Blood in the Water

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Summary

The Corvus is a merchant ship whose name is well-known throughout the islands, whether for its good relationships with traders across the waters, or its somewhat rowdy mess of a crew.

Having your ship recognized all over is all fine and good, of course, when you haven't gotten yourself mixed in with drama among pirates and merfolk.

Notes

Character's names are written as "First Name, Last Name," and are mostly referred to by first names unless they use a nickname, with the exception of certain situations (being referred to by last name by ship captains as a formality, etc.).

I'm completely new to ship/boat terminology and whatnot, and I'm not sure how sound my research really is, so if anyone can correct me on anything, it'd be much appreciated!!

See the end of the work for more notes
“We weren’t expecting you for another two days.” A mixture of confusion and concern painted the face of the young man. In front of him stood two boys, drenched from head to toe without so much as a pair of rain boots. “If anything, we thought you’d be late with this weather.” He tilted his head of mousy, almost grey hair toward the inn’s window at his left. The old shutters covered any view of the outside streets, but the sounds of heavy rain and thunder were unmistakable.

“We left early!” The shorter of the two boys announced, rising on his toes slightly as if to make his presence more known. The grey-haired man already noticed him, though. How could anyone miss that mess of orange on the kid’s head? “Our messenger told us that the skies were looking pretty bad, so the captain had us set out early!”

“I understand that, but a full two days early?”

The shorter one nodded his head, as though no other explanation was needed. It was then that the taller boy with the short, black hair beside him let out a small grunt.

“The captain has other business in town. We’re not just here for the shipment.” Something was tagged onto the end of that statement, but it was muttered and the innkeeper couldn’t quite make it out. Something along the lines of ‘dumbass,’ if he were to guess based on previous encounters with their merchant crew.

“Oh! Yeah!” The smaller one gave another enthusiastic nod, ignoring the insult completely. “I think it might’ve actually been with you, Mr. Innkeeper!”

“Just ‘Suga’ is fine.” The innkeeper gave the boy a warm, reassuring smile. How that face alone didn’t calm the raging storm outside was a mystery to everyone in the room. “I don’t know if we’ll have space for all of the supplies you brought, though. The basement’s cluttered, and we weren’t planning to tidy up until tomorrow--”

“The captain said not to worry!”

“Then you’re here looking for a room?”

Both the boys nodded this time.

“We only have two.” The corners of Suga’s lips turned just slightly, making his reassuring smile an apologetic one. “It’ll be crammed with all of you in there. You’d have more room on the ship in that case wouldn’t you?”

The short one shook his head so vigorously that Suga thought he might actually be trying to dry it out like a dog. “I want to sleep in one of your nice beds!” The taller boy gave an agreeing nod, his expression remaining mostly serious with a look of determination.

Suga responded with a light laugh. “You two are deckhands, aren’t you? Will the others even let you have the bed?”
The shorter boy crumbled down, now squatting on the floor with his hands tugging at his orange hair in frustration. “Augh! That’s right! We’d just be on the floor!”

“Are there extra blankets?” the other asked, watching Suga expectantly.

“Well, yes, we should have enough for the whole crew.” He paused. “Well, a few of you might have to share.”

The orange hair popped back up into Suga’s line of vision as the boy jumped back to his feet. “That’s good! Suga’s blankets are way better than what we’ve got on board!”

Another light laugh, and Suga’s eyes wandered to the inn’s entrance. The door was shaking considerably in the wind, as were the shutters. ‘I’d say to double check with Daichi, but I’d hate to send you two back out in that. I can’t imagine what you’ve already went through, sailing those waters.”

“We’ll be fine!” the two said in unison. Suga gave a slow nod in return, worry still clear in his features. Before the innkeeper could even offer an umbrella, the two were heading out the door, momentarily letting in a gust of wind and water in their departure.

As they ran through the storm, the boys kept their heads lowered in attempt to shield their eyes from the downpour. In general, the trip from the Dockside Inn to the docks wasn’t all that terrible of one. At least, it wasn’t when the weather was half-decent. Tonight was another case. Tonight, the wind was so strong that the shorter boy could feel himself losing his balance every time he lifted a foot. The taller one would occasionally glance over at him as they pushed through the storm, half-wondering if a strong enough gust would send his crewmate flying.

“Hey, Kageyama, keep up with me!” the smaller one was shouting, despite only being a few feet in front of the other.

Tobio Kageyama gave a hard huff as he followed closely behind the other. “Dumbass! Who’s going to catch you if you go flying in this?!”

“Haha! What, are you worried?” Just as the shorter one was turning to look over at him, Tobio grabbed the other deckhand by the shoulders and pulled him back a few steps, out of the path of a passing cart.

“Pay attention, Hinata!” Tobio snapped. The cart was being pulled along with some difficulty by two men, and the wind had the tarp covering it flapping about so violently that the barrels beneath it could be seen easily. All of them shook about as the cart was pulled over the brick road in the storm, though one barrel in particular seemed to be shaking more so than the rest. Almost unnaturally, in fact. Tobio found his gaze lingering on that barrel until his crewmate tore his attention away.

“Me pay attention? Why are you still standing there?! C’mon!” The smaller boy bounced up and down a couple of times before hurrying off once again toward the piers, this time a little more mindful of any obstacles in his path. Shouyou Hinata was not exactly known for his patience,
Tobio knew this well enough by now. But then, neither was he… or the majority of their crew, for that matter. Whether or not there was a storm right now, the current scenario probably wouldn’t have been much different. Suga really shouldn’t have been so surprised that they’d shown up so early, now that he thought about it.

As they approached the docks, they could see that most of their crew had already vacated the ship. That is to say they could see just enough to make that deduction. The rain was so heavy that the usually familiar figures were blurry masses in the distance to them.

“Captain!” Shouyou raised his voice as they came up to the group, a hand quickly rising to his head in a salute before he had even come to a complete stop. “Suga said there are only two rooms left, but he’ll give them to us!”

“Only two?!” Neither of the responding voices came from the captain, but instead from Ryuunosuke and Taketora, two sailors who looked like they could be twins, despite not being related by blood in the slightest. If the latter ever decided to shave off his mohawk, then it would probably be difficult for most to tell them apart at all.

“He has enough blankets,” Tobio said with a nod, but neither of the lookalikes seemed uplifted by this news.

“We might as well sleep on the ship!” Ryuu let out a long, tired groan, but he knew that they’d be staying at the inn either way. Beds or no beds, huddled in a pile on the floor or not, the inn would still be much warmer than sleeping aboard the Corvus, especially in this weather.

“You could always stick around onboard as a lookout.” A hand clamped down on Ryuu’s shoulder from behind. Ah, there was the voice Shouyou had been anticipating. “Sugawara’s rooms have enough floor space for two to work, but if anyone wanted to stay behind, I’d have no complaints.” Their captain, a man with short, black hair and a scar across his nose (no one knew what it was from, and no one dared to ask), stood behind Ryuu. He smiled, though something about it made Ryuu feel like he was actually being pressured to stay behind. It sent shivers down the group’s spines.

“Y-Yeah, sure thing, sir.” He wouldn’t bother arguing either way.

“Great!” The captain looked over his shoulder, raising the hand that wasn’t still gripping the sailor’s shoulder to cup around his mouth as he called out, “Tanaka and Yamamoto are on lookout duty!”

Taketora raised a finger and opened his mouth to retort. He had in no way agreed to this, but the look on the captain’s face when he turned back to him kept him quiet. Even after all this time, everyone had to wonder how a smile could be so damn intimidating.

“Any other volunteers?” No one else seemed to respond to the captain’s question, aside from a ‘Hell no!’ from Ryuu’s sister somewhere down the dock.

The two ‘volunteers’ exchanged exhausted glances, and the rest of the crew started past them, a few giving encouraging pats on their shoulders as they set out for the inn.

“Do we at least get a warm meal?!” Taketora called out.

The captain waved, but didn’t bother looking back at them. “There’s leftovers in the kitchen!”
They could barely hear him over the rain now that the group was getting further away, and the loud crash of lightning behind them made Ryuu wish he hadn’t complained in the first place.

Taketora turned toward Ryuu, just about ready to chew him out for getting them into this, when he noticed that Shouyou and Tobio were still in front of them, the latter holding the edge of the former’s sopping clothes to keep him from chasing after the group.

“What are you doing?! I want a warm blanket too!” Shouyou whined, but Tobio stood there in silence, narrowed eyes watching something unseen off in another direction.

“We’ll volunteer, too,” is what he said.

“What?!” Shouyou ceased the kicking of his legs and whipped around to glare up at the taller boy. “The captain can’t even hear you! What’s the point in announcing something like that now that they’re already halfway there!”

“They aren’t halfway there, idiot! We can still see them!”

“Let go of my shirt!”

“Quit trying to run off!”

There was some more pointless bickering between the two, but Ryuu and Taketora were just about drowning it out at this point. Everyone had sort of learned to after a while.

“Alright, alright!” Ryuu finally intervened. “All you’re doing is getting more wet! Just get on the ship, already!” He turned around and started up the ramp, and the others followed behind, Shouyou making displeased whining noises all the way.

In all the years of making stops at the Dockside Inn, Daichi’s crew had never seen it so crowded before tonight. It seemed that they weren’t the only ones trying to crowd a group of people into a few rooms to escape the storm.

The two rooms that Suga had set aside for them were directly across each other on the second floor, and Daichi wasn’t quite sure which was more of a headache: dealing with the storm itself, or trying to find a way to separate his crew among the rooms in a way that would be the least disruptive to the rest of the inn’s guests. He’d already separated two of his loudest crewmates, but he was beginning to have second thoughts about letting his first mate and boatswain stay in the same room. They weren’t in the same room as himself, so that saved him a bit of stress, at the very least.

“Try to keep it down, alright? The other guests will have enough trouble sleeping with the weather as it is. We don’t need to be giving them more to complain about. Sugawara has been kind to us all these years, I wouldn’t want him to be burdened because we--”

“Oh? Worried about upsetting your boyfriend?” A sly smirk spread across his first mate’s face as
he leaned in the doorway of the opposite room, arms crossed casually over his chest.

“None of that, either.” Daichi’s gaze hardened somewhat. “Don’t go spreading rumors like that, Kuroo.”

The other raised his hands as if surrendering to something, but his amused look didn’t falter in the slightest. “Sorry, sorry, captain. You know I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I really don’t know that.”

“Well, okay, but you know I wouldn’t actually do it. That’s all that matters.”

Daichi heaved a sigh and pulled himself away from the frame of his own room’s door. It was strange that, instead of feeling relieved to finally be on land, he suddenly felt like his babysitting duties had been multiplied. When they were out at sea, while there was still a ton of bullshit to deal with when it came to his crew, first mate Tetsurou Kuroo included, at least he didn’t have to worry about keeping them behaved for the sake of the public. It was in times like these that he was reminded just how much of a mess they really were. Sometimes he kind of enjoyed it, but he wasn’t sure if this was one of those times or not.

“Hey, hey, hey! The bed feels even softer than the last time we were here! Did Suga get new mattresses? Kuroo, come check this out!”

Kuroo laughed and turned on his heel, following after the voice inside his room and allowing the door to close behind him.

“Will the doctor be alright in there with those two?”

Daichi turned his head and jumped slightly at the sight of Suga, who was pointing a finger at the now-closed door and watching it with mild unease. “Ah. Well, Iwaizumi is in there with them, and Kuroo knows when to behave, too.”

“You sound like a proud father,” Suga teased.

Daichi could only sigh at that.

“Hitoka will be bringing some extra blankets up to your rooms soon. If there’s anything else you need, don’t hesitate to tell her or me.”

“Don’t you have enough on your plate?” Daichi looked Suga up and down, noting how tired the latter looked.

Suga leveled him with an unimpressed stare. “Don’t you?” he retorted. “What were you thinking, rushing out here like this, anyway? You had two days, surely the storm would’ve let up by then.”

“Our messenger told us the storm was nearing where we were departing, so we thought we could get out before it hit us.” Daichi let out a small surprised sound when Suga slapped the side of his arm. “And you know we like to be ahead of schedule.”

“Two days ahead. I know. And now the storm is here, so that worked out for you, didn’t it?”

“It would’ve been three days,” Daichi corrected, rubbing absentmindedly at the spot on his arm.
Suga hadn’t even hit him that hard. “But one day was wasted trying to navigate through the storm.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I know. It was worse than we’d expected. I thought for sure Hinata or Noya would get blown overboard at one point.”

Suga snorted.

“You really don’t mind us staying here, though? The place is so packed. I’ve never seen you with your hands this full.” Daichi glanced down the halls with a guilty look in his eyes.

“If it was free, maybe, but since it’s not, I don’t mind one bit.” Suga grinned at the captain.

Daichi laughed, and Suga’s smile seemed to brighten even more, a feat that seemed impossible before.

“I’m kidding. Maybe. But you know I wouldn’t turn you down, Daichi.”

It was then that another voice interrupted the two. A loud, feminine voice that boomed from behind where Daichi was standing. “Quit flirting so loud! Some of us are trying to sleep, here!” Ryuu’s sister poked her head out from the room. Her short, blonde hair was already a mess from rolling around in the bed.

Daichi’s face went red, and he shot Saeko a quick glare. The woman only stuck her tongue out and sunk back into the room.

“She’s not trying to sleep. She’ll be pestering your bartender within the hour.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Suga laughed and turned his body slightly away from Daichi, raising a finger to point down the hall. “I should really check on the other guests, though. Hitoka can only do so much on her own and, well, you know how easily intimidated she gets.”

Daichi nodded and, for a moment, thought that he saw a tinge of pink in Suga’s cheeks as the man headed off.

The ship’s kitchen was lit only by the candles set among the countertops and the faint glow of what few street lanterns had yet to be blown out in the outside storm through the windows. Tobio’s eyes were fixed on one of such small, glass windows. The bread in his hand only had a few bites taken from it so far, which had Shouyou wondering if something was wrong with the guy. Usually he’d just down things in one gulp, so this was definitely worth concerning over. Not just that, but the way that he was staring at that window was… weird.

“The window didn’t do anything to you, stop glaring at it.” Shouyou kicked his feet from the edge of the old wooden table he was sitting on and shoved another piece of bread in his mouth.

“I’m not glaring.” Well, at least he responded. That’s a start. He didn’t look any less
concentrated on the damn glass, though.

“Right! You never glare!” With a small huff, Shouyou shoved the last of his own bread in his mouth and hopped down from the table. He stepped over to where Tobio was standing, and noticed that even the soup next to him was untouched. Here they’d all been so relieved that the leftovers in the kitchen that Daichi had mentioned were actually more than table scraps, and this guy wasn’t even eating any of it. “Chef Aone made all this and you’re just gonna waste it?!”

Tobio didn’t reply, and his gaze didn’t seem to falter.

Shouyou glared at him for a long moment, then grabbed Tobio by his arm and proceeded to push said arm toward his face. “Eat the damn bread!”

“Hinata, what the fuck?!” Tobio finally tore his gaze from the window to glare at the shorter boy, dodging his own hand to avoid being forced.

“You’ve been acting weird ever since we got back on the ship! What’s with you?!” Shouyou released the other’s arm, only to smack at him with his own. “You just keep staring at glaring at inanimate objects! You’re not even eating!”

“I said I’m not glaring!”

“This is clearly a glare!” Shouyou mustered up his best impression of Tobio’s face, which looked more like someone suffering from severe constipation than anything. Soon the other’s hand was grabbing at his face to stop his impersonation.

“I don’t look like that!”

“Yes you do!” Shouyou tugged his hand away and stomped a foot on the ground. “And I know, because you’ve been staring at that same window with that look this whole time!” He shot a hand in the direction of said window.

“I’m thinking, that’s all!”

“Well don’t hurt yourself!”

Tobio grabbed the boy’s face again.

Shouyou pulled his hand away, again, and stared up at Tobio, just about fuming at this point. The two stayed like that for a moment, engaging in the staring contest from hell that they seemed to get locked into time and time again. This time, however, instead of the two huffing and storming away from each other, Tobio sighed and took a bite from his bread.

“Those guys we saw earlier. It’s been bugging me.”

“Huh?” Shouyou had no idea what he was talking about. “What guys? The crew? Suga? We haven’t seen anyone else.”

“The one’s with the barrels.” When he elaborated, his tone was surprisingly calm. Still irritated from their argument, but relatively calm by comparison. “One of them was moving a lot.”

“The... guy?”
“The barrel!”

Another short glaring contest, and this time Shouyou was the one to break it. “Moving barrel. Fine! What about it? They were rolling around, so that’s not weird, right? I mean, the wind has been all *fwoosh* all day long, right?”

“It was moving a lot. Like something was trying to get out.”

Shouyou watched him carefully, trying to make out what the expression on Tobio’s face was now. Irritation due to himself aside, was that concern he was seeing there? “ Couldn’t it have just been fish?” he suggested.

“I thought that at the time, but it’s still bothering me. It might just be nothing, but....”

“....But you wanna check it out?”

Tobio looked down at the other in shock. “We’re supposed to be watching the ship!” He was curious, yeah, but it wasn’t like it was something he’d lose sleep over. Probably. Maybe.

“There will still be two people here if we go! It’ll just be real quick, anyway!”

“We don’t even know where they went!”

Shouyou opened his mouth, but then closed it when he realized he didn’t have a response for that one. He was right. “Well… where would someone take a bunch of barrels?”

“How would I know! Do you know how many different things can be put in barrels?”

“Well!” Shouyou shot back, as if that single word was enough to constitute as an argument. “I don’t know! Fish? Wine?”

“Literally anything!”

The shorter boy groaned and ran his hands through his hair, ruffling it up. It was when he heard a loud thud from outside that he stopped and glanced up, right at the very window Tobio had been staring at so intently for the last few hours.

It was storming, so it could have been anything. The wind could have knocked over some boxes, and they certainly saw a few of those sitting outside earlier today. But for whatever reason, the two climbed up to a chair and peered out for a better look anyway. That is, Tobio looked out while Shouyou struggled to even make it to the right height.

Two men were out there in raincoats, rolling a single barrel down from one of the neighboring boats, one much smaller than their enormous merchant ship. When the wind blew back the hood of one of the coats, Tobio’s eyes widened.

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“What? What? What is it?” Shouyou noted the look on his face, and tried to pull himself up higher by pulling on Tobio’s shoulder. No luck there.

“That’s them. Did they forget some cargo?” He squinted, trying to see better through the rain to assure himself that he wasn’t just going crazy.
“We can follow them!” Shouyou bounced, and soon a loud crash sounded throughout the kitchen as the two boys fell to the floor.

“Dumbass!” Tobio shouted, but Shouyou was already scurrying out from under him and rushing to the stairs.

“Takes one to know one! Are you coming, or not?” He looked over his shoulder, and sure enough, reluctant as he looked, Tobio was rising to his feet and following after him.

The rain had lightened up, even if only by a little. The sound of thunder and falling water was, thankfully, still enough to mask the sound of the boys’ footsteps as they followed the ‘suspicious’ men from the docks. The rolling sound of the barrel across the floor was a nice bonus, too.

Shouyou and Tobio held their raincoats - which they remembered this time - close to themselves in the wind as they stalked the men. They hardly seemed suspicious to Shouyou, but he wasn’t going to just ignore something that was irking his crewmate to this extent.

“That barrel’s not thrashing like you said--”

Tobio smacked a hand over Shouyou’s mouth and ducked them around the corner of a rundown store. He shushed him, but held back any tempting insults that came to mind. He wasn’t about to trek out in this weather only to get caught in the end. He took Shouyou’s words in though, and watched the barrel carefully from around the corner as it was rolled further from their spot. It wasn’t moving much on its own, but then, neither were most of the barrels from the glimpse he’d caught earlier that day. It was just the one, and that’s what made it seem so out of place to him.

He released his hold on Shouyou’s mouth and brought a finger to his own lips to shush him one more time. With that, he carefully stepped out from around the corner and continued with their mission. He didn’t like how far ahead the men were getting from them now. He waved for Shouyou to follow, not removing his eyes from their targets.

They didn’t have to follow them much longer. In fact, the path they were on was no different from the one they’d walked earlier that day.

“The inn?” Tobio murmured, eyes narrowing as he and his crewmate slowed to a stop in the middle of the street. No, not the inn. The two men had just brought the barrel into the bar next door (also owned by Suga’s family). He waited a moment, ignoring how impatient Shouyou was already growing beside him, before making his way to the bar’s entrance. It was open, surprisingly. The place was usually open late into the night, but he certainly hadn’t expected it to be in this storm. He pushed the door open and glanced around, trying to figure out where the two men had wandered off to. He caught a shadow and a rolling sound around the other side of the bar and fixed his gaze on that.

“You’re doing the glarey thing again.”

“I’m not.”
“Aren’t you boys a little young to be in here?” Both of them froze at the new voice. Not the bartender’s, but definitely familiar. Definitely Saeko. A surprisingly not-drunk-yet Saeko. The two turned their heads to see the blonde raising a mug at the end of the bar with a loud laugh. “Weren’t you staying behind on the ship, too? Does Daichi know you’re here?”

“We’re, uh…”

“On a spy mission!”

Tobio smacked the back of Shouyou’s head, and Saeko let out another laugh.

“You actually ran all the way back here in this again? ‘A’ for effort, but couldn’t you just play spies on board?” She took a swig and slammed the now-empty mug back down on the bartop. “My brothers probably would’ve been more than happy to humor you!” Ryuu was, in fact, her only brother. That didn’t stop her from referring to both Taketora and Noya as family as well, though. The entire crew was to her, but those two in particular were so close to Ryuu that she’d practically adopted them. “Well, you’re here now either way. Sit down! I’ll get you a... juice or something. So Daichi doesn’t throw a fit with me later.”

They both knew that she’d be offering them beer if she’d been drunk enough. The boys exchanged glances and stepped over to the bar, each taking a seat while simultaneously trying to figure out how the hell they were going to sneak into the back of this place. It wasn’t packed at all. Saeko and the bartender seemed to be the only two present for the moment, but that likely only made it more difficult to get away with something unseen.

The woman hooked an arm around Tobio, who happened to be sitting closest to her. “So! Spies, huh? Getting tired of sweepin’ decks already, are ya?” She belted out another laugh, receiving a roll of the eyes from the bartender. “Tell me, what’s your mission, huh?”

“That’s…” Tobio’s eyes wandered over to where Shouyou had been sitting behind him and, lo and behold, the shorty was already sneaking away from the two. Dammit. Now he was stuck here covering for the kid while Saeko talked his ear off. “F-Fish!” he blurted, tilting his entire body to distract Saeko’s gaze as best as he could. “We saw a huge fish!”

“....And?” Saeko failed to see how a ‘big fish’ could be interesting, considering where they spent the majority of their time. “That brought you here, how?” She looked amused, that was for sure.

He groaned. He didn’t know what sort of lame story he was about to conjure up, but he did know that he’d be strangling Shouyou if he got himself noticed after all this.

He didn’t, though. Not yet, at least. Shouyou crouched low and hid behind the opening of the bar, the hood of his raincoat just brushing up against the plank overhead. He watched and waited for the bartender to refill Saeko’s mug, and took advantage of the distraction to bolt toward the back where the men from earlier had wandered. He found himself trailing down a hallway with only a few lanterns serving as a light source. Two rooms branched off from the hall, but appeared to be locked. Further down, though, was a staircase leading to a third door. This one had been left ajar, and the boy was sure he could hear two voices coming from within. He swallowed hard, and continued down the steps, pulling the door open further, just enough to get a better look inside. Sure enough, there were barrels galore among all the shelves of bottles within the cellar.
It was probably just wine after all, was all he could think. Tobio had to be imagining things. Maybe he swallowed too much seawater. Shouyou huffed, fully prepared to turn away from the scene and drag the other deckhand back to the ship.

“E’s finally gotten quiet in there, eh?” One of the men scoffed through his beard. He gave one of the barrels on the floor a kick. “Ain’t dead in there, are ye?”

At that, Shouyou took back every thought against Tobio he’d just had. Did they have a person in there? He peered through the opening with wide eyes, and had to hold back a peep when one of the men turned his way. The boy frantically took a step back and looked around at his surroundings. A vase? No, he’d break it and make the situation worse. It was bound to happen. A potted plant? Better than nothing.

