” Phoenix cawed as Ace sputtered. “For Narnia! For constitutional freedom!”

“I’m just glad both of you are alright,” Marco said, saving him the explanation. He brushed his bird’s downy feathers, ignoring how Phoenix’s talons dug into his arm and left splotchy red pinpricks. The bird was still cheeping about constitutional amendments, muttering under its breath like a delusional, old man in a coffee shop.

“I guess that’s all that matters,” he said, grinning broadly.

“I guess,” Ace returned with a smile, ignoring Phoenix in favour of kissing its owner.

--oOo--

Kidd glared at the phone buzzing away in his hand. The caller was unknown, so he figured it couldn’t possibly be his father. His father wouldn’t be caught dead calling from a pay phone. Still, it could very well be his mother, whom he certainly didn’t want to deal with at the moment. He’d save her for later.

“Just answer it,” Law said from his position in Kidd’s lap. They had retired to the waiting room on the first floor of the hospital, and were just recovering from the stress of the night. Zoro had darted
by, but there was still no sign of Luffy. But the lack of staff at this end of the hospital indicated that
something was amiss deep in its bowels.

Kidd answered his phone at the last possible second, greeting the person on the other end with a
real lack of enthusiasm. Law watched as his face screwed up, and then settled into stupefaction.
Finally, Kidd held the phone away from him like it was some foul smelling creature.

“Uh, it’s for you. Some lady…”

Law took the phone, guessing immediately. “Hello, Grandmother.”

“You sound much better, Little Polar Bear. I’m guessing the big eater is okay?” Her voice was
raspy and reminded Law of sandpaper grating against metal.

“Yeah, Ace is fine. He’ll live. Um, how did you get my boyfriend’s number?” He let his
relationship status slip, figuring that at this point there wasn’t much to lose anymore. Besides, he
thought he might as well get it over and done with.

“Never underestimate the power of divination, stupid child. As for that boy I just spoke to, Bepo
says he nearly got hit by his reckless driving.”

“H-he what?”

“But then Bepo claims the red-headed fiend would never have found you if he hadn’t shown him the
way. So he counts it as fate and isn’t holding a grudge.” His grandmother paused, drawing in a
shaky breath. “He’s fine by the way. Just a few cuts on his paws and bruises on his snout and ribs.”

Law blinked, looked up at Kidd, who couldn’t hear his grandmother’s shaky, barely audible voice,
and then quirked an eyebrow. The old hag was crazy, he decided.

“Aren’t you mad at me for being gay?” Law asked suddenly, a bit suspicious of how easily the
conversation was flowing. After Kidd nearly got his head bitten off, he was expecting his own
coming out to his old lady to be much more eventful than it currently was.

“Gay? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is that some kind of slang for something?”

Great, thought Law with a grimace, I’m going to have to explain to her what being gay entails.

“If you mean that thing you have for the red-haired fiend, then don’t worry too much. You’re
nothing special in the tribe’s eyes. Lots of men get together you know. It’s painfully normal back
home, I’m telling you. It would have been interesting if you’d chosen a wife instead. Then there
would have been babies. Babies are much more interesting.”

“It, the tribe, men, what?! This shit is acceptable, no, normal in our culture?”

“Watch your language! But yes, imprudent child, it isn’t abnormal. Maybe if you showed a little
interest in our history, you would know that.” Her annoyance was clear, and Law hung up on her
before she went off on a spiel. He sat there for a minute, clutching the phone in his hand, then
turned his face up to Kidd’s, who was perplexed beyond all belief.

He kissed him full on the lips, amid a few whispers of other waiting room occupants that
disapproved.

To them, Law shouted, “It’s normal!”
When Luffy burst into the room with a platter of half-eaten cafeteria food, Marco sprung off the bed and away from Ace like a jack in the box. Luffy stood at the door, scrutinizing them, and then cracked a wide grin, his innocence ignoring Ace’s half-naked state.

“Ace! I knew you’d be fine! That’s what I told everyone. Anyway, I brought food!”

“Luffy! Come here so I can give you a hug! And bring the food, I’m starved!”

Luffy bounded over, placed the platter on Ace’s bed next to Marco, and threw himself at Ace. The reunion turned into a fierce hugging war between the D brothers, one that Marco had to smile about as it reminded him of the closeness of his own family. That is, until he was pulled in too, quite unexpectedly. Luffy’s arm had just appeared around his body, sucking him and Ace into his chest like he was some kind of elastic band.