The boy dove behind the display, thankful for both his size and the amount of leaves poking out from the thing. He held his breath as the door opened all the way and the two men left the cellar. He heard one mention something about getting a key from the bartender, and watched as they headed back up the stairs. Nervous eyes looked from the pair to the door, then back. If there was any time to think this through, he sure as hell didn’t want to waste a moment doing so. The moment the two were out of sight, Shouyou fled into the unlocked cellar and quietly closed the door behind him.

Now… which barrel was it that he was kicking, again?

The boy sighed and looked around at the many, many barrels crowding the room. Was this bar really so popular that it needed this much wine? Or beer, or… whatever the heck was in these things. He froze at the next thought that crossed his mind.

What if all of them had people inside?

He swallowed again.

What if they weren’t even alive?

He was going more and more pale by the second, but found himself approaching one of the barrels despite his fears. “H-Hello?” he asked, voice quieter and more timid than usual. “If there’s a body in one of these, say something! I promise not to hurt you or your friends!”

He froze when a splashing sound came from the barrel directly in front of him. He looked down, contemplating whether to try opening it or ditch this ‘spy mission’ completely. The barrel had a few heavy-looking cases resting on top, preventing anything that could possibly be inside from escaping.

What if it wasn’t human? What if it had a craving for flesh? What if this was all a horrible mistake, and whatever was inside this barrel was meant to stay in there after all?

The next sound was harder to make out. It wasn’t a splash, but more of a bubbling sound. Almost like someone trying to speak underwater.

Well, he’d made it this far. No sense in using good judgement now, right?

Drawing in a deep breath, Shouyou reached for the cases resting atop the barrel, carefully lifting one at a time and setting them aside. They sure were heavier than anything Daichi made him
carry around the deck.

When there was only the lid to the barrel remaining, he held a shaky hand out to remove it, fingers hesitating before following through with the action. The first thing that he saw was water, but there was definitely something beneath the water that he couldn’t quite make out in the dim lighting of the cellar. Whatever it was, it was dark and unmoving for the moment. Blackish browns with hints of yellows dotting the surface. It was large, scaley, almost like a fish, but it wasn’t like any fish he’d ever seen before. Judgement already tossed out the window, he reached a hand inside, brushing against the scales. Definitely felt like a fish.

And then the thrashing came. The mass swung this way and that, and Shouyou jumped back, watching it with confusion and fear until it finally settled down.

“Definitely a fish,” he muttered and nodded to himself. He took a step forward, bracing himself in case it went crazy on him again. Now, it was resting against the side of the barrel, its tail end hanging out from the edge somewhat. When he peered inside, he could finally make out the rest of the creature’s appearance. The further into the barrel the tail went, the more it seemed to uncomfortably fold into itself. Its coloring faded from those dark browns into an almost peachy hue, like human skin.

....

Human skin.

This was not a fish. Not entirely, anyway. As his eyes followed the skin, he was met with a face that he could just barely make out beneath the water filling the barrel, and it looked far from amused. Dark hair that faded into blonde floated around the creature’s face. A very human face with what was possibly the most tired and most done-with-everything face Shouyou had ever laid eyes on.

This was not a fish.

This was a merman.
Daichi just wanted to get some sleep, dammit.

“Can you stop that?”

Shouyou looked up at the merman. He’d undone what restraints there were and helped the creature re-position himself in the barrel, fish tail now resting in the water while he leaned his upper half over the edge of the container, and he couldn’t stop himself from giving the fin a few pokes.

“Sorry!” he said, quickly drawing his hands back. What he couldn’t pull away was his gaze. Even on the more human areas of the creature, there were still patches of scales matching his fin and hair. “How’d you get in here, anyway?”

The merman only leveled him with a tired stare, and Shouyou realized that it probably wasn’t the smartest question. He obviously wasn’t here because he wanted to be.

“Or, uh, why did they bring you here?”

The merman sighed, sinking into the barrel slightly. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you don’t wanna be here, right?” The human set his hands over the edge of the barrel and leaned closer, leading the merman to pull back and away from him as much as he could in the small space. “I’ll get you out!”

The merman narrowed his eyes, unimpressed. He’d already taken in enough of the room to realize that there wasn’t any easy way out without being noticed. “Um… how?” And why? There were a lot of questions to be asked, but it was apparent that he wasn’t interested in conversing more than necessary.
“Don’t worry about that! I’ll handle it, okay?” Shouyou beamed, and the merman gave a slow, but still unconvinced nod. “My name’s Shouyou, by the way. What do I call you? Merpeople have names, right?”

“...Kenma.”

“Nice to meet you, Kenma!” Shouyou held a hand out toward his new friend, who only stared back at it with a look of confusion. Shouyou wondered if handshakes were strictly a human formality. “I’ve got a friend outside this door, so I’ll just sneak out there and...”

He’d been making his way to the cellar door as he rambled on, but trailed off when his hands struggled with the doorknob. The unwilling-to-budge doorknob.

“Uhhhh.....” In all his fascination with Kenma’s damn fishy features, he’d never heard the clicking of the lock from the other side. “What kind of door doesn’t unlock from the inside?!” He jiggled at it more, to no avail.

Kenma watched helplessly from the barrel. “They’ll hear you.”

Shouyou quickly covered his mouth, despite most of the noise coming from his hands. He stepped back from the door, eyes scanning the rest of the cellar. No more doors. No windows. No tools to pry their way out. No nothing.

He could bang on the exit and scream until someone came, but that would ruin his chances of helping Kenma escape, and this would have all been for nothing, as far as he was concerned.

“Well, at least you have some company now?” Shouyou looked over his shoulder, now sporting a hardly convincing smile.

Kenma sighed and sunk back into the water of the barrel.

---

The bartender was shouting something at Saeko about watching her step as she pushed through the side door connecting the bar to the inn. Tobio watched, slowly sipping at his juice until the door swung shut behind her. Luckily for him, she’d gotten drunk enough for him to easily change the subject whenever she asked where Shouyou had disappeared to. Unluckily for him, he’d just spent the last however many minutes stuck in a mostly one-sided conversation about Daichi’s supposed love life and a tale about a sea serpent that the crew once encountered. He’d been there for the sea serpent. There was no reason for her to relay the entire thing in detail to him, even if most of her side of the story was very different from how he remembered the experience. (He was pretty sure that neither of the Tanaka siblings had slain the thing with their bare hands that night. It got away, in fact.)

“Shouldn’t you be headin’ off to bed, kid?”

Tobio’s mind stopped wandering once he heard the bartender’s voice. When he looked over at the man behind the counter, he was greeted with a very annoyed expression that seemed to distort the man’s ridiculously fluffy mustache.

Right. Bed. Why wasn’t he in one of those, again? The boy’s eyes instantly flicked to the other side of the room, to the hallway he was sure Shouyou had disappeared into earlier. His
crewmate had yet to return, but he’d definitely seen the two men from before leave the bar, so…
what the hell? Did they stick Shouyou in a barrel, too?

He gulped at the thought, and the bartender smacked a hand down onto the bar top.

“Hey! Kid! You listenin’?”

The deckhand nodded, setting his juice down while his eyes lingered on the hallway, then bolted for the door Saeko had left through without another word. He didn’t even know who to go to for help in a situation like this. If he could afford to be cocky and handle this on his own, like he’d usually attempt, then he’d be the one down that hall in the first place. Not Shouyou.

Ryuu and Taketora would probably help, but they were stuck on lookout duty. Saeko was too drunk off her ass to be of any use. Doctor Takeda? The chef? Maybe Noya was his best bet. Whoever it was, he just didn’t want this horrible screw up to be relayed to--

“Captain!” If Tobio had wheels, there might have been a screech to accompany his sudden halt. His eyes went wide at the sight of Daichi, who had just stepped out from the ‘staff only’ room near the inn’s front desk. The man had a pinkish hue to his cheeks, but Tobio thought nothing of it. He was more concerned with the raised brow his captain was giving him.

“Didn’t you two stay behind?” Daichi looked Tobio up and down. The boy’s raincoat looked dry, so he gathered he’d been inside for some time now. “Where’s Hinata?”

Tobio averted his gaze, deciding to fix it on a rather tacky painting of a sailboat. “I, um…”

This is the exact opposite of what he was hoping to accomplish when he ran through that door. “I don’t know.”

Daichi’s eyes narrowed on the deckhand, and he slowly brought his arms up to cross over his chest. The action only made Tobio stiffen more. “You don’t know?”

Tobio’s lips pressed tight against one another as he nodded his head.

“So Kageyama, are you telling me that you left him on the ship with the others, or that you lost him?” There it was. That strict fatherly tone that their captain was so well-known for. Tobio was really wishing that he’d run into Noya or pretty much anyone else. At the lack of response from the boy, Daichi assumed the worst. “He’s missing, isn’t he?”

Tobio began to nod, but then raised his shoulders in a small shrug. He wasn’t sure if Shouyou was really missing or just locked in the bar somewhere.

The gesture received another raised brow from Daichi. “Can we discuss it out here?”

Tobio shook his head.

There was a sigh, and the older man pinched the bridge of his nose before turning on his heel. “As soon as we get to the room, you’d better stop with the silent treatment and explain everything.”

Another nod, and Tobio followed after his captain.

“Why am I doing this?” Shouyou looked over at his new merman friend as he lifted one of the
heavy cases up onto a different barrel.

Kenma, arms and head resting lazily over the edge of his own barrel, repeated himself for what was at least the third time. “If you stack those on there, it’ll look like it’s the barrel I’m in. They won’t suspect that I’m gone. Probably.”

“But what if there’s another merperson in here?”

“There isn’t, Shouyou.”

“How do you know? We should open them all!”

“Please don’t.”

Shouyou huffed and pushed the second case over the top of the Kenma-less barrel. “But you’re right there, they’ll still see you.”

“It’s not foolproof.” The merman heaved another sigh. “Just enough to throw them off if someone looks into the room. Maybe buy us some time. Can you move my barrel behind the others?”

Shouyou set the case down on top of the other and turned to survey the situation. A barrel full of water was heavy enough as it is. But one filled with water and a merman? “I can try!”

“Okay…” That didn’t really put Kenma at ease. Not even in the slightest.

Once the cases were stacked on top of the dummy barrel, Shouyou made his way over to Kenma and gave him a push. Nothing. He turned around, resting his back against the wood and tried again, putting all of his strength into it. It didn’t slide across the floor like he’d hoped, but instead began to tip slightly. Kenma’s eyes grew wide and he clung to the edge.

“Stop!” Kenma’s voice came out in a hissed whisper.

The boy quickly pulled back from the barrel, letting it drop with a heavy thunk. Both of their heads whipped around to the cellar entrance. They sat there in silence, and Shouyou could feel a bead of sweat run down the side of his face. They waited, but there was no hint of footsteps or any other sign that someone had heard them.

Both let out a relieved breath, and Shouyou sunk down to the floor against the barrel. “Can’t you just sink down and hide if someone looks in here? If they see the one with the cases on top, it’s not like they’ll bother to check for you or anything.”

“If we’re lucky…” There were just too many things that could go wrong. Even if Kenma could go unseen, the odds of Shouyou staying hidden were… not looking all that great to him. He’d had to remind the boy to keep his voice down several times now as it was. The fact that no one had checked the cellar yet was nothing short of a miracle.

Shouyou leaned his head back against the barrel and stared up at the lantern hanging overhead. Thank god no one thought to blow that out before they got stuck in here. “Don’t worry, okay?” he said, closing his eyes and breathing in. “Kageyama will definitely get help. We’ll be out of here in no time.”

Kenma made a small ‘hm’ sound to acknowledge the boy, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Shouyou was really this optimistic, or if he was just spewing reassuring words for Kenma’s sake. Maybe it was both. Maybe his friend really would come rescue them. Maybe Kenma was
wondering how much easier life would be if he had a pair of legs of his own.

“Let me get this straight.” Daichi, with one hand touching his forehead, was wearing a look of both exhaustion and disbelief. “You two chased down two complete strangers because of a barrel? And now Hinata might be trapped in a room somewhere?”

Saeko had managed to crash the moment she returned from the bar, and her and Noya’s obnoxious snoring combined was enough that Daichi didn’t think he could hear his own thoughts, let alone hold up a conversation like this one. That’s why now, they were standing in the middle of the room across from his own, this one complete with a snickering Kuroo, an amused Koutarou, a very unimpressed Hajime, and a doctor sleeping off in the corner.

“Why didn’t you just tell Suga, then? His family owns the bar. We can just have him let Hinata out.”

Tobio gave a violent shake of the head. “I think the bartender’s in on it!”

“In on what, exactly?” Daichi continued to stare at Tobio, unamused. Kuroo continued to snicker where he sat on the bed.

“The barrels.”

“Those barrels are just filled with wine, Kageyama.” Daichi breathed out and dropped his hand to his side. “I just discussed this with Sugawara before you ran into me. He was telling me where their wine ships from so that I could pass the information along to someone at Owl Roost. Maybe even get some for ourselves so we could bring it there if needed.”

“Either way, we have to get Shorty back, right?” Kuroo leaned against his palm, the look of amusement still not having left his expression. “I don’t think Suga would have an issue with us checking a couple barrels if it’ll put these two at ease.”

“Unless you’re saying Suga has something to do with it.” The crew’s expert gunner, Hajime Iwaizumi, had been leaning against the wall in a corner of the room, spiky black hair pressed up against it and expecting eyes watching Tobio as he spoke.

“That’s ridiculous,” Daichi said, perhaps a little too defensively. Kuroo gave yet another snort, and Koutarou looked from one to the other, as if trying to figure out what he was missing.

“Kuroo said it, right?” Koutarou chimed in, pushing himself off from the edge of the bed with a grin and watching the group with bright eyes, which weren’t nearly as distracting as the crazy black and white hair sticking up from his scalp. “We gotta get him either way, right? Then, let’s go rescue Shorty!”

“We’re just getting him out of a room,” Daichi said. They’d dealt with enough these past few days with the storm as it was. And now he had to handle this mess. He just wanted to get some sleep, dammit.
Despite their captain’s insisting that it didn’t take five people to look for a kid inside a small bar, he somehow wound up with the lot of them trailing behind nonetheless, leaving only Doctor Takeda asleep in the comfort of the guest room. Most of them had insisted on accompanying Daichi and Tobio due to the fact that, judging by Tobio’s story, they weren’t even sure that Shouyou really was in the bar anymore. For all they knew, he’d been kidnapped and smuggled out through some back exit by now.

“We should’ve told the others where we were going.” Hajime eyed the tacky sailboat painting as Daichi knocked on the staff only door he’d just left moments ago. “And I’m sure Suga is in bed by now.”

“You’re right, he should be,” Daichi said just as the door opened to a tired Suga.

“Haven’t you lectured me enough tonight, Daichi?” Suga gave him a tired smile, which only faded when he noticed how much of his crew he had behind him. “Did something happen?”

Daichi opened his mouth, pausing when he realized that he now had to convey Tobio’s ridiculous ‘spy mission’ story. Suga looked so tired, too. He really didn’t want to burden him more than necessary--

“One of our deckhands is locked in your bar,” Hajime said, noting that Daichi wasn’t going to man up and say something any time soon.

“Probably,” Daichi added with an apologetic smile. “Would you mind us checking inside?”

Suga furrowed his brows. “That’s not a problem,” he said, eyes wandering over to Tobio, who looked completely guilty throughout the whole exchange. “I’m not sure if I really want to ask how this happened.”

Tobio’s look of shame was jolted when an arm came wrapping around his shoulder, pulling him into a half-hug. “This guy says he saw something suspicious go into your bar!” Koutarou announced. Suga’s brows lifted in return. “Thinks there might be something weird in your wine barrels! Can we look?” The man flashed an excited smile. There was no doubt that he’d taken interest in Tobio’s story, and was probably more curious to see what was in the ‘suspicious barrel’ than even Tobio himself.

Suga gave a slow nod, not looking any less confused after that explanation. He retrieved his own set of keys and a small lantern before leading the group through the connecting door to the bar. The tender had already closed up after Saeko and Tobio had left, so the place was nearly pitch-black, save for the occasional flash of lightning and the lantern in Suga’s hand.

As they approached the steps, a third light source came into view. It was faint, but there was a small glow coming from the cracks of the cellar door. It wouldn’t be the first time the tender neglected to put out the lantern. Suga would have to have a talk with him about that later.

There was a click when he unlocked the door, and a small creaking sound as it slowly swung open. The group looked into the room, but the only noticeable things inside were the stacks of wine barrels.

“...Nothing?” Koutarou whined. “’C’mon! ‘Ey, Shorty! You in there?”

There was another moment of quiet, and then a mess of bright orange slowly came into view. Shouyou peered around from behind some barrels, and his entire face lit up at the sight of his crew.
“See?!” he said, hopping around the barrels and pressing his hands to the edge of one near the front of the room. “I told you they’d come!"

Everyone sent the boy a confused look, and Kuroo stepped forward. “Who’re you talkin’ to there--” Blonde hair from within the barrel caught the man’s attention, followed by the scales further down their body. “Holy shit.”

Koutarou pushed past Hajime and ran over to the barrel as well, hands clamping down on the edge as he leaned over to look inside, nearly toppling the thing over in the process. Kenma sunk lower into the water, staring up at them with wide, frightened eyes that seemed more like a cat’s than any kind of fish. “A merman?!” Koutarou whipped his head around to look at Suga, eyes full of amazement. “You’ve been hiding a merman from us?!”

Suga looked both appalled and baffled. “What?” He made his way over as well, and soon the entire group was crowded around poor, defenseless Kenma.

“You didn’t know about this?” Hajime asked, not looking quite as amazed by the creature as the others were.

“I think I’d have mentioned this before bringing you down here if I did!” Suga watched the merman retreat as far down into the barrel as he possibly could, then he took a step back, tugging both Kuroo and Koutarou by the ears. “Let’s not crowd around, though. Look, you’re scaring him.”

Shouyou remained beside the barrel, which Kenma didn’t seem to mind so much as the rest of the group leaning in over him. “He was kidnapped!” he announced. “Those two guys that Kageyama and I followed, they smuggled him in here!”

Tobio, through all of this, looked both proud and horrified over the fact that he was right all along. “The bartender?” he asked.

Shouyou crossed his arms, and looked deep in thought for a moment. “Hmm… I don’t know if he knows or not.”

“I can’t imagine that they’d hide him this poorly if they were trying to keep it from my bartender.” Suga heaved a heavy, tired sigh. “And I rarely come back here, so they wouldn’t have needed to try to hide anything from me.” He sounded ashamed toward the end there.

Kuroo, still rubbing the ear that Suga had so relentlessly dragged him by, let out a long whistle. “Sounds like you’ve got some black market issues under your belt, Suga.”

“Sounds like I need to start looking for a new bartender.” Another sigh, and Suga crouched down in front of the barrel, careful not to get too close to the timid creature inside. “How long have you been in this?” he asked, pointing a finger to the barrel.

Kenma was quiet at first, slowly raising himself just enough to see Suga over the edge. His eyes darted from the man with the mousy hair and the beauty mark under his eye to Shouyou, then back. He pressed his lips tight, then responded with a quiet, “I’m not sure.”

“Can’t exactly keep track of time inside that thing, I’d bet.” Kuroo said, dropping his hand from his ear to his hip. “More than few days, you think?”

The merman nodded.

“Do you…” Suga looked over his shoulder, helpless eyes falling on Daichi’s gaze. “...think you could bring him back home?”
Daichi’s eyes widened a little. “We don’t typically carry anything that isn’t human or cargo.”

“Then I’ll pay you. It’ll be no different than you transporting any of my other shipments.” Suga got to his feet and turned to fully face the captain.

“No, Sugawara. You’re not going to pay for this. You had nothing to do with this.”

“We can’t just leave him here!” Shouyou leaned his arms into the water and pulled them tight around Kenma in a hug. The merman was wishing now more than ever that he had more space in this thing. He couldn’t even properly shy away from these people.

“Yeah, Daichi, you really wanna leave Suga to deal with this on his own?” Kuroo smirked, and then Koutarou was popping up between him and Daichi.

“C’mon, Daichi! Let us take him!”

“He’s not a pet,” Hajime huffed.

“I can pay you.”

All eyes turned onto Kenma, who then sunk back down as much as he could with Shouyou’s arms still clinging to him. He didn’t want to ask for their help. He really didn’t. Even in this short amount of time, he already felt exhausted from all the energy in the room.

But anything was better than being stuck in this barrel, or being taken to wherever those men planned on taking him.

“Back home...” He watched them all as if expecting one of them to pounce him at any given moment. “We have treasure. I can give you some.”

“We’re not pirates,” Daichi said, nearly sounding offended.

“As long as the treasure’s not stolen, payment is payment. Would you rather have Suga pay you? Or do it for free?” Kuroo watched Daichi expectantly, as did the rest of the crew.

The man stared at Kenma for a long moment. He surely didn’t seem like a threat, and he certainly didn’t want to leave him for Suga to deal with. “Where are you from?” he asked, and there was cheering from both Shouyou and Koutarou. “I haven’t agreed to taking him yet!” he spat.

“But you budged!” Koutarou nearly squealed.

Daichi rolled his eyes and set his gaze back on Kenma, who quickly averted his own.

“North of Owl Roost.”

“We’re going there!” Shouyou blurted. “Right? Isn’t that our next stop after this? We can take care of stuff there and then drop Kenma off after! It won’t even be out of our way!” Both he and Koutarou were staring at Daichi with puppy dog eyes now.

“You know,” Kuroo started, stepping up to Daichi and giving him a small nudge of the elbow. “The last time we let someone with magic on board, it didn’t end so badly, and he’s already agreed to paying us. It’s not like we’ve never had passengers before.”

“But most of those were human.”

“The witch wasn’t, and look how well we made out from that. Wanna take a vote?”
Koutarou, Shouyou, and Tobio all shot their hands into the air. Daichi looked from them to Kuroo, who followed with his own hand shortly after. Hajime’s arms, however, remained folded.

“Iwaizumi?”

“Do what you want.”

“He’s still not over the siren thing.” Koutarou said to Shouyou in what was probably supposed to be a whisper, but was way too loud to really count as one. Hajime only huffed after that.

Daichi frowned, still unsure, until Suga rested a hand over his shoulder. “Daichi? If it’s too much, I can try to find another way…”

“We’ll do it.” Daichi’s response was quick, but that didn’t mean it sounded completely willing. Something about this made him uneasy. “But what of the men who brought him here?” Surely they’d go looking for whoever helped the merman escape. “We could wait until the authorities come by.”

Suga raised a hand in outright rejection. “Stop right there. Do you have any idea how out of hand this will get if word gets out that merfolk had been at my inn? We don’t have proof that those men brought him and not us, either. Just get him off the island safely. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“And if those men come after you?” Daichi narrowed his eyes, and his crewmates even took a step back when he did. “Sugawara, we’ve given you enough trouble as it is--”

“And I’ve heard enough of that! I can handle the rest. You know that I can. Or did you forget?”

“I... No, I haven’t.”

“Good. Then we should stop wasting time and get Kenma onto your ship.” There was a moment of silence, and everyone was watching Suga with a look of fear in their eyes. His hardened gaze went softer as he frowned at Daichi. “You know I don’t want to rush you like this.”

Kuroo took it upon himself to jump in and hopefully break the tension between the two. He jutted a thumb over his shoulder, toward the cellar door as he spoke up. “You know we’ve still got a shipment that needs to be delivered to you, right?”

“Nothing that will spoil. It’s just extra furniture, isn’t it?” Suga looked at Kuroo, then back to Daichi. “It can wait. Bring it after you’ve delivered Kenma. I promise I’ll be here safe and sound when you get back.”

“You worry about others too much for your own good, Sugawara.”

Daichi’s words brought Suga’s warm, bright smile back into being, even if it did look somewhat worn compared to the usual. “That’s why you’re still alive, isn’t it?”
Boats Are Very Boring To Merfolk

Chapter by ChosenOfKagami (kagapop), kagapop

Chapter Summary

Kuroo wants attention. Kenma is exhausted. Noya is Noya. Daichi worries about things. Bokuto is there I guess.

There are no PSPs in this universe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kenma wanted a ride home.

Kenma did not want to be surrounded and bombarded by questions by a bunch of rowdy sailors every ten seconds.

“Do you have gills? Where are they?” “Can I touch your scales?” “Do you eat fish, or is that like cannibalism?” “Can you really talk to sharks?” “How are mer-babies made?”

The most recent one was from Shouyou. “Couldn’t you just sing to make Daichi agree to take you with us?”

“I’m not a siren.”

There was a clattering sound, then grumbling from Hajime as he went to pick up the supplies he’d just dropped all over the deck.

“Oh, yeah, try not to use the s-word around him.” Shouyou nodded. Kenma nodded in response, though his was slower and holding back an unasked question.

During the night, they’d managed to sneak Kenma out by wrapping him in one of Suga’s blankets (warm as it was, he’d never felt so dry and gross in his life) and dumped him on the ship where the nightwatch duo and the deckhands remained on guard. Now it was morning, and they’d only left the docks about an hour ago, with Kenma sitting in… another fucking barrel. At least this one had a little more space than the first. He’d been told that if he wanted to, they could let him into the water, as long as he could keep up with the ship.

That sounded like too much effort.

His barrel was stationed next to two hammocks below deck, one hanging right above the other. They belonged to the deckhands, and the higher one was, surprisingly, Shouyou’s. Kenma found that hard to believe until he saw the kid fucking jump up to reach the thing like some kind of frog-human or featherless bird.

He was alone down there for the most part, which wasn’t all that bad. The peace and quiet was very much welcome. Occasionally, between whatever chores he’d been assigned, Shouyou would pop in to check on Kenma, asking how he was doing or offering some food.
He took a lot of naps, the others noticed. And when he did, he’d usually wake up to a bowl of soup or some bread left on a small stool beside him thanks to Shouyou.

“Isn’t it boring in there?” the merman had been asked more than once by just about every member of the crew. And it was, but it also gave him plenty of breaks to settle down from all the attention the others kept giving him. From what he’d heard, most of them had seen merfolk at some point in their lives, but none of them had ever actually been able to get close enough to converse with one. And here he was. Lucky him.

The room had no windows, only the faint light of the lantern overhead, which swung and creaked about whenever the ship rocked too much. It was a strange sensation, feeling the waves without actually being beneath them. He’d felt it when those men had smuggled him onto their own ship, but it was different now that he could see his surroundings and how the rocking affected everything else. He didn’t much care for it.

“Ey, what happened to cleaning all that pelican shit off the railings?” is what followed a knock against the frame of the cabin door. Kenma’s eyes blinked open from another nap, and he could hear Shouyou and Tobio groaning from the hammocks. “Don’t give me that. You two have barely even done anything today.” The source of the voice was Kuroo, standing in the doorway and pointing behind him with something more serious than the usual smirk. “Or should I point out to Daichi that it’s still there?” Nevermind. There was the smirk.

The boys lazily raised hands up in salutes and carried themselves up the steps behind Kuroo, whose eyes fell onto the occupant of the barrel.

“There’s no way you’re not bored in there.”

“Hm.”

“Getting tired of being asked that?”

“A little.”

“Then quit looking so bored.”

Kenma sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes again as he rested the rear of his head against the wood.

“We could give you a tour of the ship or something, you know.” Kuroo folded his arms over his chest and let out a short laugh. “Might have to drag or carry you around, but we’d get you back in here before you dried out too much.”

“Not interested,” Kenma said, “Shouyou already offered.”

“And you turned him down? And here I thought Shorty had you wrapped around his finger.”

Kenma opened his eyes again at that, lowering his head just enough to send Kuroo an annoyed glance.

“Not familiar with that phrase?”

“I am,” Kenma mumbled. “Why would you think that?”

“You don’t shy away from him as much as the rest of us.” Kuroo shrugged and stepped further into the room. “Not from what I’ve seen, anyway. You even trusted him enough to come
“What makes you think that was him?” Was it him? He did feel an odd sense of trust when Shouyou found him in the cellar. It wasn’t the same life-threatening vibe he got from the men who captured him, and he’d expected to feel that from all humans after that encounter.

“What makes you think that was him?” Was it him? He did feel an odd sense of trust when Shouyou found him in the cellar. It wasn’t the same life-threatening vibe he got from the men who captured him, and he’d expected to feel that from all humans after that encounter.

“Would you have if I’d found you first?”

“Probably not.”

“Ouch.”

“You asked.” Kenma was the one to shrug this time.

“Should I take that personally?”

“Probably not,” he repeated.

Kuroo laughed. He knew Kenma had reason to be uneasy. Untrusting. He’d thought that maybe Shouyou would’ve warmed him up to human interaction by now, but maybe the guy just flat out didn’t like interaction in general. “Are you like this around your kind, too.”

Kenma returned to his leaned back position, eyes closed again as he tried to relax himself. “Probably.”

“That your go-to response for everything? ‘Probably’ with a ‘not’ when needed?”

“Hm.”

“Okay, okay.” Kuroo gave a defeated laugh, gaze lingering on the merman for a moment before turning on his heel to return to the deck above. It didn’t seem like he’d be having much luck getting this fish to engage in a real conversation any time soon.

Daichi leaned against the railing of the ship, watching out at the waves crashing about below. They weren’t calm, but they were a huge relief compared to the awful weather up until now. Currently, the skies were gray, but the rain had finally slowed to a stop. Despite things looking up, he had a look of worry etched into his features.

“He’ll be fine.”

He looked up from the view and over his shoulder, where Saeko was stationed at the helm.

“Quit worrying about him. You know Suga better than the rest of us, so we shouldn’t have to keep reminding you that he can handle himself.” She leaned against the wheel and shot Daichi a stern look. “Stop treating him like a baby.”

“I don’t treat anyone like a baby.”

His response got a sharp laugh out of Saeko. “What a load of bullshit!”

Daichi rolled his eyes and turned back to the water. “I push the rest of you plenty, don’t I? I
I wouldn’t call that babying. Suga’s settled on land now. He has his business to worry about, and that should be it.”

“I know, I know. I’m sure he loves you very much, too.”

“Saeko.”

“Just tellin’ it like it is, Cap’n.” The woman gave a wink and a salute, though Daichi wasn’t even looking in her direction.

“There’s nothing there.”

“Right, right. And Ryuu has the most gorgeous locks I’ve ever seen.” She nodded, and Daichi sighed.

“Can we talk about something else, please?”

“Like how you have to let down that guy at Owl Roost now that the wine-sellers he wanted info on are dirty criminals?”

“I’ll name him some alternatives when we arrive.” So, the weather was improving, but just about everything else seemed to be going to shit. They didn’t even get to deliver the supplies they’d initially visited Suga for in the first place. “We still have to deliver some other crates there, anyway.”

“Don’t we have a delivery for the bird sanctuary?” She stared thoughtfully out at the sea ahead. “Can I do it?”

“I’ll let you fight Bokuto for that one.”

The woman laughed, her voice mingling with the sudden cawing from above. The two of them looked up as a bird coated in shiny black feathers came into view. It was certainly not something you’d expect to see anywhere near the ocean, but this crew was hardly surprised.

“Oh, you made it.” Daichi held out an arm, giving the crow space to land on his shoulder, giving him the appearance of a pirate. Saeko kept her mouth shut on that thought. She knew better by now, tempting as it was. “Please tell me you have some good news for us.”

It was the next evening, and Kenma had awoken from a nap again, this time to the sound of wood hitting wood. When he looked up, there was a small table in front of him, complete with a board covered in different colored squares. On the other side of the table, a chair came smacking to the ground, and Kuroo came plopping right on top of it.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving you from terminal boredom.”

“That isn’t a thing.”

“It could be. Better safe than sorry.”
Kenma gave him one of his ‘already-done-with-this’ looks. Kuroo was quickly growing used to these.

The merman looked down at the board, unsure of how it was supposed to save him from any sort of ‘terminal boredom.’ Looking at a bunch of black and red squares wasn’t all that interesting to him.

It was then that Kuroo pulled out a small drawstring bag full of what looked to Kenma like wooden coins, also painted black and red like the board.

“You guys have games under the sea?”

“Is that what this is supposed to be?”

Kuroo grinned. That wasn’t much, but it was the closest thing to interest he’d managed to get out of Kenma so far. *Take that, Shouyou.*

“It is.” He began to remove the wooden pieces a few at a time and placed them on the board, the red on Kenma’s side and the black on his.

“Taketora told me that first mate is an important role on a ship.” Kenma stated, watching him set up the checkerboard.

Kuroo nodded with a proud look, only for it to be ruined by Kenma’s next question.

“So why are you wasting time playing games?”

Kuroo set the last chip into place and looked up at the merman. “If we didn’t take a few breaks now and then, we’d all go insane.”

Kenma thought that Kuroo was already halfway there with that hair.

“So, alright, that’s how you start off. The red pieces are yours, so you can move those, but you can’t move mine…” he went on, explaining the rules of checkers and guiding Kenma through the first few moves. It didn’t take long for the merman to not only catch on, but become engrossed in the game.

And, much to Kuroo’s disappointment, Kenma was *really* good at checkers. So much for winning and pulling an encouraging ‘don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it!’ line.

“We have a game like this back home,” Kenma said halfway into their second match. “But we use shells, and they follow lines instead of squares. It’s also… kind of dumb.” He looked up after he made his move, then found himself falling back somewhat at the look Kuroo was giving him. “...What?”

“I didn’t know you could speak more than a sentence at a time.”

Kenma narrowed his eyes, and for a moment, contemplated splashing the guy. Maybe he really would have if he didn’t want to mess up their game pieces.

“What else do merfolk have that humans have? Do you guys have stores and things?”

“Not more questions…” Kenma groaned.

“If you answer, I’ll move my next piece.”
“I just want to play the game, Kuroo.”

“Better answer my questions, then.” Kuroo grinned, and Kenma hung his head with another groan.

“We have stores. Towns. Cities. No, we don’t have ‘cabs pulled by seahorses.’” That last one Koutarou had asked him because he was so sure it had to be a real thing. “I don’t even know what a cab is,” he murmured.

Kuroo laughed and moved his next piece. Kenma analyzed the board for a moment before moving his own.

“How long can you stay out of water?”

“Dunno.” Another exchange of moves. Kenma was already winning. Again. Kuroo was determined to make a wild comeback. “I never bothered going to the surface.”

“But you had to for them to catch you.”

“You could have moved there.” Kenma pointed to a spot on the board, effectively changing the subject and gaining an ashamed gasp from Kuroo.

The door to the cabin swung open to a small figure, but it wasn’t Shouyou. It was, of course, another person with crazy hair. Kenma really had to wonder if most of these people were actually human like they claimed to be. His own hair was a natural result of his overall coloring, but what were these guys’ excuses?

“There you are!” The tiny person shouted, and Kuroo looked over at him, unamused.

“I’m busy, Noya!”

Noya stared down at the checkerboard between the two and huffed, but held back any accusations. “We can’t find the cannon sponges!”

“Ask Koutarou!”

“He said to ask you!”

Did they have to talk so far away from each other? Was all this yelling really necessary? Kenma sunk into his barrel, eyes falling onto the game board and wishing Kuroo would just make his next move so he could keep playing.

“Well how should I know?” He probably should. In fact, Kuroo definitely knew, he was just too distracted by getting back to the damn board game to think on it. What he could think of was the next best way to distract Yuu Nishinoya so that he’d leave the room. “Hey, Noya, did you know Asahi came back last night?”

“WHAT?” Noya didn’t miss a beat in slamming the door behind him. The footsteps storming off were surprisingly loud for someone of his size.

Kuroo sighed, and turned back to Kenma, unable to help but stay momentarily fixed on the merman when he saw the look he was giving the checkerboard. Expectant and… excited? Kuroo was definitely calling this attempt a success.

When he made his next move, he smiled a smile that was far more genuine than the typical
“A-SA-HIIIIIII!” The sound of Noya’s footsteps increasing with speed by the second could be heard across the deck.

Hajime, cannon sponges reclaimed and in hand, had to practically dive out of the tiny sailor’s way as he bee-lined for his target. Daichi had been off near the door to the cabin’s quarters, and at the sight of Noya, quickly glanced up at the bird perched on his shoulder.

“Brace yourself,” he said, sidestepping out of Noya’s way. The crow slipped from the man’s shoulder and struggled to catch its balance in the air. Just below, a pair of hands were swiping at it, trying to grab at its tail feathers.

“Get down here!” Noya swiped at the bird a few more times, then finally stopped and pointed down at the deck like an angry parent (who looked like an angry child). “You got your ass back here last night and didn’t even bother saying hi?!” He gave a loud huff through his nostrils when the bird only squawked in response. It was a sad, unintimidating squawk, at that. “Change back! Now!”

Daichi raised his hands in front of him and took a few steps back, soon slipping back into his quarters before the situation became more than he wanted to deal with.

The bird continued to flap out of reach, and Noya continued to stare up at it defiantly. After a moment, Noya won, and the bird lowered itself. In a puff of smoke and feathers, the tiny animal figure was replaced by that of a more well-built man with the beginnings of a beard and brown hair pulled back into a messy bun. Even in this form, black feathers grew out from various spots of the man’s skin. The most noticeable ones were on his wrists and shoulder area, but only due to the loose cloths covering the rest of his body.

“N-Noya, you know my other form is easier to keep…” Despite his masculine appearance, the moment he opened his mouth, all intimidation factor was lost. “I already spent a lot of time in this form conveying messages for Daichi--”

“Then you should’ve come said hi before you changed back into a chicken!”

Asahi looked absolutely hurt. “I’m not a chicken!”

“Coulda fooled me!” Noya gave the man’s arm a light punch. “You’re not even Daichi’s familiar!”

Asahi absentmindedly scratched a spot on the side of his face. “But I’m still the ship’s messenger. If I relay them to you, you’ll just get distracted…”

“You could’ve relayed a ‘hi’ to me!”

Asahi sighed, and he could hear Ryuu calling over from the cannons near Hajime. “Just say hi already, dammit!”

Asahi looked down at Noya, who was glaring his worst glare up at him. He sighed. “H-Hello, Noya. Long time no see...?”
Noya glared at him for a second longer, then his face twisted into a grin and he jumped up, latching onto the bird-man in a tight hug. “Welcome home, Chicken Shit!”

Another sigh from Asahi, and a collective eye roll from everyone who could see the scene playing out.

“We have a merman now, did Daichi tell you?”

“He did. You’re bringing him to Owl Roost with you?”

Noya climbed back down from his friend and held his arms out to each side to balance himself once he landed. “He’ll probably stay on the Corvus with someone. Where’s Daichi sending you now?”

“Oh, I, uh. I thought I’d visit Owl Roost with you all.”

Noya gave another grin. “Great! We have to make a delivery to the bird sanctuary while we’re there! You can go with me!”

“The delivery is seeds for some new plants, isn’t it? Daichi said Koutarou would be handling that…”

Noya shook his head. “Well, we’re going either way!”

Asahi nodded, hoping not to rile up Noya any further. “Alright, alright. I’ll see the other birds with you.”

“Right! ‘Cause you owe me for not saying hi right away!”

“Right. I’m sorry, Noya.”

It was now five nights since they’d left the Dockside Inn back at Morrigan's Coast, and they were set to arrive at their destination by morning. Kuroo continued to bother Kenma with games of checkers, and now chess, but he wasn’t complaining anymore. The games were more fun than most of the ones he had experience with back home. He wouldn’t mind one that he could play by himself, though.

Shouyou had, at some point, caught the two playing checkers, and has since introduced Kenma to the world of tic-tac-toe. Now he was sitting in front of his fishy friend, teaching him a game that didn’t involve any sort of board or drawings.

“Now that I think about it…” Shouyou was holding a flat hand over the top of Kenma’s balled-up fist. “I know there are rocks in the ocean, but have you ever seen scissors or paper?”

Kenma pulled his hand out from under Shouyou’s. “We have scissors, and I know what paper is, but I’ve never seen it.”

Shouyou made the most alarmed gasping sound and jumped to his feet. “I have to show you paper!!!” He bolted off before Kenma could even get another word in. He sat there in his barrel, which thankfully had been replaced with fresh water recently, and waited for Shouyou to return. When he did, the boy was holding out a piece of paper, a quill, and a small container of ink. He sat
down and cleared off the empty plate from the stool beside Kenma, and flattened the paper down on it. Kenma watched as he dipped the quill into the ink and began scribbling in god-awful handwriting all over the thing.

“See? We can send messages to each other with this!”

“I said I know what it is, Shouyou…” It did look much easier than the carvings he was familiar with back home, though.

“But it’s cool, right?!”

Kenma kept his eyes on the paper, his lips turning upward into the smallest of smiles. He made another ‘hm’ noise, though this one came out as more of a laugh than a disinterested acknowledgement. It seemed odd to him that Shouyou could be so amazed by something he’d grown up with.

“Kenma laughed!” Shouyou gave another loud gasp, and Kenma’s smile quickly faded. “Oh my god!!! Wait until I tell Kuroo! He’ll be so jealous!”

“What are you two competing for, exactly?” Kenma narrowed his eyes a little.

“Oh!” Shouyou shook his head. “We’re not competing! It’s just so hard to get you to show any emotion other than, um… tired?” Tired. Apathy. Disinterested. Whatever you wanted to call it. “So, it’s like, this huge amazing thing!”

“I’ll tell you what’s amazing!” The two looked up, and Koutarou had already barged through the cabin door, wearing the same look of amazement he had when they found Kenma in the cellar. “I just saw the coolest thing! Kenma, hey, Kenma! Do you know any merpeople with black hair?”

Kenma gave a slow nod, followed by, “It’s a common color….”

Koutarou tugged at his own hair and groaned. “No, no! Like, really short, kinda curly hair? And this really long, pretty tail! It was white, like snow! And there were all these black splotches, but it was so cool!”

“You saw another merperson?!” Shouyou jumped up. “Why does that always happen to you? No one else ever sees them! That happened with the siren, too!”

“Not really. Hajime saw that one.” As if on cue, both of them glanced over at the door, possibly checking to make sure that said gunner wasn’t within earshot. “But yeah, I definitely saw one just now!” Koutarou was nodding, beyond enthusiastic. “And it was the prettiest one I’ve ever seen-- No offense, Kenma. You look great, too.”

“Um. Thanks?”

“No one believes me, though. Kuroo says there’s no way we’d suddenly be hitting some kind of merperson streak. But then I thought, what if it was someone looking for Kenma? That’d make sense, right?”

“I don’t think I know anyone like that.”

Koutarou groaned out loud. “I know I saw one, though! You believe me, right?”

Shouyou nodded like his life depended on it, and Kenma just stayed quiet. He didn’t really see why he would imagine something so vivid unless he was, like Kuroo said, ‘going insane.’ Being a
merman himself, it sounded perfectly plausible, though.

“What were they doing??” Shouyou asked, looking up at Koutarou like a child preparing for story time.

“They were just swimming. Like, really fast. Kind of away from the ship. I saw it through the spyglass. They seemed like they were in a hurry. Or panicked...” As Koutarou relayed all of this, he looked very deep in thought. “But then they stopped to look down at something. Until then, I thought maybe it was some weird dolphin or something, but then I saw their face!”

“Augh, that’s so cool! I wanna see a merperson.”

Kenma gave him the most deadpan look he could offer, but Shouyou didn’t seem to notice.

Koutarou suddenly looked very hopeful. “They were heading the same direction as us, you know! Maybe we’ll see them again!”

“Or you’ll see them again, and the rest of us will just have to settle for your stories.” Shouyou sighed and leaned against the stool he’d been scribbling on up until now.

“Um, Shouyou...”

Shouyou looked down at his sleeve, which was now covered in black ink.

Chapter End Notes

This one was mostly... relationship building/establishing, I guess?
Sorry about it being kinda short and all. The next one is much longer and will have more going on, don't worry!
“You already agreed to stay with Kenma, so the answer is no.”

Daichi stood before Shouyou, looking much like a father having a stern talk with their child. The deckhand let out a whine, followed by another attempt to sway the captain.

“But what if I take Kenma with me?”

Daichi sighed. This boy was really suggesting that he drag a merman around an island with him just to look at some birds. “You know that’s out of the question. Even if that was possible, we can’t let anyone see that we have a merman.”

Shouyou groaned out an “I knoooooww,” and lowered his head. He didn’t want to leave poor Kenma alone, but he didn’t want to miss out on seeing the birds, either. “I didn’t get to see them any of the last three times we came here, though.”

“Then maybe you will the fifth.” Daichi was flat out ignoring Shouyou’s huffs and groans now. “I don’t need that many people just to deliver a few seeds, anyway. One person would be enough, but we already have both Noya and Bokuto going to the sanctuary. Someone needs to stay onboard, and I need the others to help with the rest of the shipments.”

“Ha!” Ryuu blurted as he walked past them, helping Taketora with transporting a large crate toward the ramp. “Good luck getting him to stay! Those two bolted off the last time they were on watch duty!”

“You were the ones on watch duty, and you didn’t even notice they were gone until they came back.”

Both sailors flinched at Daichi’s words, and said nothing more as they carried the crate off.

Ryuu did have a point, though. Daichi looked down at Shouyou with an even harder look than
before. “You will stay at your post, won’t you?”

Shouyou swallowed, then straightened as he said, “Yes sir! Kageyama and I won’t leave until you come back! I promise!”

The captain could only hope that was true. He gave the boy a nod, uneasy as it was, and turned to assist his crew with the rest of the cargo. They had the smaller shipment for the bird sanctuary that Owl Roost Island was so well-known for, and a ton of miscellaneous supplies for various merchants in town. A few would be meeting them at the docks to retrieve things there, which meant less trips for the crew to make on shore. Daichi himself would be going to meet with a certain antique seller to finally get some vases off of his hands. No one liked having so many fragile objects onboard, especially during the previous storm. He couldn’t wait to say good riddance to the ugly things.

“You still meeting with Akinori?” Saeko plopped one of the cases containing some smaller antiques onto the top of a stack filling a wooden cart. Daichi glared at her. “Oops. Didn’t sound like anything broke. It’s fine.” She waved a dismissive hand and stepped out of the way for Daichi to set down another. “Can I come?”

“Kuroo’s coming with me, and you’re going with your brother to deliver those farming supplies.”

“To the old guy that talks really slow?” Saeko frowned. “We’ll be there forever. Why can’t these people just pay someone to come grab this stuff from the docks for them?”

“They’re paying us, and that old guy likes you, so we might even get a tip.”

“Don’t make it sound so gross.”

“It wasn’t meant to be. He’s a nice gentleman, not a pervert.”

“All you men say that!” Saeko threw her arms up in the air, and Daichi shook his head and started off after some more boxes. Just as he was bending to lift the remaining one, a head of crazy brown hair popped up in front of him. He jumped, dropping and quickly catching the box before anything could break. How did these people always seem to pop out of nowhere every goddamn time?

“Captain!” Noya looked fired up, his hands grasping at bags of seeds and Asahi perched on his shoulder. Even as a bird, the man had a overwhelmed look about him. “Koutarou’s got the bird feed, and I’ve got this plant stuff. That’s all, right?”

“This job really doesn’t need two people, but yes, the feed and ‘plant stuff’ is all the sanctuary is getting this trip.”

Noya nodded, and darted around Daichi and down the ramp, sending a wave of acknowledgement over his shoulder when the captain yelled out a, “Don’t waste the whole day at that place!”

They’d both definitely be wasting the whole day at that place.

Noya thought birds were cool. Well, the big birds of prey, at least. Even with that being the case, his main reason for pushing to go see the sanctuary this visit was because Asahi was with them, and he knew how much Asahi liked going.

As for the crew’s boatswain, Koutarou had been born and raised on Owl Roost. He’d been
visiting the sanctuary since he was little, when it was just a couple of old coops. The man got overly excited every time he got to see the new rescued birds and how much the place had grown. They’d added so many environments and shelters to the area that it had become the island’s most popular attraction.

“I can’t wait to see Gloria!” Koutarou was grinning with excitement as the three left the Corvus behind in their tracks. He was pushing along a wheelbarrow full of bags of bird feed.

Noya looked up at him. “Who’s that? A bird handler?” He looked hopeful, for a moment. “Did Yui get a hot new co-worker that I didn’t know about?!?”

Koutarou laughed. “No! I mean, not that I know of. Gloria’s one of the owls! They rehabbed her when she had a broken wing.”

“Oh. So, not a hot bird handler, but maybe a hot bird-friend for Asahi?” He laughed out loud, and Asahi seemed to sink into himself a little. “Can you imagine what crow-owl babies would look like?!?”

Even though he wasn’t capable of human speech in his current form, Noya could practically hear Asahi begging a silent ‘Please stop.’