The lean, long-limbed kid let them go, and Ace immediately began to stuff food down his gullet while Marco received a finger in his face. “Who are you?” Luffy asked of the man he just hugged.

Taken aback by both the kid’s friendliness and his sudden accusatory finger, Marco replied, “Uh, my name is Marco McLeod.”

“Don’t you teach math at school?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. So that’s why you’re familiar. I hate math, but you seem nice.”

“Um, thanks. I guess.”

Ace swallowed a particularly crunchy bagel before he spoke. “He’s also my boyfriend, so be nice to him Luffy and don’t scare him off.”

Luffy pouted at Ace, but turned back to Marco with a sparkle in his eye and new admiration.

“Wow, so you tamed the wild Ace? That’s so cool!”

“Um, thanks?”

Luffy swung a lanky arm that seemed a touch too long for his body around Marco’s shoulders, huddling in close with him. He attempted to whisper in Marco’s ear, but the result was loud enough that Ace could hear every word clearly. “Do you know how to take care of an Ace?”

“Um, I should hope so.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you anyway, just so you know what you’re getting yourself into. For starters, Ace needs a lot of exercise every day. But he also needs nap time too, so you have to find a balance between both. And food! Ace eats a lot and he’ll get fat if you don’t exercise him, but he needs to eat a lot so...just find a balance between the two. Oh, and he needs love. Lots of love. Did I mention he needs sleep? Because if he doesn’t get lots of sleep he’ll get cranky and then you’ll have an angry Ace in Sleep Terror Mode who—”

“Oh, that’s just about enough out of you,” Ace cried, clamping a hand down over his baby brother’s mouth. “Honestly, what am I, a dog like Spade?”

Luffy bit his hand and wormed his way free. “I’m just telling him important stuff before I forget!
Oh, and what’s up with the bird?”

“This is my pet, Phoenix,” Marco answered automatically.

Ace was about ready to rub his knuckle into his brother’s brains when Zoro burst in panting.

“Luffy! There you are! You got lost, didn’t you?”

“Hi, Zoro. Meet this guy: his name’s Marco. His bird’s a phoenix.”

“Uh, hello, Mr. McLeod. What are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story,” Marco replied, exasperated.

“And Ace! You’re finally awake!” Zoro cried one too many minutes too late, coming over to flop down into the chair by Ace’s bed that Kidd and Law had previously occupied. Luffy leapt on top of him, giggling away as he got just beyond the reach of Ace’s irate fist.

“Hey, Zoro. I’ve been meaning to talk to you lately, but I haven’t gotten around to it.” He took a deep breath and inclined his head, looking apologetic. “Thanks for taking care of my idiot brother for me. I’d offer to pay for what he’s been eating lately, but I don’t have a life savings account to withdraw such a large sum of money from.”

“It’s fine, Ace. Besides, I kind of have to get used to it since he’s pretty much moved in with me.”

“Oh, I see,” Ace said slowly. Then his eyes widened as the full weight of Zoro’s arms around Luffy’s waist prompted him to reconsider that statement. “Oh, now I see. You two better be using protection!”

“Yes, bro!” Luffy shook his head vigorously, afraid of Ace’s wrath. “We’ve been safe!”

Zoro turned bright red, heavily resembling a tomato with a little patch of green on the top. Marco almost invited him to join the fruit head club, but then reconsidered on account of how tomatoes were vegetables.

He furrowed his brow at that thought. He was starting to think in terms of food, like Ace. This was a sure indication of how attached he was to the boy.

Luffy leap off of Zoro’s lap and made a dash for the door, content just knowing he had someone trustworthy to look after Ace. Zoro went after him, but crashed into his back as Luffy spun around with a sudden cry.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you the most important thing about keeping Ace!” At this Luffy looked Marco dead in the eye, entirely serious. “If you hurt him, I’ll come after you and beat you to a pulp with my fists. You understand?”

“Yeah. I understand.” Marco smiled and Luffy nodded, content with their arrangement.

“And Ace: use protection.”

“Luffy! You can’t use my advice against me, you idiot!”
With a grin that stretched miles wide, Law continued fondling Kidd’s hair while he tried to keep his red car on the road.