“I bet they’d be amazing! Oh, we go this way.” Noya had already been walking off in the wrong direction, and Koutarou redirected him down the right path. The shorter of the two managed to get turned around every time they came here, but Koutarou had the route to the sanctuary well-memorized. Past the docks, through the west side of the market, make a left after the tavern (“Wow! They remodeled the place!”), keep down that road until it came to a fork, and then follow the signs the rest of the way to the sanctuary.

The closer they got to the place, the more populated the path grew with foliage. There were wooden statues of various types of birds leading up to the front gates, and everything beyond them looked like some kind of very well-maintained forest.

Noya frowned at the sight of the gates. Closed. “Are you serious?! They’ll let us in anyway, right? They know we’re delivering this stuff!”

Koutarou pouted. He knew they’d be let inside long enough to handle their business, but whether or not they’d get to look around after that was another matter. Damn. And they’d both been looking forward to this for days now.

“Oh! Is that the feed?” They looked to their right, where a girl with short brown hair and a pair of dirty leather gloves was watching them, brown eyes all lit up. “You’re early!”

“Yui!” Asahi lifted from Noya’s shoulder as the sailor nearly leaped at her, arms outstretched and fully prepared for a hug, but the girl just stepped out of his way like it was second nature.

“The gates are locked. Obviously. I’ll let you in through the staff-only entrance!” Yui waved for them to follow, and led them through a door in a wooden fence to the side of the main gate. “How’s that sailing been going? I heard it was getting pretty rough out there for a few days.” She glanced over her shoulder with a grin. “Not that you boys can’t handle it.”

“Has it not been bad here?” Noya looked around at the towering trees as they followed her further in.

“Nope! We’ve had nothing but sunshine and the occasional breeze. Lucky us!” She brought them over to a supplies shed, where Koutarou dumped the feed bags. Noya set the bags of ‘plant
stuff he’d been carrying off on a shelf inside, and Yui proceeded to tell them that they were flowers for one of the new environments they’d been working on.

“You ever gonna stop making this place bigger?” Koutarou looked around in awe as he stepped back out from the shed. A few smaller birds tweeted as they passed by overhead.

Yui laughed. “Who knows. I think we’re just going to focus on keeping the ones we have now maintained, though. Unless we end up with too many birds.” She shrugged. “Did you want to take a look around? We’re closed today, but since you’re here, I can give you a tour.” She smiled brightly, and Noya jumped into the air.

“What do you think?!” He grinned, and she laughed again.

“Can we stop by the owls first?” The look that Koutarou gave her reminded her of a child begging for dessert before dinner.

“The owls are on the opposite side of the new area… But you know where they are, right?”

“Obviously!” Koutarou’s face brightened. “I’ll catch up with you, then! I’ll probably just look around the whole place anyway.” He paused. “If that’s okay.”

Yui nodded, and it wasn’t long before Koutarou was hurrying out of sight.

“What kind of birds are in this new part?” Noya asked, sending an expectant look up at Yui. “Something cool? Like falcons? Crows?” He nodded his head toward the one at his shoulder. “Any single lady crows?”

Asahi lowered his head and made a pathetic sound.

Yui shook her head with a smile. “Nope, sorry. This one’s for the hummingbirds.”

Noya shook her head with a smile. “Nope, sorry. This one’s for the hummingbirds.”

Yui frowned, but followed Yui nonetheless. They passed a lot of smaller birds on the way there. There were small ponds and bird baths along the way that one could see the occasional cardinal or jay take a quick dip in. At one point they passed an empty one, and Yui and Noya stopped to let Asahi make a little splash. Probably to get rid of the smell of sea water. He wasn’t as accustomed to it as the rest of the crew.

“That is by far the strangest crow I’ve ever seen.” Yui watched, and didn’t notice Asahi stiffen in the bird bath when he heard her. “I mean, they’re intelligent ones, you know. I’ve seen crows try to mimic humans before, but I’ve never seen one willingly stay aboard a ship.”

“That’s because Asahi is the best!” And also magic. Noya decided to leave that part out.

The crow shook and flapped himself dry before returning to Noya, this time sitting himself in his wild hair. Yui tried and failed to contain a snort at the sight.

“You’re the perfect nest, huh?”

Noya grinned, not at all embarrassed. In fact, he proudly pointed a thumb at himself. “Like I said, Asahi’s the best! And the best of the bests deserves the best of nests!”

Asahi opened his beak in something like a sigh, and Yui laughed again, then covered her mouth when she realized she’d startled a nearby flock.

“Do you two sleep like that?”
“It’s happened once or twice.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She managed to keep her voice down to a giggle this time, then pointed ahead at an area with freshly cut grass and some tiny trees that still had a while to grow before they could serve as decent homes to any birds. “That’s what we’re working on ahead. There are a few flowers planted already, but the ones you guys brought us should really make the place look even better.”

Noya looked ahead. He wasn’t all that interested in flowers, but he could feel Asahi shifting on top of his head. The crow was taking in the sights, clearly more taken in than Noya was.

“Some of the hummingbirds have already started relocating here from the section over where they used to be. I think they’ll like this, better.” She nodded, and Noya caught sight of a tiny, green bird hovering over some flowers. There were a few butterflies within sight, too.

Asahi gave a gentle squawking sound. One to announce that he very much liked the environment, but it was quiet as not to startle the smaller birds.

They both looked over as Yui gave a huff. “Sorry, I’ll be right back,” she said, starting over to the one of the infant trees. The wood meant to hold it straight for growing had somehow come untied from the plant.

Noya nodded, and Asahi hopped down from his head, landing in the soft grass below. He lifted his feet one by one, stepping in place a few times. The sailor bent down and laughed. “Softer than the ship deck, right? I’d sure as hell rather land on this than a hard floor after one of your long-ass flights, too.”

Asahi turned to look up at Noya.

“Most birds just hang out in trees, though.”

The bird lowered its head with another quiet caw.

“Sure would be easier if you could talk in this form too, you know,” Noya huffed.

Asahi looked from the sailor to where Yui was bent over, adjusting the tree.

“Yeah, yeah. People would be going crazy if they saw me with a talking bird.” He sat down in the grass and held a hand out down against it, which Asahi stepped into. He lowered his voice, sounding more serious than usual. “If I knew magic like your old partner, we wouldn’t have this problem. You could talk to me without having to strain yourself in your other form.”

The crow bent its head, nuzzling its beak against Noya’s wrist.

The sailor gave a short chuckle at the gesture. “Don’t get too affectionate on me, Bird Brain.”

Asahi looked up, ruffling his feathers a bit, and Noya laughed. The crow wanted so badly to point out that Yui had just said crows are intelligent animals.

“Okay!” Yui approached the two. “We can move onto the next area, if you two aren’t too comfortable here.”

Noya grinned up at her and raised his arm, allowing Asahi to climb back to his shoulder as he got to his feet.
“Ready!”

Just like he knew the way to the sanctuary by heart, Koutarou knew exactly where the owls could usually be found. He took in some of the new plants and shelters on the way, but barely slowed down because Gloria was waiting for him, dammit.

When he saw a certain grouping of trees and a small wooden shelter come into view, he slowed his pace, hardly even able to contain himself the closer he got. As he approached the shelter, he caught sight of a man bent over, one arm poised in the air with a hawk-owl perched upon his arm cover, and the other hand pushing a stopper into place to keep the door to the wooden structure open.

Koutarou’s eyes rested on the back of the man’s head. He always made a point to be friendly with the employees, but he’d never met this person before. Yui should have told him they hired another guy so he’d know to introduce himself! But then, before he could even open his mouth to do so, his eyes fell onto the owl accompanying the man.

“GLORIA!”

The man gave a startled little jump, but the bird seemed unbothered. He straightened and turned around, eyes narrowing on their new guest. The sanctuary was closed today, wasn’t it? Or did the owner forget to tell him something?

“Sorry! Um, I’m here for a delivery. Yui said I could look around when I was done, and I wanted to see how Gloria’s wing was doing, so…” Koutarou trailed off, his gaze now settled on this man instead of the owl. Hearing the sailor’s explanation, his gaze now held less suspicion, and more of a serene calmness. Or maybe just regular calmness. Or was that exhaustion? Either way, his face was pretty, but Koutarou didn’t say that out loud. That sort of curly black hair that framed it just right only added to it, and, despite knowing that he’d never met this person before, something felt oddly familiar about him. He couldn’t quite place why.

“Yui did?” The man glanced up at the owl on his arm, then looked back to Koutarou. “That’s fine, but please try to keep it down. Most of them are nocturnal.….” As he spoke, he found himself staring at that mess of black and white upon Koutarou’s head. He squinted somewhat, that look of suspicion returning, up until he realized that the sailor was doing the same to him. He pulled back from the other slightly. “…Yes?”

“Have we met?” Koutarou looked him up and down. “We haven’t, right? You weren’t here the last time I visited. I usually remember everyone here.”

“I haven’t been here long.”

“But you look so familiar!”

“Please lower your voice.”

“Sorry!” Koutarou covered his mouth, then slowly lowered his hand back down, along with the volume of his voice. “But you really do. Like, I feel like I saw you just yesterday.”

The stranger lifted a finger to stroke through Gloria’s feathers, his tone definite. “That would
be impossible, since I was off the island yesterday.”

“Me too!”

The man stiffened. His gaze remained on the owl, who cocked her head at Koutarou.

“But we were out there for days, and we didn’t pass any other ships or anything.”

“I’m sure you’re confusing me with someone else.” He pulled his finger back from the bird, who then lifted off from his arm, taking flight into the trees.

Koutarou’s jaw dropped. “Her wing is all better?!” It had been months already, so that should have been a given. “That’s great! Aaw, but I didn’t even get to pet her yet…”

The other watched him carefully, then turned to the path beside the shelter. Koutarou followed, much to his dismay.

“Hey! Wait! I was going to catch up with Yui for a tour, but maybe you can show me around, instead! Are there any new owls? I think one had eggs last time I was here. They’ve hatched, right? How many were there again? Four?”

My god this guy talked a lot. “I wasn’t really expecting any tours today…” The bird keeper came to a stop as a tiny bird hopped across his path, pecking at little seeds here and there. Then there was an ‘oof’ and the feeling of something - someone - crashing against his back, and he stumbled, startling the bird so that it flew away. He jerked his head around, leveling Koutarou with a very unamused look.

“Sorry!” The sailor stepped back, hands raised in the air in front of him. “Huh. I thought your hair would smell like flowers or something, but it kinda smells like fish.”

Dark eyes narrowed on Koutarou again. “I’m sorry if I offend you.”

“No! No! I mean, I’m always out at sea, so I’m used to it!” Koutarou shook his head. “I don’t think you smell bad! Just like you’ve been in the water a lot, is all.” He offered an uneasy smile, but the other didn’t seem any less miffed. “I mean, I can’t talk, right? I just got off the ship, so I probably smell like salt water! I don’t know if I smell like fish, though. I guess it’s all kinda the same, huh? And we’re so close to the water, people probably don’t even mind!” He laughed. “They’d probably just think you were like, a merman or something!”

The other froze momentarily, his eyes widening somewhat before he turned his head and continued down the path. “I highly doubt that.”

Koutarou watched his back get further away. There was something about the way he’d reacted that seemed… off?

He bounded forward, catching up to the man’s left. “Well, it was just a joke, obviously!” He grinned and leaned forward as he walked, trying to get a better look at the other’s expression. Still unamused. No surprise there. There was a small area of skin below the man’s left eye that Koutarou hadn’t noticed until he got this close, though. There was no discoloration, but it wasn’t as smooth as the rest. Not quite rough, but a little bumpy, maybe? A skin condition? Even he wasn’t about to point out something like that.

He tried for another laugh. “I mean, who would see a person who clearly has two legs and go, ‘Oh, look, a mermaid!’?”
Keeping calm was proving to be a struggle for the bird keeper as he muttered, “I can’t imagine.”

Koutarou bobbed his head. “Right? So, um. You didn’t answer me about the owl babies.”

The man might have seen relieved in the change of topic if it weren’t simply for the fact that Koutarou was still talking. “There are four, yes, but they’re likely asleep right now, so--”

The sailor’s eyes lit up, and he cut the other off. “How big did they get? Can any of them fly yet? I really can’t see them? Oh, I guess their nest is up in a tree, huh? That does make it pretty hard to get a good look.” He looked a little defeated. “Darn.”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience.” He didn’t really sound sorry. “But I’m sure that Yui would be more than happy to show you new birds on the other side, if you’re interested.”

Please leave. Please--

“But the owls are my favorites!”

Just his luck.

“There are other not-nocturnal ones, right? Like Gloria? Or maybe you could call Gloria back down here so I can give her a pet.”

“They aren’t show animals. We don’t tell them what to do when it isn’t necessary.”

Koutarou nodded. “Yeah, yeah, of course. Sorry.” He was still walking uncomfortably close to the other.

The bird keeper kept trying to think of an excuse to get away from the visitor. He wasn’t antisocial, but this conversation was not all that pleasant of one in his opinion. “I should really go clean the next shed out. If you’d like to look around on your own, then feel free to do so.”

Koutarou suddenly didn’t seem responsive. He had been eying a spot between the other’s neck and shoulder, eyes narrowing intently on a single, black speck. It was shiny, like a small beetle, maybe. He actually didn’t know anything about bugs. Maybe it was actually some kind of ant. He didn’t think to give any sort of warning when he reached out to give it a flick. The spot didn’t move, but as Koutarou’s finger brushed against the edge of the man’s shirt, the fabric lifted slightly, and he caught a glimpse of more black spots.

And white ones.

The other pulled back, and a hand shot up to cover the black and white patch. His eyes narrowed on Koutarou, who let out a long, loud gasp.

Not beetles.

Scales.

“I DID see you yesterday!”

“No, you didn’t.” He picked up the pace, pulling himself away from Koutarou’s side.

“Yes I did!” Koutarou rushed in front of the other, stopping him in his tracks. “But you have legs now!”

The man drew in a sharp breath, and this time, glared at Koutarou. “I don’t know what you’re
“Augh, and no one believed me when I said I saw you! And here you are!”

“Please keep your voice down,” he repeated.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Koutarou’s expression was an amazing contrast with the other’s. Absolute glee versus absolutely done with this conversation. “But you’re the second one I’ve met this week! I won’t tell anyone, okay? It’s just really cool that you’re here, in my favorite place!” He outstretched a hand with a grin. “I’m Koutarou, by the way.”

The supposed merman looked down at the hand, then back up at the sailor, still just as fed up as before. He began to speak, but was interrupted by another.

“Keiji!” Yui waved from down the path behind them. “I see you’ve met our biggest fan! Did you get to see Gloria yet, Koutarou?” Noya was following close behind, albeit completely distracted by the animals flying around the treetops.

Koutarou waved back. “I did!” He turned his attention back to Yui’s coworker, who looked just about ready to die right then and there. “Nice to meet you, Keiji!”

“It’s strange that he just disappeared like that.”

A petite girl with blonde hair, messily tied off in a side ponytail, was standing on her toes, struggling to push a pile of clean sheets onto one of the higher shelves of the storage room. Suga reached over from behind to put them there himself.

“Yes, it is….” Suga tried to hide the knowing feeling that was trying to creep into his tone as he spoke. Ever since the Corvus crew had taken Kenma from the island of Morrigan’s Coast, he hadn’t seen any sign of his bartender. Neighbors told him that they hadn’t seen the man come or go from his house in days. If he ran away to avoid getting caught, it didn’t seem like he bothered to take any possessions with him. There were still things of his locked up in offices at the inn, not that any of it gave the innkeep any clues as to what they were planning to do with the merman.

Kuroo had made a comment about some black market dealings when they were here. He may have been joking, but Suga had heard rumors from guests throughout the years about skinning mermaid tails for clothing and purses. He’d also heard ones about slaughtering and preparing mermaids as some kind of rare delicacy, but that one he was less inclined to believe.

The girl, Hitoka, pulled out two pillows from a lower shelf and held them close as she turned to face Suga, worry etched into her features. “Do you think he’s alright? What if he got involved in something dangerous?”

He definitely was involved in something dangerous, Suga thought. “His neighbors have been concerned, too. I’m sure they’ve already contacted the authorities.” Suga removed a stack of hand towels from another higher shelf and handed them to Hitoka. “He won’t be coming back here either way, though. I was planning on firing him the day he disappeared.”

Suga thought back to the tiny, cramped barrel they’d kept Kenma in. “He was treating a guest poorly.”

“That’s awful! And I thought he was so nice, too…” The girl frowned and looked down at the flooring. “What will you do about a replacement?”

“I’ve met with a few people already.” Suga mustered up a smile. “I think I know who I’ll be going with, but I’m giving it another day. The inn can handle a week without an open bar.”

Hitoka nodded, and leaned her head to the side to see the man better as he stacked some more towels onto the pile, which was now close to towering just over her. “A guest asked for an extra quilt, too.”

Suga eyed the stack she was holding and laughed. “I don’t think you can carry that much. Tell me the room and I’ll handle it.”

She did so, and then headed off down the inn’s halls to disperse the supplies amongst the rooms. Once she was out of sight and her footsteps could no longer be heard, Suga’s smile fell, and he let out a long, tired breath. The men disappearing was probably better than them coming after him or his guests, but it didn’t sit well with him, either. Surely they’d just run off and find another place to hide their captives.

He pulled a clean quilt down from a shelf and closed the door with his foot on the way out, pulling his smile back on for any guests he’d happen to pass by. The expression usually came so naturally, but these last few days had been different. He kept thinking about the time Daichi told him, ‘You can’t save everyone, Sugawara.’ He wanted this to be a case where he could. He wanted to know that the crew and Kenma wouldn’t have any troubles after they left, and he wanted to know that those men wouldn’t just repeat this situation elsewhere where he couldn’t intervene.

He knocked on the door to the guest’s room, giving them a warm greeting and an equally warm blanket when they answered. The woman thanked him with a grateful nod, and he started back down the hall toward his office at the front of the inn. Helping people here was the most he could do for now. It was why he took over the family business in the first place.

*If only it felt as satisfying as usual,* he was thinking just when the bell at the entrance gave a ding. Suga’s hand paused over the office door and he turned to the new guest. Just when he was about to tell them that there were no open rooms for the night, the other spoke up.

“Koushi!”

The man standing there offered a wave and a smile with half-lidded eyes. A smile that Suga didn’t trust in the least.

Suga knew that spiky mess of obscenely bright red hair anywhere. “Satori…” He acknowledged him, but seemed far from pleased by his presence.

“What’s that tone for?” The visitor stepped up to the counter, smile not fading. “I won’t keep you long. Just looking for some information, is all.”

“And what information would a *pirate* want from me?” Suga snapped.

The other laughed and leaned over the counter, resting an arm over the top while he eyed the innkeeper. “Some people we have business with went missing, and I thought you might know where to, is all.”
Suga narrowed his eyes. “And what makes you think I would know this?”

“Ha! Koushi, don’t act like you don’t hear *everything* in this place. Your inn’s the most popular joint in town! Hell, if you don’t know anything, your bartender probably does.” Satori’s smile morphed into a knowing smirk, one that distorted his entire face, one eye squinting while the other looked almost as if it were bulging out of his head in contrast. “Know where I can find him?”

“No.” Suga’s response was quick and final. “But if you find out, I’d love to know that, myself.”

The pirate watched him carefully for a moment, then straightened. “Hmmm, then he really is missing, huh? And you’re saying you have no idea why?”

“I wish I did.” Suga lied. Well, mostly-lied. He was assuming a lot of things here, after all.

Satori sighed. “My captain sure would be pissed if he found out you were lying to us, Koushi. Why don’t you cut the goody-goody act for a few seconds?”

“I’m not acting,” the innkeeper said matter-of-factly. “And I’m not lying. A few days ago, I had a bartender, and now I don’t. Now, if that’s all you came here for, then the exit’s right behind you.”

Satori shook his head, and then shrugged. “Fine, fine. But if we find anything *fishy* in that wine cellar of yours, there’s gonna be a problem.” He paused, then corrected himself. “Or there’ll be more of a problem if we *don’t*.”

Suga struggled to keep his gaze calm and collected. Great. So it wasn’t just a black market deal, but a black market deal among pirates?

“Where’s the merman, Koushi?”

There was a pause, and Suga began to open his mouth, once again to deny that he knew anything, but a cold metallic feeling at his throat stopped him. Satori stood there, arm outreached and the tip of his newly withdrawn blade just touching the innkeeper’s skin. That twisted face of his had never made Suga feel more uncomfortable.

“We’ve already got men flooding your bar,” he informed him, “And if you don’t want them bothering your guests, you’ll do us all a favor and cooperate.”

Maybe Daichi was right to be concerned, after all.

Normally, the walk home from the sanctuary would be filled with only the sound of his own footsteps, save for the occasional passerby. Now, however, there was another following close behind, and Keiji was resisting with every fiber of his being the urge to go off on his new stalker.

Noya and Asahi had long since left the bird haven, and likely already returned to the Corvus. Koutarou, however, was walking not-so-sneakily behind his new friend. Well, he’d like for him to be his friend. Keiji would much rather climb up a tree and get pecked at by a territorial falcon of some sort.
He halted in his tracks and turned to face the sailor for a fifth time. “Please stop following me.”

“But!” Koutarou pleaded. “I just want to ask you some stuff! I was really good, I didn’t tell anyone back there what you are, just like I promised!” He looked very proud of himself for that. “We can stop and talk at the tavern, and I’ll be really quiet!”

Keiji doubted that.

“I’ll even buy you a drink, okay?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh. I guess drinking and swimming isn’t a good combination, huh?”

The merman looked at him with disbelief. The conclusions that this guy came to were... really something.

“We don’t have to drink, then. Can we just talk? Please? You don’t have to answer anything that makes you uncomfortable, but at least let me ask.”

This entire meeting had already made him uncomfortable. How was discussing his personal life in a tavern supposed to help? “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to decline.”

“But aren’t you looking for Kenma?”

“Who?”

“Oh.” Koutarou frowned. “Nevermind...”

Keiji raised a brow, then turned to continue on his way. Koutarou followed again, and the merman heaved an exasperated sigh.

“You were pretty far out when I saw you,” the sailor rambled on. “I can’t believe you swam this far and got here so soon! Don’t you stop to rest?”

“You really aren’t going to drop this, are you?”

Koutarou shook his head, and Keiji came to another stop.

“Alright,” he said, bringing a hand over his face. “I’ll go.”

“What?”

“The tavern. Anything to keep you from following me home.”

“Don’t you live in the ocean?”

Keiji could only stare at him. Alcohol or not, this was going to be a long night.

The tavern was crowded, which meant that there would be plenty of distractions to keep the guests from paying attention to their conversation. At least, that would usually be the case, but now that they were there, Keiji couldn’t help but worry with how much Koutarou’s goddamn hair stood out in the place.

They found a small table at the far side of the establishment, and the first thing that Keiji
asked when they sat down was that Koutarou would *please refrain from using the m-word.*

He hadn’t so far, and he hadn’t planned to, but Koutarou nodded regardless. Even he understood that much, especially with how they’d been handling the situation with Kenma.

“Do you live on the island, then?”

“I do.”

“Like this?”

“Like this.”

Koutarou pouted. “But being in the water seems so much cooler.”

Keiji shrugged, and watched the sailor down an impressive amount of beer in one gulp. He could only hope that he’d still refrain from saying too much out loud if he got intoxicated. This was such a bad idea.

“How do you have legs now?”

“You don’t know?”

“What?”

“What?”

They stared at one another, both equally confused, though it showed more in Koutarou’s face than Keiji’s. The merman seemed almost less expressive than Kenma at times, his eyes showing just enough emotion to make an expression readable, but no more than that. So many of his expressions so far were borderline deadpan, if not completely.

And then, those dark eyes fixed themselves on Koutarou’s hair. “I just thought…”

“Huh?” Koutarou looked up. He couldn’t see his own hair like that, but he still managed to put it together. “Oh! No, this is. No, no.” He shook his head and laughed. “Did you think I was a m-- I mean. I’m human, you know.”

“It’s just a common trait among us, so I assumed. A lot of us have hair that matches the lower halves.” Keiji lifted his own mug to his lips, only taking a small sip. He didn’t even like beer. “That, and I thought I felt…” He looked down. Surely he was just imagining things. “Nevermind. I’m sorry.”

Well, that explained Kenma’s weird-ass hair. Koutarou laughed. “Why would I be so interested in you if I was like that too, though?”

Keiji nearly choked on that tiny sip, and Koutarou jumped.

“N-No! I didn’t mean interested like that!”