“You’re distracting the driver who is currently making his way through dense traffic riddled with pedestrians while listening to a meowing orchestra.”

“I’m barely doing anything!” Law protested. The meowing in the backseat became louder as the cats heard the agitation in his voice. “If I was between your legs doing naughty things as we drove along, then you could make that statement. So, therefore, we can afford a little fun playing with that bush that’s been growing out of your forehead.”

“Your reasoning sucks.” Kidd’s frown deepened as he pondered Law’s words. “Do you really think it’s a bush?”

“Rest assured that it’s a sexy bush. One that I enjoy digging my fingers into when you go down on me.”

“The cats probably didn’t want to hear that.” Kidd blushed with such intensity that his face rivaled the stop sign he pulled up to. “Where the hell is it again? It was dark the last time…”

“See Heart Avenue? It’s at the end of the street. By the way, I’ve been circling estates in the local newspaper. I’ve got about five we could potentially look into.”

Eustass snorted loudly. “Estates? I think you meant to say shitty apartments. That is what we’re going to be moving into someday soon, isn’t it? The money I have stockpiled will only stretch so far.”

“Hey, our first place together might end up being a real hole in the wall, but at least I’m optimistic about it,” Law retorted. He turned around, taking in the cat carrier strapped to the backseat with a multitude of seatbelts. The meowing intensified as he made little cooing noises.

“God, those fluffs are noisy. Quit encouraging them.”

“Aww, Mr. Eustass, don’t be so harsh. The kids just want to know when we’re going to get there.”

“Cats and cars don’t mix. And use those weird noises you’re making to tell them to quiet down.”

“Someone’s grumpy this morning. And I have a feeling that maybe it’s not so much grumpy as it is raw nerves. What’s a matter, Kiddo?”

Kidd was silent for a few minutes, focussed on his driving. After all that had happened, he wanted to get to his destination in one piece. At the same time, however, he was dreading their inevitable arrival. And Trafalgar knew it.

“I’m just a little nervous. What if she doesn’t like me and kicks me out? Then how am I supposed to see you? Sneak in somehow?”

Law barked out a laugh. “Well, she doesn’t really enjoy my presence for starters, and frankly she’d sooner stick you in the stomach with the family heirloom than kick you out of the house.” He reached over and grasped Kidd’s shoulder firmly, giving him a squeeze that was meant to reassure. The tense muscle barely yielded under his palm. “Besides, I think she’ll like you. After all, you can
“You give surprisingly skilled blowjobs and—”

“Unfortunately that is not applicable to the situation at hand.” Kidd braked hard as Law rushed to point out his house lest they pass it, and Kidd pulled into the empty driveway. Looking up at the dilapidated two-story home, Kidd shivered slightly. The last and only time he’d been to Law’s home he thought he was going to lose him.

Before he could become swamped in those painful memories, he turned to the boy halfway out of the car and pulled him back inside. Law turned his face up, surprised by Kidd’s sudden aggression, and was smothered by a kiss. Wet and warm, Kidd reassured himself that Law was still here with him, and that he wasn’t dreaming a fantasy that would be taken away from him upon awakening.

Law snickered as he pulled back, Kidd’s lips trailing down his jaw to suck on his neck, right next to where he’d previously left a bite mark from their romp that morning. “What’s gotten into you today, Mr. Eustass?”

“Just happy.”

Law laughed at such a snappy reply, one that was doubtlessly true. Still, he felt like Kidd was stalling for time. “Come on, we have to go inside sometime. Bepo’s sitting on the stairs looking at you as if he’s not sure whether to wag his tail or rip your balls off.”

“Gee, that’s incentive to get out of the car.”

Regardless, Kidd made it out with minimal coaxing, and Law reassured Bepo that Kidd hadn’t been trying to bite into his neck to hurt him. They stood on the doorstep while Bepo went to peer through the window into the backseat of the car, enticed there by the noises the cats were making.

Law entered first and pushed the tip of a very sharp instrument away from his chest, simultaneously hauling Kidd inside the house with a tug of his wrist. Kidd caught sight of the grim sword and the surly woman who held it and wrapped an arm around Law’s waist, instantly feeling the need to assert his position. He would not cower behind Law, rather he would move up beside him as an equal.

Law’s thin grandmother scrutinized him. Kidd felt like he was melting under her harsh, one thousand watt glare. Finally, she decided to speak, raspy voice abusing tender ears.