There were a few things that ‘interested’ could have meant in his situation. Some were more of a concern to Keiji than others, but Koutarou *had* to go and make it even more awkward. He wiped at his mouth. “It’s fine....” He set the mug back down, now wanting less to do with it than before. “That hair can’t be natural for a human, though.”

“Well. I mean. No, I guess.”
“You guess?”

Now Koutarou was the uncomfortable one. “So, um, that area on your face…?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

Keiji noted the way he avoided the topic, but didn’t push it further. “Also scales.”

“Can all of you do that? Changing like this?”

“Yes, but most don’t ever try it.”

“Why not?”

“It isn’t easy.” And he’d leave it at that.

Koutarou pouted again, but then his eyes lit up when Keiji said, “Can I ask you something, now?”

The sailor nodded, and Keiji rested his hands on the table in front of him.

“You said I’m the second one you’ve met this week. Why couldn’t you just ask the other these questions, instead of dragging me here?”

“He doesn’t talk very much.”

“And I seemed more open to conversation, in your opinion…?” He was pretty sure he’d done the opposite of that.

“You’re giving me more than two-word responses. That’s something!” Koutarou nodded and leaned back in his chair. “And I don’t even know if he can do this sort of thing? You just said not everyone tries it, right? So it’s better to ask you.”

“But you didn’t know that beforehand.”

“Hmmm. Yeah, that’s true. I also couldn’t stop thinking about you after I saw you in the water. Maybe that’s it.” He nodded again, and Keiji had to wonder if this guy ever thought his words through before opening his mouth. “So, why birds?”

He just jumped from one topic to the next, didn’t he? “Why do you like them?”

“What? That’s obvious! They’re amazing!” Koutarou grinned. “Can you imagine? Having wings? And the babies are so cute!”

Keiji nodded in agreement, expression not quite at anything that Koutarou would call a smile, but less judgmental or irritated than before, at the very least. “It’s the same for me.”

“You wish you could fly, too?”

“No, that’s… not what I meant. Just that I think they’re amazing, as well.” He absentmindedly ran a finger along the edge of his mug. “They’re a lot different from the types of creatures that I grew up around.”

“But they’re kinda the same, right? If you’re on the floor here, the birds fly over you, and if you’re on the floor underwater, then the fish swim over you!”

“Yes, but if you’re underwater, you can also swim. Being on the same level as the fish is still
a possibility. It isn’t with birds.”

“Ooooooh.” Koutarou looked amazed by the simple - and obvious - explanation. “You make birds sound so mysterious.”

“I suppose.”

The two went back and forth for a short while, conversing about birds and the interesting types of fish Koutarou had seen out at sea, all of which the sailor was happy to find out that Keiji knew the names of. They’d long abandoned the topics Koutarou had initially brought them there to discuss, but it didn’t seem to matter. The merman was more relaxed discussing these things rather than merfolk out in the open, and... well, Koutarou wasn’t all that difficult to please.

At some point during a conversation of “What would an owl-crow baby look like?”, Keiji’s finger paused on the metal of the mug, and his eyes settled on something across the room. Koutarou took notice, and turned to look over his shoulder, but Keiji quickly reached across the tiny table, taking Koutarou by the chin and yanking his attention back toward himself. “Don’t,” he said, and he averted his eyes from the distraction. They were now on the sailor in front of him, and he realized what he was doing. He retracted his hand and got to his feet. “Don’t look that way. Follow me.”

“What? Where are we going?” Koutarou got to his feet, and Keiji gave him a final warning glance before setting off through the crowd of people.

“Just hurry, and please keep your voice down.”

Koutarou obeyed, and followed the merman along the far wall of the tavern until they were out of the building. As he was led down the road, through an alley and into the market, he noticed Keiji keeping his head down the whole way. He wanted to ask why, but he kept his mouth shut, just as he was told.

It wasn’t until they were a ways away from the market, on a wooded road lined with a few cottages here and there, that Keiji finally seemed to relax somewhat.

“What…” Koutarou began with one word, waiting for the okay to continue. When Keiji looked up and didn’t shush him, he took it as permission. “...was that about? Are you running from someone?”

“Not everyone’s as friendly to my kind as you seem to be, Koutarou.” Keiji looked down the path. It was quiet, much nicer than being in that tavern. It would also be incredibly easy for anyone who did pass by to hear what they were saying, which wasn’t so nice. He seemed at a loss for what to do now that they were here. He certainly wasn’t about to bring Koutarou home with him.

Koutarou thought about Keiji’s words, then he thought about Kenma and wondered if the Keiji knew anyone who’d gone through something like the half-blondie just had. He wondered if Keiji had ever been through something like that. “Is that why you’re here? He wouldn’t have known what you are when you look like this, right?”

Keiji sighed and watched Koutarou from the corners of his eyes. “You should probably go back to your ship, or wherever it is you have.”

“You could have just left me in the tavern and ran.”

“You would have made a scene.”
Well, this guy sure figured him out fast enough. Then again, considering how they were here because Koutarou fucking stalked the guy, it shouldn’t have been much of a surprise.

“Well, you be alright, though? Is it safe for you to walk home alone?”

“I don’t need an escort,” Keiji assured him. “I’m fine, Koutarou. Thank you.”

The sailor frowned, unconvinced. He wasn’t even able to appreciate the fact that Keiji was already beginning to seem more comfortable around him. Sort of.

The merman noted his expression. “Well… thank you for the drink.”

“You don’t even like that stuff, do you?”

“Not particularly.”

Koutarou sighed, mumbling a small ‘sorry,’ and Keiji shook his head.

“I really should go, though. And so should you.” Keiji started forward, but then paused. “It was... nice meeting you?” It was worded as a question, like it was some formality he wasn’t sure he should really go through with or not.

Whatever the case, and despite the lack of enthusiasm he would’ve liked to hear in Keiji’s words, Koutarou found himself smiling again. “Yeah...” He nodded his head, and as the merman finally turned away and continued down the path, Koutarou waved. It would go unseen, but the gesture could practically be heard in his voice as he called out, “Yeah! You too! Be careful out there!”

And he bit his tongue after that. There were still so many questions he’d wanted to ask, one of which being, ‘Can I see you again?’

But he hadn’t asked, and now he was standing there, watching a person that he knew wasn’t really human walk further and further away. A merman on land, huh?

He didn’t even catch himself running his hands through his black and white hair.
The Hunt For Apple Pie

Chapter by ChosenOfKagami (kagapop), kagapop

Chapter Summary

Enjoy the lack of bloodshed while you still can.

“Is he… okay…?” Kenma watched the man in question from his barrel before turning to Shouyou, who shrugged.

“He’ll snap back soon. This just happens sometimes.”

Off in the corner of the cabin was Koutarou, head against the wall and mumbling something incoherent to himself. Whoever spooked Keiji at the tavern had him worried for Kenma, so he came back to the Corvus as soon as he could. When he first got there, he seemed relieved. Happy, even. But now?

Now he couldn’t stop thinking about all the things he should have asked instead of getting side-tracked by how great it’d be to fly or see some baby owls. He should have asked more questions about the person in the tavern. Should he watch out for them? Shouldn’t he have asked Keiji if he knew about any men smuggling merfolk in barrels? Or was he not supposed to bring that up for Kenma’s sake? Was he allowed to bring Keiji or the tavern thing up to Kenma? Why didn’t he think about all of this before running back here in the first place?

“Stupid…” Mumble mumble. “So stupid…”

Shouyou frowned.

“Should you… do something?” ‘You.’ Not ‘we.’ Kenma had a feeling there was nothing he could accomplish here, even if he had the will to.

“It’s practically impossible if we don’t know what’s upsetting him.” The two were speaking in whispers now. “And he won’t say anything. He just keeps mumbling to himself this time…”

Koutarou sure as hell didn’t want to keep mumbling to himself. He wanted to blurt out all the details right off the bat. He was just talking one-on-one with a beautiful merman and he just let him walk away without asking anything of any real value. After all that work trying to get him to go to the tavern, too.

“UGH!”

Both Shouyou and Kenma froze at the sudden outburst, and their eyes followed as Koutarou turned and stormed up the steps to the cabin’s exit.

“We’re back!” The friendly greeting came from Kuroo, who had just entered through the door before Koutarou could stomp past him. The man’s eyes followed as the boatswain marched out of sight, then he pointed a thumb his way. “Yikes. What happened this time?” He turned to the two at the bottom of the steps, both of which shrugged in response.
“He came here, looked all excited, then got all mopey on us.” Shouyou huffed. “Is everyone back now?”

“Just the captain and I. No idea what’s taking the others so long.” Kuroo came down the steps, and the others noticed that he had a small box in his hands. “Maybe it’s ‘cause that old farmer they’re delivering to talks so damn slow.”

“I haven’t seen Iwaizumi or Doctor Takeda around either, though.” Shouyou eyed the box, trying to pinpoint why it looked so familiar. There was a faded flower design painted on the sides.

“The doc’s getting more medical supplies or something.” Kuroo pulled up a stool and plopped down in front of them. “And Hajime’s probably just trying to distract himself. I doubt he’s looking forward to taking Kenma home.”

Kenma looked up, and Shouyou cocked his head to the side.

“You said your home’s north of here, right, Kenma?”

The merman nodded.

“In other words, past siren territory, right?”

“I haven’t seen many in the area before….”

“Ooooh!” Shouyou blurted. “But that’s around where we saw that one the last time, isn’t it?” He paused. “Well, where Iwaizumi and Bokuto saw it…” He seemed almost dejected at that.

Kuroo nodded. “We’ve never had issues in that area aside from that, though. Even Kenma says it’s safe.”

“I didn’t say safe.”

The humans both looked at Kenma, who gave them a blank look.

“I got captured, didn’t I?”

“Right…” Kuroo shook his head. “Pirates or whatever aside, it’s mostly safe.” He smirked before adding a, “Probably.”

“Iwaizumi will be crazy on-guard though, huh?” Shouyou looked up at Kuroo, who nodded. “Even if there aren’t any sirens, it’s not that far from where we saw the sea serpent!”

“We won’t be going that far out though. At least, I don’t think so.” Kuroo crossed his arms and raised a brow at Kenma. “Are we? You haven’t mentioned having any sea serpents for pets or anything.” He pulled open the lid to the box as he spoke.

“No one keeps those as pets.” Kenma’s eyes found themselves on what was in Kuroo’s hands, then lit up a little at the smell that came from inside.

Shouyou gave another loud gasp and jumped to his feet. “Kuroo brought cookies!”

Kuroo grinned, and brought a finger to his lips to shush the other. “Don’t let the chef know. I wouldn’t want him feeling jealous that we stopped by the baker.”

“I don’t think he would,” Shouyou said, reaching in and retrieving two cookies, one of which he handed off to Kenma. “Maybe he’d even like it if you brought him some!”
Kuroo shrugged, then watched as Kenma gave the cookie a curious little sniff. He snorted at the act, and the merman shot him a glare before taking a bite.

It was coated with sugar crystals, and the flavor reminded him faintly of the apples Shouyou had him try the other day. It was still warm and soft, too. The look on his face as he took another bite told Kuroo and Shouyou that he liked it.

“Apple pie cookies?” Shouyou asked, and was given a nod from Kuroo. “We should ask the chef to make a real apple pie!”

“I don’t know if we have the supplies for that.”

“Apple... pie...?”

Kuroo and Shouyou were both grinning now at Kenma’s sudden interest. Chef Aone had prepared chicken pot pies for one of their meals during the voyage so far, and Kenma was having trouble visualizing something like that having apples in it. But, if it tasted anything like this cookie, he was willing to try it.

“Well, if the chef can’t manage to whip one up, we can always stop by the bakery again tomorrow.”

Shouyou gave Kuroo a baffled look. “Aren’t we leaving tonight?”

“Supposedly Akinori has some more antique junk he needs shipped to Kingston, but he won’t have it ’til tomorrow.” Kuroo shrugged and bit off half a cookie for himself. “Crazy expensive stuff, too. The buyer’s gotta be loaded, and we don’t have any other major shipments left, anyway.”

“None?” Shouyou swallowed the remains of his own cookie and reached over for the box, which Kuroo quickly pulled away from the kid with a smirk.

“Save some for the others. And no, none that anyone’s counting on, anyway. The schedule got a little screwed up when we rushed out of Suga’s place.” He ignored Shouyou’s groaning when he handed a second cookie to Kenma. “We’ve got a ton of stuff to trade and sell off for ourselves from other dealings, but we’ll get way more for it in Kingston than we would here.”

Shouyou leaned toward Kenma, hoping to get even a little piece of the cookie, but Kenma just pulled it away for himself. Shouyou made a pathetic noise before looking back to Kuroo. “How many days here, then?”

“Up to the captain, but it sounds like we’ll leave as soon as we get the merch from Akinori.”

“We’RE STAYING?!”

All three of them jumped, and Kuroo even mumbled a, ‘That was quick,’ before looking over his shoulder. He could just see Koutarou’s head of stupid hair (like he had room to talk) poking out from the other side of the cabin door.

Koutarou was grinning now, as if he hadn’t just been in any kind of depressed state moments ago. Kenma didn’t understand how that was possible, but the other two seemed only mildly off put by it.

“Got over that one fast, huh?” Kuroo remarked, and Koutarou only stuck his tongue out before vanishing from sight once again. Before the first mate even had the chance to face forward again,
Shouyou was rushing right past him with, as he would put it, a *fwoosh*.

“Be right back! I’m gonna get Kenma a pie!”

“No one’s gonna bake a pie fast enough for you to be right-- oh, forget it. He’s gone.”

“You guys really don’t have to go out of your way for me.” Kenma finished off what remained of his cookie and shifted, trying to get more comfortable in the barrel. “I only expected you to take me home…”

“Is it going to be an issue that it’s put off another day?” Kuroo looked down at the barrel with a frown. “You can’t be--”

“Comfortable. I know. I’ve gotten out to stretch a lot, so it’s fine.”

“On the ship. Wouldn’t you rather stretch in the water?”

“I don’t wanna keep up with you guys when you’re sailing, and there are too many people around to do it when you’re stopped.” Kenma averted his eyes to the floor.

“Are all merfolk this lazy?”

“Hmph.”

“Don’t go in there.”

Shouyou had his hand poised just over the kitchen entrance when he heard Tobio behind him. He looked over, and the taller deck hand was clenching a broom and shaking his head from side to side. Shouyou glanced at the door, then back to his friend, and raised a questioning brow.

“Souffles,” Tobio said, and suddenly Shouyou understood. The smaller of the two dropped his hand from the door and took a step back. “I got chased out with a butcher’s knife when I went in.” Tobio looked off into space like he was having some horrible flashback from all of three minutes ago.

Supposedly the slightest tremor could ruin a souffle, or so they’d been reminded several times by the crew’s doctor when the chef was attempting this feat in the past. Even when they weren’t sailing, there were still small waves here and there at the docks, and people were running all over the place both above and below deck. Preparing the dish had to be challenging in this environment no matter what, but Chef Aone kept trying nonetheless. No one knew why. He never told them. But then, he never said much to begin with. He’d just silently stare down at people with this unintentionally-intimidating gaze, but then make up for it by sharing his amazing cooking (probably made with love or some shit). He was much kinder than he seemed at first glance.

As long as you didn’t barge into his kitchen while he was attempting the impossible souffle.

“Do you think he has a bet with someone?” Shouyou asked as he and Tobio got further from the kitchen.

“Maybe he’s challenging himself?”
“Is there some kind of ‘Best Chef’ award for pulling that off on a ship?”

Tobio shrugged.

“I’ve heard that souffles come easy to him when he’s not on board, though. I guess it really is the waves.”

“ Heard from who?”

“The chef.”

“The chef talks to you?” The chef didn’t talk to anyone. What the hell?

Tobio looked at Shouyou in pure shock, and the latter simply nodded and said, “Sometimes.” Apparently it wasn’t just Kenma that opened up easily to this shorty.

The taller boy went back to sweeping, keeping his distance well away from the kitchen.

“How much longer you gonna be with that?” Shouyou asked, keeping his voice down for the chef’s sake, even though they were far enough away from the doors already.

“Why?” Tobio looked annoyed at the question.

“Kuroo’s keeping Kenma company now. I wanna go into town and get him a pie.”

“Then go get him a pie.”

“Come with me!”

“Why should I?!”

Cue another staring contest.

Minutes later, Shouyou was humming and carelessly walking down the streets of the market with a disgruntled Tobio at his side.

“We’re going to get a pie,” Shouyou began to sing, and Tobio groaned. “And tomorrow I’ll see the birds, I’m gonna watch ‘em fly! And when one poops on Kageyama, I will definitely cry…” He paused and looked up as they walked, trying to think of a way to finish that part of the song. “…from laughing!”

“Shut up!” Kageyama swung an arm to grab at the boy’s head, but Shouyou was quick to avoid it. He was laughing as they came up to the bakery, and the two were soon calmed by the smell of fresh pies and other sweets.

The calm wore off when they saw who was behind the counter upon entering.

Shouyou pouted. “Aaw, why can’t the nice one be here instead?!”

Behind the wooden barrier, a blonde boy hardly any older than the two of them straightened. He was holding a tin of muffins, and his eyes narrowed behind his glasses at the sight of the sailors.

“You lot aren’t going to give me a break today, are you?” Kei Tsukishima sounded far from pleased to see the two.
“Where’s your brother?!” Shouyou put his hands on the counter and hopped, trying to get a better look into the back of the bakery. The blonde stood in front of him specifically to block his view.

“He’s out. If you want something, hurry up. Your friend with the rooster hair pestered me enough earlier, and I don’t really want to deal with any more of you.”

Shouyou and Tobio both glared at the baker, but eventually the former spoke up. “We want an apple pie!”

“We don’t have any.”

“Well make one!”

Kei offered a blank look. “Do you know how long that takes?”

Shouyou puffed his cheeks and continued to stare at Kei, as if doing so angrily enough would somehow conjure up a warm apple pie. Meanwhile, Tobio was already taking it upon himself to look through the pies that were available and on display.

“There’s an apple pie right here,” he said, pointing to one behind the glass case.

Shouyou pushed away from the counter and hurried to his side, then frowned at the pie in question. “Kageyama, that’s cherry!”

Kei set the muffins down on another shelf with a snicker.

“Well it’s a pie, isn’t it?!"

“But we came here for apple!”

“Well the evil-brother already said they don’t have any!”

Kei’s amused expression quickly faded.

“Don’t you have anything else with apples?!” Shouyou turned away from the pie case and went back to huffing up at Kei.

“Your friend just bought the last of the cookies. We have turnovers, and that’s it.”

Shouyou’s face lit up. “That’s practically pie!”

“Whatever you say.” Kei rolled his eyes, and Shouyou requested three apple turnovers. He went to fetch them from their shelf, and set them down in a small bag on the counter. “Twenty pieces.”

“That’s expensive,” Tobio huffed.

Kei leveled him with a look of pure irritation. “If I give them to you for ten, will you leave sooner?!”

The sailors exchanged glances, then nodded.

“Then ten.” Kei held out a hand, waiting for the payment. “And you’d better leave as soon as you pay me. After your friend and that guy with the idiotic merman obsession, I’d like to get some peace and quiet for a few minutes.”
The two had each gathered up five coins, and just as Tobio was about to drop them into Kei’s hand, he pulled back. “Merman obsession?”

Kei scowled, motioning with his fingers for Tobio to hand him the money already. Tobio didn’t flinch. “He was just here before you two barged in. Asking if I’ve seen any mermen around.” He rolled his eyes. “Like anyone really believes in that sort of thing.”

Tobio and Shouyou exchanged looks yet again, then both leaned over the counter, closing in on Kei. The blonde quickly leaned back.

“What did he look like?!” Shouyou demanded. “And where did he go? Did he say his name?”

Kei’s eyes narrowed before he said, “Twenty.”

“What?”

“If you want information and the turnovers, it’ll cost you twenty.”

“But we don’t have twenty pieces on us!”

Kei shrugged, then snatched the ten from Tobio’s hand and pushed the bag of sweets across the counter toward them. He went back to tending to the other displays, and both boys left the shop with their heads hanging low.

They started back for the ship, dispirited, but then Tobio stopped in the middle of the road. He looked around at the surrounding shops, then asked, “Do you think that guy went asking people in the other businesses, too?”

Shouyou perked up, then jumped to pull Tobio’s face closer to his level. “Kageyama! That’s genius! Let’s ask all the shop owners until we find something!” Hopefully for free, if they were lucky.

“It’s not too much trouble, is it?” Daichi asked, looking up from his desk at the feathered man across from him. “I know you would probably rather have a break after all that flying around.”

Asahi shook his head. “I can’t say no to you now. If there’s a chance that Suga might be in danger, then I’d like to do what I can to help.”

Daichi sighed and leaned his head into his clasped hands. They were in the captain’s quarters now, and he still couldn’t shake of the feeling that someone might go after the innkeeper. “I just want to know that he’s still there, safe and sound. If there’s anything wrong, don’t try to interfere. Just come back and relay what you see.”

Asahi breathed in a nervous breath, then nodded.

“I’m sorry. We ask too much of you.”

The familiar shook his head again. “You don’t. I used to aid a witch, remember? Do you have any idea what sort of errands I was running before she passed me on to Noya?” A light chuckle followed. “I can handle a few trips around the islands. It’s relatively tame compared to testing unstable potions…” He gave a little shudder at the memories.
“She experimented on you?” Daichi’s eyes widened.

“Oh, no! No! She would never! But I helped her with them, and things often got… out of hand.” Asahi could recall more than one occasion in which his feathers had been nearly fried off. “So, don’t worry about this. I’ll come back as soon as I check on Suga.”

Daichi gave a slow nod, and Asahi frowned.

“I’m sure that he’s fine, Captain.”

“I hope so.”

It was nighttime when Shouyou and Tobio returned from their information hunt. Empty handed, at that, with the exception of the one remaining turnover that had long gone cold.

The captain was already asleep, so they headed back for their own, tiny cabin, figuring that they could try to squeeze some information out of Kei the next morning. Preferably with one of the higher ranked sailors there to back them up. Maybe they’d even get lucky and Kei’s friendly, older brother would be there to make things easier.

When they opened the door to their cabin, they saw Kuroo at the bottom of the steps, raising a finger to silently shush them. Just past the man was a game of checkers, and a Kenma who had fallen asleep in his barrel some time ago.

The boys made their way down the creaky steps as quietly as they could, and Shouyou left the bag with the turnover down on the checkerboard in front of Kenma.

“We heard something from the baker,” Tobio said, voice hushed as not to disturb the merman.

Kuroo raised a brow, and Shouyou continued for him. “Said a guy came in asking about mermen. He wouldn’t give us any details, though.”

Now both of Kuroo’s brows were raised. “The other stores?”

Both boys shook their heads.

Kuroo glanced at Kenma, then motioned for the boys to follow. He led them out of the room, and down the hallways below deck until they were in the kitchen. The place was no longer occupied by the chef, and being that there were no souffles for dinner, it was a given that the earlier attempt had been yet another failure.

Kuroo sat down at one of the tables, leaning his elbows on top and lacing his fingers together. He eyed the boys with a serious look. “You asked all around?”

“We went into every shop.” Tobio nodded.

“But we didn’t get to talk with every store owner, and the baker refused to tell us anything without paying him.”

“But you paid for the desserts…”
Shouyou sat down and rested his face on the table. He cried out a guilty, “I knoooooooww….”

Tobio remained standing and stared down at Shouyou for a moment. “Could you go with us tomorrow? Or the captain?” he asked before turning to Kuroo.

“If the captain does that scary smiley thing, it might get the baker to talk.” Shouyou nodded, then mumbled an, “Ow,” as his nose brushed uncomfortably against the wooden table top.

“I don’t think Daichi wants to get any more caught up in this than we already have. Once Kenma’s back home, he’ll likely want us done with all this merfolk business. And even if that wasn’t the case, he wouldn’t want to bother with a potential wild goose chase, either. This guy could be asking around about mermen for reasons completely unrelated to what happened to Kenma.”

“But-!” Shouyou pulled his face up from the table, but stopped himself when he saw how Kuroo was looking off to the side with an almost hurt expression.

“I’m just saying that Daichi won’t be of any use to us. I’m not saying I won’t go with you.” Kuroo’s eyes went half-lidded. “I just wish you would’ve come back here and told me right away. This guy could be gone by the time we get anything out of Mr. Spectacles tomorrow.”

“Won’t the captain be upset if you go behind his back?”