“Bepo says you make a mean plate of bacon.”

“Is that so?” asked Kidd, cautious not to screw up this strange introduction.

The old woman scrunched up her wrinkly face. “You still have to prove yourself. Don’t forget that.”

And so, the woman gave Kidd one final, knowing stare, and waddled away, using the nodaichi as a walking stick. Kidd was convinced their meeting wasn’t over, but Law assured him that his grandmother wasn’t much for social gatherings, no matter how small.

They retrieved the cats from the car and set them loose on the house. Their little noses twitched as they took in the smells and their eyes widened to saucer proportions. When Bepo came through the doggy flap on the door to examine the fluffballs up close, he tried to emphasize his dominance over
them. But Uno was not having that, with a swipe at the Samoyed’s nose. Dos wanted to be friends, grabbing onto the side of Bepo’s head with her claws and trying to lick the inside of his ear, and Tres simply didn’t care, sauntering off into the depths of the house, ignoring everyone.

When Law was sure Bepo wasn’t going to get mauled too badly, he dragged Kidd up to his bedroom. Inside the floor was unusually clean and on the bed was a fresh set of sheets. Sitting on his reading chair, neatly folded, was the quilt that he’d tried to save Ace’s life with, washed of his blood but not the bad memories. The window, too, was a sorry sight. It was boarded up with a few pieces of plywood.

Kidd liked the space. He didn’t know why, precisely, but he figured it had something to do with Law’s unique scent overpowering his senses.

Kidd soon found himself belly up on the bed, with Law straddling him. He had a quirky gleam in his eyes, and Kidd knew it would be a matter of time before he was stark naked. He hoped the door had a lock.

Much to his surprise, sex wasn’t immediately on Law’s mind. “Still want to go to the party tonight?”

“I’d like to stay here and cuddle with you, but I have a feeling you want to go. And since I’m such a great guy and all, I figured I’d drive you there and come inside for a drink.”

“Aww, aren’t you just the sweetest?” Law leaned down, pretending to place a kiss on Kidd’s nose only to flick it instead. Slightly irked, Kidd flipped them over so he was on top, and frowned. Then he saw the giddy excitement in Law’s dark eyes. The bastard always liked being on the bottom of things.

So, sex was on Law’s mind after all.

--oOo--

Marco figured that the second time Thatch fell off the stage was probably when the party should go back to the Moby Dick Orphanage, so he helped the band pack up and everyone piled into cars. Ace went with him, of course.

It had been three weeks since Ace had been discharged from the hospital, and for those three weeks Marco had been keeping an eye on him. They still didn’t display any public affection, as Ace had a few months of school left and they really didn’t want any more trouble to spring up, but once they arrived at the Moby Dick amongst their friends they eventually got a bit closer than what could be deemed acceptable. Especially at the insistence of Izou, who made it known he wasn’t a fan of Marco’s increased attempt at modesty.

“Aw, come on Marco, the poor boy must be utterly distraught that you haven’t even given him a peck on the cheek all night!”

Marco snickered; Izou had no idea what had happened in the car when they went from the Whitebeard Pirates gig to the orphanage building. And he wasn’t inclined to tell him. He knew better than to divulge his and Ace’s little adventures to inebriated people with big mouths.

Izou reached into his pocket and produced a yellow object. Holding it out to Marco, he asked, “Do you know what this is, Marco?”

Marco stared while Ace burst into laughter. “It’s a lemon, Izou,” he said, stating the obvious.
“And what does this mean to you?”

“You’re going to make another bad fruit joke concerning my hair?” Marco guessed hesitantly. Ace laughed harder, burying his face into Marco’s neck as he fought to gain control of himself lest his chest start to hurt.

Izou shook his head sadly and ran off, probably to further harass the redheaded boy that Ace’s best friend Law had brought along. Marco had warned both Kidd and Law when they showed up at the gig that things would probably get a bit weird for them, but Law seemed eager enough to view the spectacles that would ensue that his boyfriend would just have to suffer.

And so, that was how a middle-aged man in a kimono had hit on Eustass Kidd. It had become the joke of the night, especially when Jozu had to drag Izou off of the poor boy, who had become quite frightened. As a result, he had given Izou a bloodied nose. That had not deterred him in the slightest.