Kuroo’s gaze landed on Tobio. “Let me worry about that. I’ll come up with some excuse for someone else to go with him to handle the antiques situation. Just keep this all hush hush, huh?”

“Yes, sir!” Both offered salutes, and Kuroo waved them off to bed with a yawn of his own.

The sun had yet to rise when Koutarou left the Corvus to go sit on the beach a little ways from the docks. There was a lantern at his side, and he was on his back, shirtless against the sand while the tide rolled over his feet and ankles. It was quiet, save for the sound of the water, and it was nice. Even someone as boisterous as himself could enjoy a little solitude every now and then. All the better if it was in the presence of the ocean. He could never get tired of that.

He used to sit in this very spot when he was little, picking up seashells and making little sand castles with them. He’d even catch tiny fish swimming along the shore and say, “Look, Daddy, I caught a mermaid!”

He supposed he’d been interested in them for longer than he thought.

He was staring up at a cluster of stars when he heard a splash in the distance. He sat up and looked out at the water, wondering if he’d see a bird going after some fish, or maybe even a dolphin. He saw something very different from either of those, however, and it had him scrambling to his feet and into the water without another thought.

He waded out until it was deep enough to swim, and then did so as fast as his legs would take him, which was relatively fast. He kept his head above water, watching the back of a familiar figure come into view, and then--

“Keiji!!!”
The man in front of him jerked around, startled, and Koutarou could feel something large and scaley brush against his leg when he did. The sailor looked down, then grinned. “Oh my god. Your legs are gone again!”

Keiji clamped a hand over Koutarou’s mouth and nearly hissed at him, “What are you doing out here?”

Koutarou’s response was muffled by the hand over his mouth, so the merman released him. The sailor kept his voice down. “I was sitting on the beach, and I saw you! I couldn’t tell which form you were in from there, though.”

“Good to know…”

“But even up close, I can’t see your fin in this light. The water’s too dark.” Koutarou frowned. He could, however, make out the small no-longer-concealed patches of scales dotting Keiji’s neck, shoulders, and cheek. They were glistening in the faint lighting, and Koutarou couldn’t stop staring.

“Did you come out here just to see my lower half?” Keiji deadpanned.

Koutarou shook his head. “I came out here to say hi.”

Keiji’s jaw dropped a bit. Incredible. This guy’s ridiculousness knew no bounds.

“I thought you said you didn’t live in the ocean, though.”

“I don’t.” Keiji allowed himself to float, drifting enough to put a little space between them. “I was only going for a swim. Keeping legs twenty-four seven is strenuous.”

“Really?” Koutarou looked down, but he still couldn’t see anything past the moonlight reflecting off the water. “So you have to change back a lot?”

“Sometimes. And now I’m done, and I’d like to get my legs back before I get back to shore to avoid any unwanted sightings, so if you don’t mind…”

Koutarou only stared back at him, waiting for Keiji to finish the sentence he had no real intentions of finishing.

“…Could you turn around?”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want you watching.”

“Really? Is it because you’ll be naked when you turn back?” Koutarou laughed. “C’mon, Keiji, I’m a guy, too. It’s no big deal. Unless mer-humans have different parts than human-humans?”

Oh. My. God. “Just turn around, Koutarou. Better yet, you can swim back to shore, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Can’t you show me your tail first? If you lift it out of the water a little, I could see better!”

“No. It’s staying under the water so no one sees it. That’s the point.”

“But it’s just me!”
“We don’t know that.”

With an overdramatic sigh, Koutarou turned around and started back for the shore. He was watching out at the water with a determined stare when he got there, keeping an eye out to make sure that Keiji kept his word about meeting him there instead of running off to avoid him.

There was another splashing sound, and he turned to see Keiji’s head from behind a section of rocks leading out from the water. There was some shuffling, presumably Keiji getting back into a pair of trousers, and Koutarou hurried over to him.

“I didn’t see any bright lights or anything!” he announced, peeking over the rocks without warning.

Keiji straightened, legs now clothed and a shirt in hand. “Sorry?”

“When you turned back? I expected there to be a lot of glowing or something coming from you in the water.”

“I have a feeling our transformations are very different from what you’re imagining.”

“Well you wouldn’t let me watch!” There was a reason for that, but Keiji didn’t want to have to explain it. Thankfully, Koutarou kept running his mouth. “I know this crow familiar, and whenever he changes forms, there’s this big puff of smoke!”

Keiji slung his shirt over his shoulder and stared at Koutarou. “You sure seem involved in a lot of non-human things.”

“A lot of really amazing things!” Koutarou nodded. “And guess what! My crew and I aren’t heading out until later today, so there’s still time for us to talk!”

“Why?”

“Huh? Oh, see, we deliver cargo from island to island for traders and things like that. Y’know, a merchant ship? There’s some more stuff we have to pick up before we head out to Kingston.”

“No, I meant why do you want to spend your day talking to me?” He paused, and his expression brightened somewhat. Not with joy, but definitely with interest. “Wait, Kingston? You’re going to Kingston?”

“Yeah! I don’t really want to. Too many snooty people. Have you been there before?”

Keiji nodded. “I have.”

“This place is better, right?” Koutarou stretched his arms high above his head, then plopped himself back down on the sand. Keiji’s eyes fell onto the sailor’s shoulder, where there was a solid black silhouette of an anchor inked onto the skin. How classy.

Keiji surveyed the area once before sitting down beside him, once again being sure to leave a little space between the two. “It is. I feel more relaxed here than anywhere else.”

“When you’re not running away from people in taverns?”

Keiji sighed. He was hoping the other wouldn’t bring that up again. “Yes, Koutarou. That would be the exception.”

Koutarou was watching Keiji, looking over the scaled patch on his face. His gaze wandered
down to the man’s legs, and he wondered what sort of magic show took place when they changed into that beautiful fin. God, he wanted to see it up close so bad.

And then he caught himself staring, and turned to look out at the sea instead.

“So,” he started, “I know you don’t really want to talk about what happened yesterday, and that’s fine! But, whether they’re related or not, I was wondering if you knew, um…” His lips twisted into a thoughtful expression as he tried to think up how to word the next part. “Have you heard anything about your kind being kidnapped? Like, smuggled in barrels and kept locked away in wine cellars or something?”

“That’s… a very specific scenario, Koutarou.”

“Yeah…”

Keiji frowned and turned to look at the water as well. “Some people covet the scales, so kidnappings happen, yes. I’m not sure about wine cellars or barrels, though.”

“That really happens? People really make things out of your fins?” The sailor whipped his head around to Keiji, a look of horror taking over.

The other nodded. “I’ve seen them. Purses and things. If I didn’t know what they were made from, I would’ve thought they were beautiful.” He pulled his legs to his chest, the bottom side of them now coated in sand. He kept watching the water with that uneasy look as he lowered his chin to his knees. “But I knew, so it was terrifying.”

Koutarou swallowed. “Was that… what that person from the tavern does?” He averted his gaze again, trying to keep it on the light reflecting off the water instead of the man next to him. He didn’t want to make Keiji even more uncomfortable now. “Sorry. You don’t have to talk about that. I shouldn’t have asked.” He dropped his hands to the ground behind him for some support as he leaned back. “I wonder if that’s what it was, though…” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Keiji breathed in, tense from the subject, but also relieved that Koutarou didn’t push it as far as he could have. “You mentioned meeting another one before me. Is that what this is about?”

Koutarou nodded, then shook his head. “I’m, uh. I’m not sure if I should talk about that or not. I mean, if you’re one too, then it should be fine, but I don’t know. This is all really crazy.” He ran a sandy hand through his hair. “I always thought it’d be great to see a mermaid up close, but it seems like you guys are always in danger whenever I do? Not really how I imagined it.”

“I’m not in danger, Koutarou.”

“You acted like it yesterday.”

“I was being cautious.”

Koutarou wasn’t convinced. Keiji knew it, too. What he didn’t know was why it was necessary for him to do any convincing to begin with. Was Koutarou actually concerned, or just nosy? Keiji had a feeling it might be a little of both, but there was also a sinking feeling in the back of his head that maybe Koutarou was his enemy, trying to get more information out of him.

He didn’t want to think that.

The two watched out at the view ahead. The sun would be rising any time now, but for the moment it remained relatively dark. And quiet. Neither seemed to know what to say after that.
Rather, Koutarou didn’t know what to say, and Keiji hoped to drop the subject completely.

Koutarou, for once, took the hint. “Have you ever been to Barnwood?”

Keiji offered a silent nod. Of course he’d been to a park so close to the sanctuary.

“Have you ever gone off the trail, though?”

This time, Keiji turned to Koutarou. He shook his head, and the other began to grin.

Koutarou pushed himself to his feet, then held a hand out to Keiji. “Come on. I’m gonna show you something.”

The merman leveled him with an exasperated look. “Now?”

“Of course now! I’ll be leaving later today, remember?”

“Tired, Koutarou.”

“It’s morning!”

“And I’ve been out here swimming. I’d like to rest.”

“I thought you came out here to relax? Doesn’t that mean you’re rested now?” Koutarou pouted. “Please? I just want to show you one thing.”

Keiji watched the other for a long moment, then sighed and reluctantly took the offered hand and got to his feet. Why he was following this lunatic again, he had no idea.

“You are going to love this!”

The sun had only just begun to rise when the three approached the bakery. They knew it wouldn’t be open yet, but Kuroo couldn’t manage to sit around on the Corvus any longer knowing there was a chance that they could find something on the people who captured Kenma. The boys behind him would yawn every now and then, sometimes louder than necessary just to let Kuroo know how displeased they were for being dragged out of bed so early.

“They probably don’t even open for another two hours.” Shouyou yawned again, but Kuroo only huffed and marched around the side of the building, through an alley between it and the cobbler nextdoor. His boots hitting against the cobblestone just about drowned out the tired shuffling of Shouyou and Tobio’s feet.

Banging soon followed as Kuroo knocked hard against the side door. The door to the Tsukishima family’s home at the back of the bakery.

When the door did open, it gave view to a half-asleep Kei who seemed to wake up almost immediately upon seeing the trio. With a cold stare and without a word, the boy slammed the door in their faces.

“Hey!” Kuroo pounded his fist on the door again. “Don’t be fuckin’ rude!”
There was the sound of shutters opening, and the cobbler next door was looking out their window with a sleepy and disapproving look.

“Sorry,” all three of them muttered, despite Kuroo being the one with the loud sailor mouth in this case.

And then the door in front of them was opening, but this time it wasn’t Kei on the other side. Instead, there stood a taller man with a neater head of blonde, and without any glasses to be seen.

Akiteru offered an apologetic smile. “Sorry about him.”

“The nice brother is here!” Shouyou chirped, and Akiteru gave an uncomfortable laugh.

“Can I help you with anything?”

Shouyou and Tobio both bobbed their heads, and Kuroo took the initiative to speak. “Your brother could, actually.” He pointed a thumb at the boys standing behind him. “These two said he mentioned a certain customer yesterday.” He’d have to get a little creative with how he worded the rest. “It sounded like a friend of ours, so I was hoping to maybe get a description before we go running all over town looking for ‘em, you know?”

Akiteru nodded, then looked over his shoulder to call out for his brother. There was some hard to make out grumbling from Kei further into the house before Akiteru sighed and asked the sailors that they wait outside for a moment.

The three couldn’t quite make out the conversation on the other side of the door, but there was certainly some back and forth going on. Mostly pleading from Akiteru’s end and stubborn rejection from Kei’s.

Eventually, the door finally opened once again, with Kei once again giving the three a displeased glare. Akiteru was close behind, his apologetic smile still clear.

“Ten pieces, right?” Kuroo held up a small bag. Kei raised a brow, then snatched it from him.

“Light hair, dark tips at the bottom. Looks ridiculous. I’d say he’s impossible to miss for anyone with a brain, but…” Kei glanced at the two boys and scoffed.

Both Shouyou and Tobio took steps forward, but Kuroo put an arm out to stop them.

“Young? Old?”

“Older than me. Probably younger than Akiteru.” Kei opened the bag and looked inside to check that it was really coins he’d been given and not some cheap trick. “Probably under six feet, if that helps.”

“Did you get a name?”

Kei looked up, a suspicious brow quirked high above the other. “Isn’t this your friend that you’re looking for? Shouldn’t you know that much?”

Shit.

“You can never be too sure, right?” Kuroo offered a smile, but Kei seemed unimpressed. “Did he say how long he was in town for?”

“No. That’s everything. Are you done here?”
The boys were fuming, and Kuroo merely sighed. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Kei pulled the bag closed and turned on his heel, leaving the group with his brother at the door.

“Kei!” Akiteru frowned and looked to the trio. “I’m sorry. Again. If I hear anything about your friend, I’ll let you know.”

Kuroo nodded and thanked him, then shot looks at the boys so that they’d do the same. Once the door was closed, the older of the trio turned to the other two, a worrying grin spreading across his features.

“And now we have the rest of the day to hunt him down.”
Keiji wasn’t joking when he said he was tired.

They’d left the beach some time ago, and the merman had since put on his shirt and covered up any visible scales with a heavy coating of makeup, including the ones beneath his clothes that Koutarou had managed to catch sight of the day before. What he didn’t cover up, and what Koutarou could see clearly now that the sun had begun to rise, were the dark circles beneath his eyes.

The sailor swung his now-blown-out lantern by his side as they made their way through the park, still on the trail for the time being. He looked around at the trees and bushes with fondness, thinking happily on how little the place had changed over the years. He’d glance at Keiji every now and then, eyes lingering on those tired eyes and how disinterested the other seemed with the place. Understandable. He’d probably been here plenty of times since he’d started living on the island, right?

“Hey, Keiji,” Koutarou said, breaking the silence and prompting the other to look up at him. “How long have you been staying on Owl Roost?”

“Not very long,” he said, repeating what he’d already told Koutarou upon their first meeting.

“Yeah, yeah, I know that. What’s that though? A month? A few months? A year?”

“Does that matter?”
Koutarou looked at him with a pout, and Keiji didn’t blame him, but he also still felt wary when others asked too many questions regarding his personal life. He could only hope the sailor would understand that after what few conversations they’d already had.

“Do you get enough sleep?” Was Koutarou’s next choice of topic.

That time, Keiji shot him a glare. “I told you I wanted to rest.”

“I know! But I didn’t realize your face looked like that before.” Keiji’s glare only hardened, and Koutarou shook his head. “It was dark, and I wanted to keep looking at your scales before you covered them! I didn’t notice you had bags under your eyes.”

The other sighed and looked forward as they continued on. “I know we haven’t seen anyone since we got here, but please don’t mention those things in public, Koutarou.”

“Right. Sorry.” He nodded. “You’re not upset, are you?”

“I could be more upset, I suppose.”

“Keiji!”

“It’s fine, really. I could have walked away if it was that bad. How much further is this… whatever it is you’re trying to show me?”

The sailor gave a thoughtful ‘hmmm’ sound as he looked ahead. “It’s after the fountain, so not much longer?”

“The fountain that we already passed?”

“What?!” Koutarou spun around on his heel, then brought a palm to his forehead. “I’m so sorry, Keiji, I got distracted…”

“It wasn’t that far back,” the merman said with a shake of the head, already starting in the other direction.

Koutarou followed, and then pulled Keiji off from the trail and through the bushes lining it once said fountain came back into sight. He wove in and out of the trees with the ease of someone who’d done this countless times before. Now that he was paying more attention to his surroundings, Koutarou seemed to have a surprisingly good sense of direction. All of the turns he made in the pathless patch of wood were something that Keiji certainly hadn’t expected.

“If this thing is really so incredible, then why haven’t they made a trail leading to it by now?” he asked as Koutarou pushed a branch out of their way.

The taller of the two didn’t answer, but came to a sudden stop in one of the more open sections, setting his hands on his hips and looking triumphantly up at a large tree. An elm, Keiji suspected, but not all that amazing of one, in his opinion. It was large, yes, but not something he would’ve thought to wander through the untamed area of a park for.

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“Is that it…?” he asked, turning his tired gaze to Koutarou, who nodded. “It’s, um, certainly a tree.”

“What?” Koutarou turned to Keiji with wide eyes, then shook his head. “No, no, it’s amazing! Here, you just have to look at it right.” He set his hands on Keiji’s shoulders and stepped to the side, pulling the man along with him. “It’s all about the prospective.”
“Perspective.”

Koutarou rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, that. Do you see it yet?” He bent down slightly, leaning his head over Keiji’s shoulder so that they were looking from about the same angle.

“I don’t understand what it is I’m supposed to be seeing.” Keiji breathed a worn breath. “I see lots of branches, and lots of leaves, just like every other tree in the park.” The ones at the sanctuary were more interesting. At least those were full of far more life than the occasional squirrel that he’d seen here so far. Still, he squinted up its form and tilted his head, trying to make out what had Koutarou so excited. “Could you at least give me a hint or…”

An excited laugh left Koutarou’s lips as he saw Keiji’s eyes widen in realization.

“Oh.”

“Oh?” He laughed again. “Is that all?”

Keiji looked down, careful of any branches or raised roots as he took another step to the side. He looked back up, wondering if it had helped his view, and it had.

The old tree’s branches extended to the sky and filled with leaves in such a way that it bore a silhouette resembling that of an eagle, head majestically raised to where the sun would soon have raised, and wings outstretched in mock-flight.

“How did you find this?” There was the smallest hint of awe in his voice.

Koutarou grinned at Keiji, then up at the bird-like tree. “Probably spent every second exploring this place as a kid. The island, I mean. You find all sorts of things that way.”

“An explorer. No wonder you became a sailor.”

He laughed again, this time smacking Keiji in the back. The other didn’t seem too pleased with the action. “Probably!”

“I still don’t understand why you brought me here, though.”

“Well…” Koutarou looked down from the view, scratching the back of his neck with a look that told Keiji he was looking for the words. “You seemed kinda down, you know? I didn’t mean to drag you into flashback hell back on the beach, so I thought, maybe this would cheer you up?”

When the man looked up at Keiji again, the merman felt a strange sense of ease. The whole way here, he’d been keeping significant space between the two as he followed. He was cautious. Overly so.

‘He could be leading me into a trap.’ The thought had crossed his mind, but the words and the current look of pure innocence on Koutarou’s face momentarily relaxed his nerves.

“You only just met me. I’m not sure that I understand.”

“Can’t a guy just do something nice because he wants to?”

Keiji’s response was a slow nod, and Koutarou’s grin somehow seemed to double in size.

The latter looked up at the tree once again. “It’d be even more amazing during firefly season! Before it gets completely dark, they come out, and it looks like someone’s put all these tiny candles in the branches! Augh, I wish I could’ve shown you that.”
“Well, now I know where to go when the fireflies come out.”

“You sure do!”

Koutarou belted out another laugh, and Keiji was, for a short while, able to forget about all the issues that had him run away to this island in the first place.

Luckily, the description Kei had given them was, while lacking details, unique enough to work in their favor. ‘Light hair with dark tips’ wasn’t exactly a common trait to be seen in such a human town, and most people they asked had admitted to seeing such a person the day prior.

But not today.

At least, not this morning. The trio had split up and asked just about every tent in the farmer’s market, and pestered every open store on the bakery’s street, but for all that they knew, this ‘merman obsessed man’ was already off the island.

Kuroo bit into one of the apples they’d bought from a fruit stand with a force that made his teeth uncomfortably mash together on contact. Shouyou and Tobio sat at his feet on the steps of a currently-closed book shop, eating their own apples with far less speed and tension than the older man.

“We have a description,” Tobio said once only the core of his fruit remained. “If he turns up on another island, we’ll know when we see him.” He raised his hands up and threw the core with precision into a trash barrel a few feet away. “But if it’s then or now, what will we even do when we find him?”

Shouyou’s jaw dropped. “We ask why he’s looking for merpeople! What do you think we’ve been running around all day for?”

“And then what? What do we do with that information?” Tobio glared down at Shouyou. “We’re dropping ours off after we leave the island anyway, so what does it matter? Kuroo already said that Daichi wouldn’t want to interfere with whatever’s going on here.”

Shouyou frowned, then looked up at Kuroo. Tobio followed suit, and Kuroo only stared down at his own apple core, turning it over in his hands with a frustrated look.

“I just want to know why they took him,” he said after some time. “If it really was just some black market dealing, then at least we can rest knowing he isn’t being targeted.” He lowered the core and looked out to the townspeople populating the street. “But if it’s something else? If he’s being specifically hunted down?”

“Then we can’t just bring him back home!” Shouyou blurted, and Kuroo gave a grunt in agreement.

“Wouldn’t he knew if he was being targeted?”

“He keeps saying he doesn’t know why they took him.” Kuroo’s gaze hardened, and he stepped away from the book shop. “So I don’t wanna leave port until we find this guy.”
“Then we’ll keep looking, and Kageyama can go be unhelpful on the ship,” Shouyou said, pulling down on one eyelid and sticking his tongue out at the taller boy, who huffed in response.

“I didn’t say I’d stop looking!

All he did was ask some perfectly reasonable questions, dammit.

Down a sidestreet from the bakery and bookstore, one could happen across a shop by the name of Nekomata Weaponry. It was small, and there were certainly larger places to find muskets and pistols, but Hajime happened to find that the ones here were of much better quality. This was based on experience, of course.

“You left this place with so much the last time you visited. Are you telling me you need new gear already?” The elderly man behind the counter gave a hearty laugh. “You wear it all out, or some pirates take it off your hands for you?”

“Your wares are too high quality to wear out so quickly,” Hajime stated, and the store owner grinned. “And I can guarantee you I haven’t let a pirate set foot on that deck.”

The old man, Yasufumi Nekomata, laughed again. “Then what can I help you with?”

“A distraction, hopefully,” the younger man muttered. Kuroo was right in his assumptions. With the Corvus already prepared for defense against whatever they may find in those waters while escorting Kenma, he had nothing to do aside from help with deliveries or sit around in irritation dreading the next day. Unfortunately, Daichi had already left with a good portion of the crew to handle loading the antiques, and Hajime sure as hell wasn’t about to do the sitting around thing right now. So, here he was. “Any objections to just browsing?”

“With the business you’ve brought me? Look all you want.” The man gestured around to the walls of weapons.

Hajime bowed his head and turned to inspect an eye-catching display of pistols. When the bell over the front door gave a ring, he paid no mind.

The owner, of course, leaned an arm over the counter and leaned forward with a friendly “Welcome!”

The new customer nodded in acknowledgement, eyes barely bothering to scan the room as he approached Yasufumi.

“Oh? You look like someone who knows what they want. Looking for something in particular?”

The customer shook his head. “I was actually looking for information, if you could answer some questions.” He had a tired, edging on frustrated look and sound about him that said maybe this wasn’t the first store he’d come into like this.

The old man’s smile fell somewhat in disappointment. “What sort of information would that be?”
“I was wondering,” the customer began, pushing the ends of his dark-tipped bangs to the side, away from his eyes, “If you’d heard any rumors regarding merfolk sightings lately.”

Now Hajime was paying attention. He kept facing a rather attractive flintlock pistol with gold accents, but from the corners of his eyes he watched the stranger.

The old man shrugged. “In all my years on this island, I’ve never seen any such thing! And I sure haven’t heard any rumors in a long time, either. That’s all sailor folktale stuff. Maybe you’d have more luck by the docks.” He huffed a short laugh and glanced over at Hajime. “Or ask a sailor yourself!”

Appreciate it, old man. Not exactly the thanks he wanted for bringing him so much business.

Hajime straightened and looked over at the two, expression remaining calm.

The stranger turned to him, and there was a hopeful ring in his voice. “You’re a sailor?”

“Yeah, haven’t seen much outside of some sea serpents and an annoying siren, though. Sorry,” he lied.

Yasufumi laughed, spouting a disbelieving, “Sirens! What a story!” before turning to dust off some displays behind the counter.

“That’s a shame,” the customer said, all hope draining from his tone. “That you haven’t heard anything, and the siren part. I hear they’re a pain in the ass.”

“I’d rather fight off pirates, to be honest.” Hajime tried not to scowl at the thoughts that he came here to avoid lingering on, dammit. “Can I ask why you’re looking? I’ve heard stories about people skinning merfolk for clothing, but those have been going around for years now. Something new come up?”

“Some people back home have been complaining about merfolk lately. They’re pretty pissed over this one in particular. They say the tail was black and white and looked like a koi’s.” He once again ignored the incredulous scoffing of the old man behind the counter. “If you haven’t heard anything, then how about a man with short, dark, curly hair?”

Hajime lifted a brow at his question. “Are you looking for a mermaid, or a human?”

The other paused. “...Both, actually.”

“That description could be anyone,” Yasufumi chimed in as he set down the feather duster and pulled a crate up onto the counter. “Dark curly hair doesn’t quite stand out as much as yours does,” he added with a look of amusement.

“Then what about a name? The guy I’m looking for could be going by anything at this point, but I knew him as Keiji Akaashi.”

Both shook their heads, and the stranger let out a defeated sigh. “I figured. Thanks for the help, though.”

There was another ding of the bell as he left the shop, with both Hajime and Yasufumi watching the door once he was gone.

“That was something,” the older one managed with a chuckle. “And you entertaining him with that siren nonsense, too!”
Hajime huffed.

After that conversation, he wasn’t sure that sticking around in this place was much of a good distraction anymore, as much as he’d love to keep ogling over that gold pistol. He thanked the store owner for allowing him to look, and took his leave.

Well, now what? If it were cooler out, maybe he could find someone selling some earmuffs. They had plenty aboard the Corvus as it was, but one could never be too prepared to block out that damn *singing* if they ever had the misfortune of coming across it again.

His scowl returned, but the expression faded when he recognized some voices nearing from the main street.

“This is the only shop we haven’t checked that’s open today…”

“What do we do after this? Start knocking on people’s houses?”

“Can’t say I haven’t thought of it.”

The trio came to a stop in front of the weapons shop, and Hajime raised a hand in acknowledgement.

“Oh! Iwaizumi!” Shouyou jumped up at the sight of their fellow crew member. “Maybe he’s seen something!” The boy ran up to the man and stared up at him with determined eyes. “We’re looking for someone with black hair and white tips, have you seen ‘em?”

“He said light hair with dark tips, idiot!” Tobio stepped up from behind and pulled Shouyou back, giving Hajime some space.

Kuroo stepped up behind both boys and slapped each upside the head. “Does ‘hush hush’ not mean a thing to you two?”

Hajime watched as the two boys quickly froze with guilt. “I think you just missed him,” he said, looking to meet Kuroo’s gaze, which was surprised, to say the least. He pointed over his shoulder at the store. “Just came in asking about merfolk sightings.”

“That was him!” Shouyou announced, then quickly covered his mouth and glanced over at Kuroo.

“Do you know which way he went?” Kuroo asked, and Hajime shrugged. “Shit. Did he seem suspicious to you? Like he could’ve had something to do with…”

Hajime shook his head. “Our guest? No. He definitely felt suspicious, but it sounds like he’s looking for specific people. He described the tail as black and white. Doesn’t really match up with what we’ve got.”

Kuroo and Shouyou both let out long, relieved breaths at that news.

“You’ve been running around looking for him all day, haven’t you?” the gunner asked, noting how exhausted they looked. “I’m guessing the captain doesn’t know.”

They all shook their heads.

“And he’d be pissed if he found out.”

The two younger boys exchanged glances, and Kuroo offered a pleading look.
Hajime watched them all, then sighed. “You got the information from me, so it’s not even worth bringing up. Don’t go getting your asses mixed up in anything else, and I won’t mention it.”

“You’re a gift to the human race,” Kuroo said, finally managing up one of his trademark smirks. Hajime rolled his eyes, then both of them looked over at the deckhands when a pair of deep growls escaped the boys’ stomachs. “...Guess we should be heading back to the ship, then.” Knowing this guy wasn’t after Kenma after all was allowing him to think a little more straight now and, yeah, maybe an apple wasn’t enough to constitute as a meal, especially now that they were nearing lunch and that fruit was the only thing any of them had eaten all day.

“I’ll catch up soon,” Hajime said, nodding as the three turned back toward the main street with departing waves.

The hell were those idiots even planning to do if the guy did have something to do with Kenma? Tobio and Shouyou getting mixed up into something stupid wouldn’t have been much of a surprise, but Kuroo, too?

They were getting too attached to this damn fish boy.

His feet carried him back to the main street. The man with the dark-tipped hair was already out of sight, likely pestering whatever remaining shopkeepers he hadn’t already. The poor guy was probably getting so many strange looks and laughs with that story of his. Merfolk and things of that nature were a ‘seeing is believing’ deal for most people, after all. Even when magical beings were caught and shown to the public around here, it was almost always chalked up to smoke and mirrors types of explanations. Of course, that was to be expected, with how many people really did try to fake such things in circuses and the like.

Hajime himself hadn’t believed in any ‘fairytales’ until that time Nishinoya went and introduced the crew to the witch.

‘We’re not related, but she’s practically my grandma!’ he remembered the shorter sailor telling everyone. The woman was on the edge of her life when they’d met her, and her dying wish had been to return to her birthplace on Morrigan’s Coast before her passing. Daichi had been inclined to refuse her as a passenger at the start, being wary of non-humans for whatever reasons he had, but Noya had managed to somehow convince him. ‘You can’t abandon family,’ or something like that. Hajime had thought the whole ‘witch’ thing was some kind of childish game up until the woman’s bird turned into a feathery man right in front of them.

Hajime had not been prepared for that.

He also hadn’t been prepared to handle fucking sirens or sea serpents. No one had trained him for that when he learned how to fire a goddamn cannon. Apparently, that was be because it wasn’t normal to run into all this shit out in the ocean. Most magical beings kept to themselves, so he often had to wonder if the Corvus or its crew was somehow cursed to attract this sort of nonsense.

Whatever the case, he was prepared now. He’d spent plenty of nights studying on creatures he’d once believed to be purely fiction, and the ship was probably more well-equipped than ever before because of it.

Pirates? Fuck pirates. Their ship could take on a kraken if needed.

Okay, maybe not a kraken. He was still reading up on those.

As he strolled from the main shops into the farmer’s market, Hajime heard another familiar
voice, this one far louder than all three of the sailors he’d bumped into just moments ago. He glanced up, immediately catching the source by his ridiculous hair. He didn’t recognize the person standing with him, though.

“This is just a boring old spyglass!” Koutarou looked very unimpressed - insulted, even - with the salesman at the stall they were at. The shorter, dark-haired man accompanying him looked even less impressed, but more so out of embarrassment, from what Hajime could tell.

“Not just any old spyglass! This here is said to have belonged to one enchantress of a siren. The sailor that sold it to me nearly drowned trying to get it.” The man behind the table tried to convince him, but Koutarou only frowned more.

“Who would risk their life for a dumb spyglass? Why would a siren even want a spyglass? I’ve never seen a siren with a spyglass.”

“Well, you’ve never seen any sirens, have you?”

“I have!”

“You’ve seen one,” Hajime interjected. Koutarou jumped at his voice. “And don’t you bring that shit onto the ship.”

“I wasn’t going to buy it!” The boatswain quickly set it back down on the table. “All this junk is too overpriced, and I already have one of these.”

“Then get away from my stall!”

Koutarou raised his hands defensively, and began to back away from the angry merchant.

“Who does that guy think he is?” he asked once they were a little further away. “Those feathers he was selling probably aren’t even really from a griffon. I bet he took them from the sanctuary.”

“They were turkey feathers,” Keiji noted. “That man’s been there for days. No one around here believes in all those things, so no one buys anything. He’s wasting his time.”

“He even tried selling us mermaid tears,” Koutarou said, turning to Hajime with an appalled look. “Said they could heal any injury. Can they even do that?”

Keiji bit back the urge to respond with a, ‘No, they can’t.’ He opted for, “I’m sure those bottles were just filled with regular water,” instead.

“He’d have better luck selling that junk on Kingston!”

“I doubt it. You could probably find someone selling the real thing there,” Hajime snorted. “Apparently the place used to be overrun with magical bullshit.” A rumor he’d gradually become more accepting of the longer he stayed with this crew.

Keiji shifted uncomfortably, though his expression remained stoic enough.

“Aren’t we leaving for there today?” Koutarou asked.

“As soon as the others get back with those antiques. Shouldn’t be much longer.”

“...Does your ship take passengers?”
Both sailors looked at Keiji, and the merman severely hoped he looked as calm as he usually did under their staring. The thought had popped into his head numerous times since Koutarou first mentioned Kingston on the beach. Getting a ride from some merchant ship would give him much more cover, not to mention some much needed rest, as opposed to swimming all the way to the island himself in the open.

He also didn’t want to stick around here as long as that person from the tavern was about.

“You want to go to Kingston, Keiji?” Koutarou asked, and Hajime’s brows lifted at the mention of the name.

Dark, curly hair, huh? Okay, so Kuroo and the boys managed not to get mixed into any trouble. Great. Fantastic. Now he just had to deal with the fact that Koutarou might be friends with some kind of criminal. Unless the guy in the store was the criminal, and this Keiji person is innocent? Hell.

“If you’re going there already, and if there’s room for me on your ship, then yes. I can pay for myself, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“I don’t see why not!” Koutarou nearly jumped with excitement. “We take passengers all the time!” And Daichi wouldn’t know this one was a magical one, so it wouldn’t be a problem.

“I don’t know if the captain’s going to want any extra passengers right now.” Hajime said calmly, though he couldn’t help but regard Keiji. “At least not until we take care of our next delivery.”

Koutarou let out a loud groan. Kenma. Of course. “Augh! That’s right!” They wouldn’t want anyone finding out they had a merman with them… even though the extra person finding out would be another merman himself. But then, the crew wouldn’t know that. Neither would Kenma. So. Ugh. Koutarou could’ve sworn there was smoke coming out of his own ears with all the thoughts building up in his head. “But we have to pass by Owl Roost on the way back to Kingston anyway, so we can just pick him up after, right?”

“Coming and going from port isn’t a fast process and you know it. Take that up with the captain.”

Koutarou groaned again.

“If it’s not possible, then I’ll find another way. You really don’t have to--”

“No! I’m going to ask the captain, okay? And you should come with me so I don’t have to go running around looking for you when I get an answer.” Koutarou smiled and held a hand out toward Keiji.

The other looked down at it, but didn’t take it. “Alright…”

Hajime kept quiet for the moment and decided that he’d have to spend the rest of the day not only preparing for siren attacks, but trying to find out exactly how much Koutarou knew about and trusted this Keiji person.
“You were gone a long time.”

Kuroo looked down at the floor of the deckhands’ cabin, where a certain merman was sprawled out on his stomach, chin propped up by one arm on the now-wet wooden flooring. The man grinned at his observation.

“Did you miss me?”

“Not really.”

Kuroo frowned, and the end of Kenma’s tail gave a few bored flops against the floor behind him.

“Taketora and the doctor checked on me a few times.” Kenma said, looking up at the other. “Tora’s too loud.”

Kuroo laughed at that. “You can say that after you’ve been rooming with Shorty for this long?” He stepped over to Kenma, and noticed that the bag on the checkerboard from the previous night was now empty. “Oh? I see you found the turnover.”

“It was right in front of me.”

“It was also cold.”

“It was,” Kenma agreed. “I didn’t mind too much, though.”

“But my cookies were better, right?”

“You say it like you made them yourself.” The merman sighed, and rolled onto his side. Kuroo resisted the urge to make a ‘fish out of water’ joke when he saw the tail give another flop. “You really are competing with Shouyou for something, aren’t you?”

“I just like being appreciated.” The man grinned and sat down on the floor in front of him. “Did Dr. Takeda make you get out of the barrel to stretch?”

“Mhm.”

“Good.”

“We’re still at port, aren’t we?”

“For a few more hours, maybe.” Kuroo reached over to ruffle Kenma’s hair. The latter pouted in response. “And then we’ll have you home in no time…”

Kenma looked up at him with those strangely cat-like eyes. There was still a hint of annoyance from the hair ruffling, but otherwise he seemed to be searching Kuroo for something.

“You don’t sound too thrilled.”

“Is that bad?” Kuroo’s smile faltered. “I’m worried. If you get caught again, I’ll have no way of knowing.”

“I won’t go near the surface again, Kuroo. It was a mistake to in the first place.”

“Why did you? You don’t seem like someone who’d let curiosity get the better of them. Hell, you’re too lazy to get back in the water.”
Kenma stared at an almost butterfly-shaped spot on the flooring for a bit before he answered. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “I’d never seen it before. I didn’t even really want to, but I guess I just figured if I should at some point in my life, I might as well get it over with.”

“That’s it? Every other time I’ve asked you, you avoided the topic. It was something that simple?”

“Didn’t seem worth talking about.”

“So, what? You went to ‘get it over with,’ and you just had shit timing? Those guys snatched you up with a net or something, and now you’re here?”

“Mmn.”

There was a pause, and then Kuroo actually laughed. Kenma glared up at him. “What?”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! It’s just, this whole time I kept wondering if there was some big thing going on. Like, I thought people were targeting you or something, or there was some big task you came up to the surface to accomplish, and it got ruined.” He was laughing through his words, and even stopped to wipe a tear from his eye. “But it all just comes down to you being a lazy ass, doesn’t it?”

Kenma half-wished Kuroo was sitting behind him so he could slap him with his tail. “Minus ten.”

Kuroo tried to calm his laughter. “What?”

“You and Shouyou are competing to impress me or something weird like that, right?” he deadpanned. “I’m keeping tally. Minus ten for you. Shouyou’s in the lead.”

“What?! What’s my score?”

“A secret.”

“Kenma!”

The merman pointed a finger up at the barrel. “I’m starting to get dried out, Kuroo.” He’d been stretching out long before Kuroo showed up.

“Don’t change the subject!”

“Water.”

“Tell me the score!”

“You admit it’s a competition?” Kenma asked with a straight face.

“There is no competition!” Kuroo groaned.

“Then don’t worry about a score.”

“But you said it exists! If I put you in the water, will you tell me?”

“You’re going to let me dry out and die because I won’t tell you?”
“No!” With another groan, Kuroo got to his feet and helped Kenma up and into the barrel. Some water sloshed out the sides, and Kenma sunk into it with a barely audible, but definitely satisfied noise. “Please.”

“Hm.” Kenma submerged his head completely beneath the water.

Kuroo could just make out the slits along the merman’s neck opening and closing as he breathed beneath the surface. Stupid fish and their stupid gills and their stupid tallies and was he really keeping score?

That thought was interrupted by the sound of several pairs of footsteps from above, telling them that the rest of the crew had returned, and also telling Kuroo that he’d better go help them load everything.

“I already told you, it would be too much trouble to stop here again after the next delivery.”

“But--!”

“And that’s final.” Daichi’s tone was stern. Threatening, even. He was standing at the edge of the ship, near the ramp, and already seemed plenty fed up with Koutarou’s attempted bargaining. Keiji stood behind the boatswain, appearing very uncomfortable with the whole ordeal.

“Then let him board now! I’ll keep a close eye on him, I promise!” Koutarou pleaded. “I’ll make sure there aren’t any issues with the next delivery, alright?” It still felt weird to refer to Kenma’s situation as a simple ‘delivery,’ but they weren’t really sure what else to call it in the presence of outsiders.

“You have your own duties to tend to here. Babysitting doesn’t need to be one of them.”

“I’d only have to babysit during the delivery, though!” All they would have to do until then was keep the cabin with Kenma inside locked so their new passenger wouldn’t catch a glimpse of the merman. The other merman. Whatever. Koutarou could easily keep Keiji company while they dumped Kenma off the ship or… however they were handling that part.

Whatever the case, the look on Keiji’s face at the moment made it apparent that he didn’t enjoy being referred to as the ‘baby’ in this situation. Did they forget he was standing right there?

“I won’t wander about your ship if it makes you uncomfortable, Captain, and I don’t mind being kept an eye on until we’ve arrived in Kingston, either.” He gave a short bow of the head. “I’d also be more than happy to assist with any chores during the voyage if need be.”

Koutarou looked at Keiji, then turned to Daichi with a grin.

The captain ran a hand over his face. “Just. Give me a moment, Bokuto.”

Daichi turned away from the two, and started over toward Kuroo, who had just come up from below deck. Koutarou turned his grin right back at Keiji, and the latter kept his impassive stare.

“He hasn’t agreed to anything.”

“He’s considering it, though.”
“You seem very optimistic about that.” And just about everything else. Keiji couldn’t help but notice the stark contrast between Koutarou’s shining optimism and… Koutarou-ness, and the seriousness he’d seen from Hajime and Daichi so far. He didn’t want to call it a relief, that might be too harsh, but it was a little nice to know that he wouldn’t be completely overwhelmed by an entire ship of Koutarous.

If they’d allow him to join them, that is.

“Daichi may be the captain, but I’m still pretty important, on this ship, you know. He trusts me, so he’ll definitely agree to it.”

“Aren’t you a deckhand?”

Koutarou’s jaw dropped, along with that optimistic air. He made a hurt noise, and sounded almost as though he were ready to cry when he said, “Keiji.”

“Sorry, I just…” Thought you seemed a little too impulsive to be in a position of high responsibility? Yeah, that wasn’t something he was about to say out loud. The more places Koutarou dragged him off to, the more Keiji began to think he’d been underestimating the sailor. And here it’d only been a day since that less-than-pleasant first meeting of theirs.

“I’m a boatswain,” Koutarou announced, pointing at himself and stepping up to Keiji perhaps a little too closely. “I supervise the deckhands!”

“That sounds like quite the responsibility.” Keiji took a step back, giving himself some space.

“It is!” Koutarou’s grin returned, but only until he felt a presence behind him. He looked over his shoulder to see that Daichi had returned, along with Kuroo at his side. “Do we have a yes?”

The captain and first mate exchanged glances before turning to Koutarou and the potential passenger.

“As long as no one gets in the way of our next job, I don’t have a problem with it,” Kuroo said, though something about it sounded almost reluctant. He didn’t want to turn down one of Koutarou’s friends, but he’d sure as hell be going out of his way to make sure the guy didn’t get anywhere near Kenma.

“I’ll be sure not to burden anyone,” Keiji stated, offering another courteous bow of the head.

With that, Daichi crossed his arms and grinned. Keiji thought the gesture to be more intimidating than welcoming. “In that case, welcome aboard the Corvus.”

Keiji had left the ship long enough to gather some basic necessities for the trip, something he didn’t typically have the leisure of when he traveled his own way. Bringing along a bag with some spare clothes never did him much good when he was traveling underwater, after all.

By the time he’d returned, all of the new shipments had been loaded on, and there were busy sailors running this way and that, preparing the vessel for departure.

He suddenly felt very out of place.
“Would you be Keiji?”

The merman looked to his left to see a man much older, though shorter, than himself with dark brown hair and a pair of glasses set over his equally brown eyes.

“You have great timing.” The man offered a welcoming smile and shook hands with Keiji. “I’m Dr. Ittetsu Takeda, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Keiji. The others are busy preparing the ship for our leave, but I can go ahead show you where you’ll be staying these next few days in the meantime, if that’s alright with you.”

“That would be much appreciated, thank you.”

“Splendid!” The man’s smile brightened, and he turned on his heel. “This way, then,” he said, waving for Keiji to follow, but not without first casting a glance at the irregular patch of ‘skin’ beneath the merman’s eye. Keiji had been sure to re-apply some makeup to the scales before returning to the ship, but of course a doctor of all people wasn’t going to miss something like that. He just hoped the man didn’t ask any questions.

Luckily, he didn’t. The shorter man led him down beneath the deck, giving him a basic tour on the way to the guest cabin. By the time they reached the room, Keiji knew where the essential places such as the kitchen were, as well as what areas were restricted to crew-only access. The doctor was careful not to allude to anything suspicious that could be kept in such rooms. Say, a certain oversized fish, for instance.

Keiji stepped into the cabin. Small, with a single cot pushed up against the wall and an old wooden table beside it. On the table was an unlit lantern and a small box of matches. There was a mirror on the wall, but nothing else otherwise. It certainly wasn’t high class travel, but he had expected nothing of the sort.

“Would it be alright for me to ask what business you have in Kingston?”

Keiji set his satchel down on the cot and glanced up at the walls before responding. He could hear the footsteps and voices of the crew members stomping about above.

“I’d like to check up on some acquaintances of mine,” he calmly replied. It was the same explanation he’d given Koutarou and Daichi when the former first brought him to the Corvus. It also wasn’t completely a lie.

The doctor nodded. “Well, I hope you aren’t inclined to motion sickness, but if you are, don’t hesitate to ask for my help.”

“I’m not, but thank you.”

“The noise won’t go on through the night, don’t worry,” Dr. Takeda added with a chuckle, casting his gaze up to the ceiling. “Even those workaholics need rest at some point.”

Keiji nodded. Sleep. Right. He should probably do that one of these days, himself. Maybe tonight would be his lucky night.

It was almost another hour until the Corvus had managed to get any decent distance from Owl...
Roost Island’s docks. The wind hadn’t been in their favor to just sail right out, forcing a group to row ahead in a separate boat with a smaller anchor. Once the anchor was dropped, those still aboard the Corvus used the rope to effectively, albeit more slowly than preferred, reel themselves out from port.

The process had to be repeated another two times before they could finally set sail.

Once the smaller boat had been lifted from the water, Ryuu crawled out from it onto the ship with a groan.

“Good job, little brother!” Saeko called from the helm, and another groan followed.

“I hate kedging.” The younger Tanaka sibling leaned against the railing, eyeing the water below with a ridiculous scowl that could potentially scare off a great white.

“Goes for all of us,” Hajime mumbled as he dropped a box down on the deck.

Ryuu stopped glaring at the waves long enough to look at the box. “The hell’s in there?” Hajime was already in the process of opening it, and when Ryuu saw its contents, he let out a loud laugh. “Really? We only just got off the island!”

“You wanna wait until after one of those shits starts singing to put one on?” Hajime removed one of several pairs of earmuffs from the box and rested them around his neck. “Don’t expect me to save your ass this time, then.”

“We ain’t gonna run into one of those again.” Ryuu huffed and pushed away from the railing. Despite his words, he strolled over to the box and plucked out a pair for himself. “These really gonna be enough to block out some singin’?”

“Worked the last time. I didn’t hear them from my cabin, either.” He picked up another pair and tossed them to another crew member from across the deck. “They’re not as much a threat as they think.”

“Just enough of a threat for you to go through all this trouble, huh?” Ryuu began to smirk, and Hajime shot him a cold stare.

“All this trouble will make it easier to shoot one down if it tries to lure us into another one of its damn sea serpent friend’s paths.”

“Shouldn’t ya be more worried about the serpents than the fish?”

“The fish is what led us into the serpent in the first place. So, no. Fuck the fish.”

“Ha! I’m amazed you didn’t aim a gun at Kenma the second you saw him.”

“Hey, hey, hey…” The third voice that joined them was surprisingly hushed compared to usual. Koutarou approached the two with a finger to his lips and a ‘ssshhh.’ “You’re probably gonna have to be quiet about that while we’ve got another guest onboard.”

Ryuu jumped a bit, then responded with a guilty nod.

Hajime furrowed his brows at Koutarou. “What other guest?”

“The one from the market?” The boatswain laughed. “Hajime, you were right there.”

“What happened to picking him up after the Kenma thing?” Hajime hiss-whispered back at
“Daichi said that would be too much trouble, so, he’s here! We just have to make sure he can’t get into Shouyou and Tobio’s room, and everything will be fine!”

Well fuck. There went Hajime’s plan of getting some information out of Koutarou and telling him and Daichi what he heard on the island before they actually brought this Keiji guy on the damn ship. Now they were already ditching Owl Roost in the waves behind them.

No way. Screw this. He wasn’t going to hide all this possibly dangerous information from their captain. They had enough to deal with as it was.

“We need to talk with Daichi,” he growled, snatching Koutarou by his shirt and promptly dragging him off toward the captain’s quarters. “Now.”

“Wha? Let go! I’m your senior on this ship!”

Hajime ignored Koutarou’s complaining, and Koutarou didn’t seem to be putting up any sort of physical struggle, anyway.

He did, however, receive another obnoxious laugh from Ryuu when he marched back to grab two more pairs of earmuffs before storming off with Koutarou again.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time On Blood in the Water: PIRATES
Chapter Summary

"Still better than sirens."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three men stood before Daichi now as he sat within his quarters, hands clasped and rested over the desk of cherry wood that had been passed down through his family for generations. He sometimes wondered if he should have left the extravagant furniture piece back home and settled for any regular old desk to use at sea. Surely something of this much sentimental value was not an object he should constantly feel stressed around.