“Hey, Marco, Ace, have you seen my boyfriend? I think he’s gone into hiding,” Law said as he took a seat at the huge table a majority of the partygoers were sitting around. Some played poker, some just drank and laughed at Thatch and Izou.

“Nope,” Ace said, nuzzling into Marco’s chest. He was currently seated in the man’s lap, sipping at some punch Marco was convinced Thatch had spiked. Ace was getting more and more daring as the night wore on. His hands in particular were roaming.

“Have you checked upstairs? There are a bunch of empty bedrooms. Haruta, Curiel, and Kingdew got the few orphans we have staying here still out for the night by taking them to a movie. Brave souls, those guys,” Marco said, thinking back to the sight that met him upon their arrival at the Moby Dick – screaming children piling into a multitude of vans. It made him glad he’s never chosen to teach elementary school.

All Law heard was: “Empty bedrooms?” His smirk quirked suggestively, prompting Marco to narrow his eyes and Ace to start laughing uncontrollably.

“Don’t get any ideas!”

Law grinned. Never before had he seen someone with authority get so worked up. It was highly amusing. Perhaps Ace would have fun in his relationship…he would have to keep tabs on the two.

“As if Ace hasn’t been trying to get you upstairs yet.”

Ace laughed harder until he started coughing lightly, and two sets of concerned eyes with matching frowns were instantly upon him.

“Are you alright?!” asked Marco and Law in unison.

“I’m fine! Ugh, I was fine three weeks ago!”

Both gave him hard looks of disbelief. But Ace had recovered from his coughing spell and his eyes sparkled. Still, neither man was dropping it and Law kept glancing at Ace’s chest, at the place that had caused them all so much grief.

“Ace, I’ve known you for a long time now and you can’t fool me,” Law stated bluntly.

Ace quirked an eyebrow and he stuck his tongue out the corner of his mouth, faking a pose of deep thought. “Oh, yeah? Well, in that case, remember the day we met?”
Law rolled his eyes. He decided to find Kidd before Ace got all sentimental on him, and darted off into the throng of people – the motley collection of Marco’s brothers and sisters who were dancing along with Thatch. The man had gotten his guitar and amp out for the second time that night and was rocking his ‘do for all to see. Half blindfolded by his necktie.

“He’s hilarious,” Ace said, watching Thatch leap off a sofa. The guitar lead pulled taunt and tripped someone as Thatch went flying again to emphasize a certain chord, but Ace didn’t know who that person was. Marco had tried introducing him to some of his family members, but only a few names had stuck.

“He’s drunk,” Marco replied with a snicker. “They all kind of are. Well, expect Pops, but he never really gets drunk, just a bit forgetful, so…”

Speaking of Whitebeard, the hulk of a man picked up and set down a few bodies to pick his way through the crowd, eventually stopping in front of Marco and Ace.

“Enjoying your little banquet, brat?”

Marco frowned. “Don’t call me that when I’m as old as–”

“I was talking to my other brat! Ace, you havin’ fun, or do I need to give you the rest of this bottle?” He held up a half empty bottle of sake, moustache twitching as he contemplated handing it over. “I guess I could, since it’s your induction-into-the-family-party and all.”

“I thought we were celebrating me getting out of jail?”

Whitebeard gave him a distant look. “We were? Really? Huh. Well, I guess we can have another party later. Gives me reason to go out and buy more drinks…”

“Your liver is going to fail with all this abuse you’re subjecting it to!” Marco shouted, trying to reach around Ace to snatch the bottle of sake away from his Pops. It was just out of his reach.

Meanwhile, Ace was blushing, and Marco felt how he squirmed slightly in his lap. “My… induction party? To the family?”

“Well, I know you’re already a part of the family, but Thatch insisted we make it official with a little banquet thing so I–”

“Wait, I’m already a part of the family?” asked Ace with wide eyes, interrupting Whitebeard. “When did this happen?”

The big man laughed, and Ace heard Stefan bark in response. It sounded like it came from the other side of the room where the food table was situated. He had no doubt Spade – whom Whitebeard had enlisted to keep some of the orphans amused earlier in the day while they set up for the party – was hanging out near the food and mooching off of people. He hoped Stefan would take care of his Saint Bernard.

“Of course you’re part of the family, brat! What, did you think you could escape us? No, Marco comes with excessive baggage,” Mr. Newgate said, downing the remainder of his drink. He slammed the bottle on the table behind them, and Ace was sure he heard the wood crack. “Now that we’ve got that settled, I think it’s time we got out the old photo album…”

This time, Ace felt Marco stiffen and the arms that encircled his waist began to twitch.

“…I think you should see some old pictures of Marco in drag. With his blue mohawk.”
“Pops, NO!”

But it was too late; someone had thrown Whitebeard the ginormous photo album in the shape of a smiling white whale. While someone held Marco down, Ace made sure to sear every photograph Whitebeard showed him into his mind, because he doubted he’d ever see his teacher dressed quite like that again.

~

“Oh, so this is where you were hiding?”

Eustass frowned. “I wasn’t hiding. I was just taking a break from the party. Getting some fresh air.”

“…In someone’s closet?”

“You’d be too if an old guy in a kimono hit on you,” Kidd grumbled. “Besides, it’s quiet here. I don’t know how much more of that guy’s awful singing I can take.” Law laughed and pulled the door of the walk-in closet closed. Then he sank down the wall next to Kidd and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek.

“Yeah, Thatch is a bit much, isn’t he? But the guy who hit on you, Izou, has good taste in my books.” He grinned and fondled a stray lock of Kidd’s hair that wouldn’t be held back by his black headband.

“…Do I really look gay?” muttered Kidd, feeling a bit self-conscious.

Law raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know. Why? Don’t like it when other guys hit on you?”

Kidd shook his head. “You’re the only one I want hitting on me.” With a smirk he snuck a hand behind Law’s head, bringing him in for a hungry kiss. Ever since that delirious Izou had leapt at him he’d wanted to forget the incident by making some more pleasing memories. Just a few kisses would do it for him.

Law had made other plans. He broke for air and asked, “Want to have sex in here before we leave?”

Kidd stared at him incredulously. “First we do it with your grandmother in the next room over and now you want to do it with an entire party downstairs?!”

“What can I say, I like to live on the edge. Besides, my grandmother’s going to be up late tonight, I can feel it in my bones. And I have a feeling tonight could be the night she might burst in on us. To scare you.”

That convinced Kidd. He snickered a little and said, “Well, in that case, we’d better get fucking busy.”

“Busy fucking,” Law corrected as he pounced on top of Kidd, fingers already undoing his belt.

--oOo--

Marco had retreated to the front steps of the orphanage, where the night air cleared his mind and forced some calm into his body. It became a rowdier party the moment the photographs had begun circulating the room.
Then Thatch had made matters worse. The man had somehow found the skimpy baby blue dress he’d once worn on a whim in a box somewhere in the basement, and they’d all tried to get him into it. Even Ace.

Thinking of Ace brought an irrepressible smile to his face. As soon as everyone had started crowding around Whitebeard and Ace, trying to look at the photo album that Marco had long since hidden in the attic, Ace had practically started glowing. Marco guessed he had never been to a huge family get together before, and surprisingly he flourished once Pops had announced how he’d taken Ace under his wing to the growing crowd.

It was downright adorable, Marco thought.

He felt strong arms wrap themselves around his shoulders from behind and panicked a little, thinking it was Thatch that had snuck up on him. The reappearance of the blue dress was haunting him. If he had known of its existence within the orphanage he would have set out to burn it. Along with that goddamn photo album.

He struggled to stand up against his assailant, but he ceased fighting when he felt lips on his neck and a rolling laugh in his ear. “You scared me, Ace.”

“You couldn’t help yourself. You were just sitting here on the steps, all alone, lookin’ mighty kissable.”

“You’re not drunk, are you?”

He could practically hear the toothy grin on Ace’s face as he said, “Pops gave me some of his sake, but I’m no lightweight. Apparently you’re not either. They showed me that picture of you standing behind a pyramid made out of beer bottles you drank all in one sitting.”

Marco groaned. He could only imagine the vast amount of respect he probably lost in Ace’s eyes over the course of the night. “What else have they told you about me?”

“They told me all about your time in high school. About that time you pushed Thatch off the roof. And that time Izou dared you to moon an assembly but you wouldn’t do it so you had to eat these nasty chocolates wrapped in foil that looked like money that Thatch had in his backpack for over a year, but one of the chocolates ended up being a real quarter and you choked and they took you to the hospital to get it surgically removed. And how you tried to cover that scar with your tattoo, but the tattoo wasn’t quite large enough anyway. And that time you crashed Pops’ car into a pole and ruined the front end, got it fixed before he knew what you’d done, and then accidentally backed it up into somebody’s garage the very next day and smashed the back end, too. And that time—”

“They told you everything, didn’t they?” Marco interrupted, red in the face as he recalled those events in vivid detail. He still had that small incision mark on his chest and Whitebeard never let him drive his vehicles again, even though he’d improved his driving immensely after that incident.

“They told me some good stories about you too, don’t worry.”

Marco regained some hope. Just a little. “Oh, yeah, like what?”

Ace paused and came to sit beside Marco on the step. “…Well, I can’t remember. Those didn’t stand out as much as the others. And Thatch told me about the time he dumped a carton of honey on you when you were asleep and then emptied a few pillows filled with feathers on you. Apparently some of them didn’t come off for a week. Is that true?”

“Must I tell you?”
Ace nuzzled against him, hoping to win him over. “You must! It’ll kill me not to know.”

“Okay, fine. I had feathers stuck to my chest and my ass for a week. And they all called me Chickenbutt. It was mortifying, but I think by that point in my life I really didn’t care. Happy, Ace?”

“Immensely.” He began to play with Marco’s hair, brushing his hands over the short, prickly strands on the sides and back of his head and then combing through the longer locks. The action seemed to soothe Marco, so Ace decided now would be the best time to broach a subject he thought Marco might have slight qualms about.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about getting a tattoo on my back.”

“What? Why? You’ll be stuck with it for the rest of your life…and your back is so beautiful already, why would you want to wreck it?”

“You’ve got one on your chest,” Ace argued. “And it’s fucking huge.”

“…Point taken. But what would you possibly want as a tattoo on your back? Not flames, I hope?”

Ace frowned and punched Marco playfully in the shoulder. “No. I want that.” He pointed over Marco’s shoulder.

Marco turned back at the Moby Dick Orphanage and traced the direction of his finger until his eyes landed on the only thing of graphical value in sight. “You…want the emblem of the Moby Dick? On your back?”

Ace laughed loudly, then settled down as Marco continued staring at him with disbelief. “Oh come on, don’t think I haven’t noticed how all of your brothers and sisters have that mark somewhere on their body. It binds them as a family, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but…Ace, they all chose to get that mark. It’s not a requirement to join Whitebeard’s family or anything.”

Ace’s smile held. “And I’m going to get it because I want it, not because everyone else has it.”

Marco finally smiled and relented. Besides, fighting Ace was like fighting a raging wildfire hell bent on consuming everything in sight. He didn’t want to make him annoyed by throwing a few buckets of cold water on his head. At any rate, he was just glad Ace wasn’t getting flames tattooed on his back.

As Ace cuddled up to him again and they listened to the sounds of the party echoing through the house behind them, Marco couldn’t help but feel a bit too privileged. He hugged Ace closer to him, wrapping an arm around his broad shoulders. The heat from Ace’s body warded off any and all of Marco’s chills.

“I love you,” Ace said suddenly. It was just what Marco needed to hear.

“I love you, too, Ace. So much.” Marco couldn’t help himself then; he turned Ace’s face up and kissed him. Ace’s arms slinked around his neck and his own around Ace’s waist, holding him there with him. When they broke, panting slightly and aware of the cheers from some casual observers on the other side of one of Moby Dick’s windows, Marco couldn’t help but joke, “And I’ll always love you, even if you do get flames tattooed on your back.”

Ace gave him a light head-butt, but he snickered. “Just as I still love you despite your fancy for
“Hey, that was a one time thing.”

“What about the pink dress?”

“A two time thing,” Marco admitted begrudgingly. “I was not thinking clearly at the time.” Ace continued to laugh, and Marco knew he was probably cycling through the mental pictures he took of the contents of that accursed photo album.

A sudden thought overtook him and he found himself pondering whether or not he should tell Ace how he’d done on his math exam. He’d marked them a while back, after he’d settled back into his routine outside of jail, and he thought he could tease Ace with the information. If anything, he hoped it would get Ace’s mind off of him in frilly dresses.

“So, how do you think you did on the exam?”

A cheeky grin split his lover’s face once more.

“I Aced it, of course.”

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!