And right now, he was most certainly stressed. He and Kuroo had been calmly discussing business matters before Hajime had barged in with Koutarou dragging behind like a reluctant dog on a leash. The gunner had insisted that the matter was urgent, and proceeded to explain his run-in with the man at Yasufumi’s shop, along with the description he’d been given which fit Keiji all too well.

"Maybe he meant another Keiji!" Koutarou had suggested.

Hajime frowned. “Another Keiji with short, dark, curly hair?”

“It’s a common haircut!”

Kuroo snickered. “Owl-head over here would know all about those.”

Daichi lowered his head with a drawn out sigh. “This man didn’t give you any other details, Iwaizumi?”

“No, sir. He only mentioned a trouble-making merperson, then followed up with a human’s description that matched Keiji’s.”

“That doesn’t automatically make our passenger a criminal, though.”

“No, but it means someone’s out there looking for him and, depending on the reasoning, that could mean trouble for us, and we already have one risky passenger as it is.” Hajime crossed his arms with a short huff. “Not that we can’t handle it. I just thought it was worth bringing to your attention, Captain.”

“I appreciate it.” He acknowledged the other with a small nod before turning his attention to Koutarou. “And your friend hasn’t mentioned this person to you before?”

“Huh? No. I only just met Keiji yesterday, so I guess something like that wouldn’t really come up?"
The three stared at Koutarou with disbelief.

“Just yesterday?” Daichi repeated.

“Yeah, at the sanctuary. I didn’t say otherwise, right?”

“You introduced him as your friend, and we were at the island you were raised on. I had assumed…”

“He is my friend, though.” Well, he’d sort of decided that on his own. It was very possible that Keiji was merely tolerating him. “Since yesterday.”

Daichi lifted his still-clasped hands from the table, sliding his elbows to their previous spot instead as he rested his forehead against his fingers. “That doesn’t make me feel any better about the situation.”

“The easiest thing would be to just question the guy,” Kuroo added.

Koutarou bobbed his head. “Yeah! I’m sure it’s nothing! I’ll ask him about it as soon as I check on--”

“I’d rather Iwaizumi questioned him,” Daichi interrupted. “He was the one who met the man on Owl Roost, after all.”

“But if it’s really nothing, then that’s just going to intimidate him!” Koutarou ignored the what’s-that-supposed-to-mean look Hajime was giving him. “I’ll talk to him, alright? If it’s anything suspicious, or if he sounds like he’s lying, then I’ll let you know right away. It’s not like he has anywhere to run, right?”

Well, he could just jump into the ocean, but hopefully it wouldn’t come to that.

“I suppose…”

“Then that settles that.” Kuroo stepped forward and plucked a sheet of paper off from Daichi’s desk. “Then the captain and I can get back to our own work while Koutarou interrogates our guest and Hajime…” He paused, only to allow for an amused smirk. “…siren-proofs the ship, probably.”

Hajime tossed one of the earmuffs at the back of Kuroo’s head without warning.

“Ow! What the hell?!?”

“You keep teasing me about it, but you’ll be grateful the next time when you’re actually conscious to see what’s going on.” He placed the second pair across from Daichi on his desk with care.

“How come he doesn’t get one to the head?”

The question went ignored as Hajime gave a respectful bow to Daichi and turned on his heel to leave. Koutarou stood around for a short, uncomfortable moment before fleeing the room as well.
There was another hour of running back and forth across the deck for Koutarou, checking on the other sailors to be sure that all the tasks he had given them prior to setting out were properly carried out.

Easily distracted and spontaneous as he was, the man knew the ship and all it took to keep it running smoothly better than the majority of the crew. Maybe even more than Kuroo, who just barely outranked him… which was likely because Kuroo was so much better at keeping calm and collected when needed. Koutarou couldn’t argue with that. Besides, even with that ridiculous-as-his-hair personality of his, the rest of his shipmates respected him plenty. By now, they recognized that he did, in fact, know what he was doing.

Of course, it always took outsiders by surprise. It was no wonder why Keiji had assumed he wasn’t in a position of power here.

Ah. Right. Keiji.

Koutarou may or may not have purposely checked on a few shipmates more times than necessary for the sake of putting this encounter off as long as he could. He’d probably offered to teach Tobio and Shouyou some more effective rope-tying techniques about three times before Hajime butted in with, “If you don’t get your ass down to that guest cabin pronto, I’ll do it myself.”

The thing was, he didn’t even know where to begin questioning the guy. He was finally standing in front of the passenger’s cabin door, scratching at the back of his head as he thought over his options.

‘So, hey, um, Keiji? Would you happen to be some kinda convict or anything? You’re not, right?’

Perfect. That would go so smoothly.

He inhaled long and deep, bracing himself before he rapped his knuckles against the wooden door.

There was no response at first, so he gave another knock, this time following with, “Keiji?”

Still nothing. Did he decide to wander around the ship? Maybe Dr. Takeda was still giving him a tour. Koutarou pressed an ear against the door and listened. Still no verbal response, but there was definitely some shuffling going on inside.

He pulled back, then rested a hand over the doorknob. There was a moment of hesitation because, God, he still had no idea how he was going to go about this whole thing. Even so, he found himself pushing through the barrier, half-hoping that he’d imagined the shuffling sound and Keiji wouldn’t actually be inside. ‘Oh well, I’ll just have to ask later,’ he would say, but no. There on the cot, under a few layers of thin blankets, was most certainly the man in question, curly hair sticking out from beneath the covers at the end against the wall.

‘Crap,’ he whispered to himself, taking a step back so that one foot was just out the doorway. Of course he’d be asleep. He’d been talking about getting rest ever since Koutarou invaded his personal space back at the beach.

The blankets shifted, and Koutarou could see that Keiji’s face was peeking out from beneath them, blinking at the sailor with tired eyes that barely seemed to register what was in front of him.

The sailor offered an uneasy smile and wave of the hand, and Keiji responded with a sleepy
groan before slowly pushing himself up into a sitting position.

“Yes, Koutarou?” The bags under his eyes somehow looked even worse than before.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s fine.” He didn’t sound like he meant it.

Koutarou tapped his fingers against the doorframe as he spoke. “I had some questions, but I can come back later! You should really sleep.”

“You’ll just wake me again if you come back later.” Keiji turned to let his legs hang over the side of the bed with a yawn. “What did you want?”

“Um.” The sailor stepped back inside, this time allowing the door to close behind him. “I was hoping you could maybe, er, tell me about what happened in the tavern yesterday?”

It suddenly felt like those tired eyes of Keiji’s were boring into Koutarou’s skull.

“I told you I was being cautious.”

“I know, I know, but… I just thought that person was some mermaid hunter, and that was it, but he was looking for you specifically, right?”

“I never said--”

“Hajime ran into him in town,” he blurted, and the two fell quiet for a moment as they watched one another. Koutarou held a look of anticipation, and, dark circles aside, Keiji suddenly looked very awake. “At least, I think it was them. They said they were looking someone, and you, um, kind of match the description?”

“What description is that?”

Koutarou glanced back at the door before stepping further into the room, away from it. “Both?” He continued to word everything as a question while he tried to recall all that Hajime had relayed. He saw Keiji’s eyes widen, and the sailor quickly waved his hands in front of him. “But he described you as two different people! So, I’m still the only one here who knows what you are.”

Keiji sighed, but whether it was with relief or exasperation, Koutarou couldn’t tell.

Probably both.

“The crew’s just a little worried that someone might come after us now that we have you on board.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “Or that you might… cause some kind of trouble otherwise…”

“I doubt he knows I’m here, Koutarou. And I don’t know how to convince you that I won’t be trouble outside of simply telling you so and acting on it.”

“Yeah, no, I believe you, but if he’s a hunter, then he might be able to track you down somehow, won’t he?”

“He couldn’t manage to find me despite my being on the island for months.” He avoided confrontation with most people in town as often as he could for a reason. “I doubt he’ll find me on this ship.” Keiji leaned back until his head was bumping against the wall. “Besides, he isn’t a hunter to begin with.”
“He’s not?” He recalled what Hajime had said about the merman ‘causing trouble back home’ for this stranger. “Then… what did you do?”

“I left. I didn’t think anyone would notice or care when I did, but apparently I was wrong.”

“Left?”

“Home.”

“Home? Like, another island you were at before Owl Roost?”

“Like the place I was born and raised.” When the sailor showed no signs of understanding, Keiji tacked on another statement. “Where he was born and raised.”

He could practically see the gears turning in Koutarou’s head after that.

“Wait, wait, wait.” The man’s jaw dropped significantly. “Then he’s a--”

“Yes, Koutarou.”

“But he’s from your home, and all you did was leave? Then, doesn’t that just mean he’s worried about you?”

“I doubt that...”

“But what if it’s important? Keiji, he could’ve had a message for you! What if there’s an emergency? What if something happened to your family?”

God, this guy was optimistic. Keiji watched him for all of two seconds before tilting his head back and closing his eyes against the sight of the ceiling. He bit his lip before murmuring, “That has nothing to do with me now.”

“Keiji…” Koutarou frowned. He stepped forward, then stopped, unsure if sitting anywhere on the cot beside the other was safe or not. “Why did you leave?”

“I don’t know how I feel telling that to someone I only met yesterday, Koutarou.”

“Well, I already know a lot about you anyway, right?”

“Yes.” Keiji opened his eyes, but kept them turned upward. “A lot more than I would like.”

“Oh.”

Koutarou shifted uncomfortably where he stood. He couldn’t blame Keiji for feeling that way, even if he had shown him an incredible sight and managed to hook him up with a ride to Kingston. Some people just weren’t as easy to win over as Shouyou or himself.

“Then… what should I tell the others? You ran away from home, and now you’ve got family looking for you?” It was at least a more reassuring explanation than, ‘You’re hiding from the law’ or something along those lines.

“Eita isn’t family, but otherwise, yes. I don’t know what else to say without giving away what I am...” Or his reasons for running away and being so damn distant from everyone. Thank goodness he had been, too, or else the guy might have actually been able to get some information on him from those merchants on the island. He could only hope that he wouldn’t pester anyone at the bird sanctuary before Keiji returned…
Koutarou gave a slow dip of the head, then pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the door. “Okay. So. I’ll do that, and, um… let you get back to sleep…”

At this point, tired as he was, Keiji wasn’t even sure if he could fall asleep again. Nonetheless, he responded with a, “Thank you, Koutarou,” and finally managed to pull his gaze from the wood planking above.

Night had already fallen by the time Kuroo poked his head into the deckhands’ cabin, a lit lantern hanging at his side. Both boys were already asleep, Shouyou snoring like there was a goddamn train onboard with one leg dangling out from his hammock. How that kid didn’t fall out and onto Tobio every night was a mystery.

Among all the obnoxious snoring was the sound of water sloshing about, but it wasn’t from the waves outside. Kuroo’s eyes fell onto the container and, sure enough, Kenma had shifted and was peeking over the edge at him. His eyes were wide and alert, and still so cat-like that Kuroo was almost surprised they weren’t glowing in the dark of the room.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Kuroo asked, all whispers as he approached the merman as not to disturb the others. Not that he expected Shouyou to hear anything over his own snoring. He was almost as bad as Noya. Almost.

“No,” Kenma said simply, and he rested his head on the edge of the wood.

Kuroo watched him carefully before asking, “Excited to almost be home?”

The other shrugged. “It’ll be nice to sleep in more open water again.” His eyes wandered. “And to see my family.”

Kuroo frowned. “Why does it sound like you’re trying to think of things to convince yourself?”

“I do want to go home, Kuroo.”

“But?”

“I didn’t say anything about a ‘but.’”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Maybe because we don’t have apples in the ocean.”

Kuroo placed a hand over his heart, feigning hurt. “Kenma only loves us for the food.”

“I wouldn’t mind another cookie before I have to leave.”

“‘Have to,’ huh?” Kuroo smirked. “There aren’t any left, though. I’ll see if the chef can whip anything else up.”

“That’s okay…”

Kuroo shook his head. “It’ll be your last time on human turf, won’t it? I can’t see you coming
back to the surface after what you’ve already been put through.” His amusement was fading into something uncertain. “Your first glimpse of the surface was shitty, so your last should be something at least half-decent. I’ll make sure if that.”

Kenma scrunched his nose at him. “Please don’t make it sound like I’m dying.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were.”

Kuroo quietly pulled up a chair and sat himself backwards on it in front of Kenma. “I’m sorry, alright? But I can’t see you again after this. It’s not like I can just dive down and pay you a visit.” He folded his arms over the back of the chair and rested his chin there. “And it’s bothering me.”

“Your ship takes on human passengers often, doesn’t it?” Kenma asked, and Kuroo lowered his head in response. “Do you usually get this way with them?”

“No.”

The easiness of Kuroo’s response actually had Kenma taken aback. He’d at least expected some sort of hesitation or self-reflection before he got an answer.

“Then why?”

“Why you, you mean?” Kuroo leaned his head forward more, neck now pressed against the sides of his wrists as he gave his head a slight tilt. His eyes weren’t focused on Kenma any longer. “Couldn’t you ask Shorty the same thing?”

“The way you look at me is very different from how Shouyou does.”

“We do have different faces.”

“That’s not what I meant, Kuroo.”

The man’s gaze wandered over to said shorty, who was still snoring away. Kuroo had been blocking it out as white noise thus far. Tobio seemed just as knocked out in the lower hammock.

“Maybe you’re imagining things.”

The merman’s gaze was still fixed on him, unwavering. Kuroo very much felt like he was being judged. “Maybe.” Kenma knew when he was and wasn’t imagining things. He didn’t even bother to mention the fact that Kuroo was very obviously avoiding meeting his eyes now.

“In any case,” Kuroo stated after a pause, one finger tapping against his arm. “If the distance from Owl Roost you gave us is right, we’ll be around your area before sunrise.” He tried and failed to hide the disappointment in his tone.

“I’ll try not to make you wait too long when we get there.”

Kuroo finally looked at Kenma. Well, looked at his general form that didn’t include his eyes, at least. He raised a curious brow, to which Kenma did the same.

“The payment? I promised treasure, remember?”

“Oh.” And then his eyes were on the damn wall again. “Right. That. What are we talking, anyway? A bunch of seashells?” He was still tapping away at his arm, and everything about the
current conversation felt so forced on Kuroo’s end. “None of us thought to ask if merpeople have
the same idea of treasure as humans.”

“I think that definition varies for everyone…” Kenma’s eyes were fixated on the man’s hand.
“I figured you’d be expecting jewels or something. So, that’s what I’m giving you. It’s not like I
need them.”

“You make it sound like table scraps.”

“I don’t really care about flashy things. They’ve been sitting around since I was little.”

The tapping stopped, and Kuroo looked in Kenma’s general direction again. “You’re not
giving us some kind of important family heirloom, are you?”

“No. It’s just junk I found in the dirt.”

“Junk you-- You just find that stuff laying around?”

“Things have to go somewhere when you humans drop them.” Kenma shrugged. “It’s not like
our culture doesn’t covet that stuff like you do. I just don’t care for it. I found things treasure
hunting when I was little, and they just accumulated over the years.”

“You find that kind of shit while playing treasure hunt as a mer-baby, and you think checkers
is amazing?”

“Checkers doesn’t require any moving around.”

“Lazy little shit.”

Another shrug.

“You’re gonna get worn swimming all the way down there and back to deliver that stuff, you
know. You haven’t exercised in who-knows-how-long.”

“I’ll get over it. I guess.”

“You’ll exhaust yourself.”

And then he was tapping away at his arm again.

Kenma sighed, then carefully leaned over the edge of the container. His expression was calm
as he curled his fingers around Kuroo’s own. “I’ll be alright, Kuroo.” He held his breath, along
with any hint of worry from his face when the man’s eyes finally met his. Why hadn’t he noticed
that hint of pink in Kuroo’s cheeks until just then? Or had it not been there at all before?

They watched each other, eyes searching for something in their expressions in silence.
Kuroo’s lips parted, but there was clear hesitation in the action as no sound escaped his mouth.
Kenma waited, but the next sound he heard was not from Kuroo.

There was a choking noise as Shouyou’s snoring came to an abrupt halt, and then the boy
shifted further onto his side in the hammock. Now there was an arm hanging out along with his
leg. Kuroo and Kenma turned their heads to him, bodies stiff and fearful that he may have stopped
breathing.

And then the snoring picked back up.
Kenma exhaled a relieved breath, shoulders relaxing again.

And then, Kuroo’s hands were slipping out from beneath his fingers. “I should…” the man began, “…probably leave before we wake them.” His voice was soft. Calm. Too calm, Kenma thought. “You should sleep too.”

“You too…”

“...Yeah.”

Despite all the noise coming from Shouyou’s breathing, it felt like there was an unbearable silence between them as Kuroo stood from his seat. Kenma quietly sunk back into his barrel, watching as Kuroo turned and started for the cabin door. He paused before the stairs, glancing over his shoulder and uttering a quiet, “Good night.”

It could barely be heard over the snoring, but Kenma managed to make it out and responded with a tiny nod and a “Good night” of his own.

The sun was only just beginning to rise, and half of the crew was already up and about on deck. The sails had been furled, and Daichi was looking out at the water in search of some sort of indicator.

“Does this look right to you…?”

“How the hell should I know?” Saeko was leaned over the wheel, one hand with a compass outstretched in front of her. “S’all just water around here. Unless you wanna take a dive and look for any landmarks.” She paused, then let her hand hang down and glanced up in thought, lower lip pushed out slightly. “Or… watermarks…?”

“Watermarks?” Daichi lowered his spyglass and raised a brow at the woman.

“Well it wouldn’t be a landmark underwater!” Another pause. “Right?”

“We passed it, didn’t we, Saeko?”

“I said I don’t know!” She straightened this time, throwing her arms up in the air. “We passed that tiny patch of land with the dead trees and shit already. That’s the only marker Kenma gave us, and he’s never even seen it himself! And I think we’re the right distance from it now?” She ran her free fingers through her hair. “Assuming that mermaid miles are the same as human miles… What if they measure in like, kelp or something? What if one mile is actually one kelp? Why don’t we ever ask these things?”

“I’m sure that’s not the case…”

The blonde leaned over the helm again and began shouting at her brother on the lower deck. “Hey, Ryuu! Go jump in the water and tell us if you see any cities or somethin’!”

“Huh?!” The younger sibling pulled down the earmuffs that he’d finally put on after many glares from Hajime. “You fuckin’ crazy?!”

“I believe in you, Ryuu!”
“I’m with Sis!” Noya chimed in, turning his attention from the lifeboat he and Ryuu had been checking on and pumping his fist in the air to cheer him on. “Go! Go! Go!”

“I know you’re good at holding your breath!”

“Is he?!” Noya looked up at Saeko, shouting way louder than was necessary for her to hear him.

The woman grinned. “Mom used to scold him for timing himself when we’d go to the beach!”

Noya turned around to face Ryuu again, face serious, and pointed a finger straight out at the water. “Only you can handle this task, Ryuu.”

“Fuck you!”

“You can’t do it?”

“You don’t think I can?!”

Daichi was groaning, running a hand over his face in a long, drawn out motion. “No one is doing any diving,” he said, tired, but stern nonetheless.

“Aside from our merman.” Saeko tilted her head back as she watched the captain. “Who is… where, now?”

Daichi lowered his hand back to his side. “Kuroo should be checking that Keiji is being watched first, then they’ll be bringing Kenma out here.”

“Right, right. What a pain, having to be so hush hush on our own ship.”

“Well,” Daichi began, and he compressed the spyglass and slipped it into his coat pocket. “We won’t have to once this is out of the way. Hopefully it won’t take too long.”

As if on cue, a door came swinging open, and Kuroo stood in its entrance, foot poised in the air from having kicked the barrier open and an over-sized fish tail hanging over the front of his shoulder.

Daichi furrowed his brows at the sight. “…Surely you could have carried him without treating him like a sack of potatoes.”

Shouyou and Tobio poked their heads out from behind the man.

“We tried to carry him together—”

Tobio was quick to continue Shouyou’s sentence. “But dumbass here dropped his tail.”

“It’s all slippery!” Shouyou huffed, then turned to Kenma, apologetic. “Oh. No offense.”

Kenma, human half hanging over Kuroo’s back, arms dangling idly below him, watched Shouyou with a hardly amused expression. “You fell on my tail.”

“It was an accident…”

“So, my method was best,” Kuroo said, forcibly conjuring up one of his smirks as he stepped out onto the deck. “It was this, or bridal style.”
“Bridal?” Kenma began to ask, but then pulled in a sharp breath when Kuroo gave a violent shrug, causing the merman to bounce into a better position over his shoulder.

“So, what’s the plan, Captain? We tossing him overboard, or what?”

Kenma pressed his palms against Kuroo’s back, pushing himself up slightly and looking over at him with cold eyes. As relieving as it was for the man to be joking around and not acting so damn awkward again, he was still being a major pain in the ass.

“Just get him in the boat, Kuroo.”

Kuroo replied to Daichi with a salute and made his way over to Ryuu and Noya. Shouyou followed close behind, while Tobio hung back. Kuroo stepped into the lifeboat first, carefully setting Kenma down so that the merman could sit on his tail in the meantime. Shouyou climbed in after, and sent a thumbs up to the others, giving the okay to lower them down to the water.

“How long of a trip are you thinking?” Kuroo asked, watching Kenma as the half-blonde stared down at the waves below.

“It’s pretty far down…” Kenma frowned at the water. “Assuming we’re even in the right spot. I can’t really tell from up here. Hopefully not more than half an hour…”?

“You look exhausted already.”

“It’s a lot of swimming. I’m still amazed I didn’t turn around the first trip.”

“No kidding.”

When Kenma looked up at Kuroo, he noticed how strained the smile on his face was. Maybe all that joking around wasn’t something to be relieved about, after all. Was he putting on a show for his sake?

The thought pulled the corners of Kenma’s lips further down his face.

Shouyou turned away from making faces at Tobio up on the ship and plopped down more comfortably beside Kenma. He leaned over and caught sight of his frown, then reached out to push his fingers against the sides of his mouth, pushing it up into a strange-looking smile. “Cut that out,” he said, pouting at the look of disapproval Kenma gave in return. “You’re finally going home, so be happy about it! We’re gonna see you as soon as you swim back up here, anyway, so at least save the frowns until then if you have to.”

Kenma pulled away from Shouyou’s hands, mouth twisting to get rid of the lingering feeling of contact.

“He’s got a point.” Kuroo might have been saying it more to comfort himself than Kenma. “So, for now, it’s gonna be ‘be right back’ instead of ‘goodbye.’”

Kenma looked down, and the water from this view still felt so foreign to him. But that was it. The sight was strange, but he’d finally grown accustomed to the feeling of air filling his lungs, to the sound of footsteps and waves sloshing against wood. And now he was about to abandon that for good. Well, for about half an hour or so, then for good.

No more checkers or tic tac toe, but then he supposed he could recreate those just fine back home. He couldn’t recreate cookies or apple turnovers, though.
No more human food.
No more Shouyou.
No more Kuroo.

He swallowed, and felt himself jerk when Kuroo placed a hand over his shoulder.

“Ready?”

There was a pause before he murmured a “Yeah,” and Kuroo and Shouyou helped him up over the edge of the boat.

Kenma stared down another moment before he closed his eyes, bracing himself.

The icy chill of the water shot shivers from his head to the end of his tail as he broke through the surface, the sensation completely different from that which came with dipping in and out of the barrel. It was unexpected, but soothing in its own way.

He stretched his arms out in front of him and peered out into the endless, blue abyss. Streaks of white light curled through the water like curtains. A school of some sort of small fish that he didn’t recognize parted and passed around him like he was just another obstacle. Another natural part of the sea.

Home sweet home?

Somehow, this didn’t feel as comforting to him as it should. Was it because being this far up wasn’t as much his home as the ocean’s depths were?

He glanced up at the surface, where he could just barely make out Shouyou and Kuroo leaning over the edge of the boat through the ripples.

“Be right back,” he whispered to himself, gills parting open at his neck as his mouth moved. His words bubbled through the water, but still with more clarity than any human could have managed. He looked downward, hoping with everything that they were near his home and he wasn’t about to get himself lost.

Not that it mattered.

As soon as he pushed forward, Kenma felt a force hit hard at his side, sending him tumbling sideways through the water. He swung his arms outward, fighting to regain a sense of balance, but his fingers only tangled with the netting that forced its way around him. He drew water through his mouth and gills in a sharp breath and looked every which way, searching for an opening.

There was shouting overhead, but Kuroo and Shouyou’s words were drowned out by Kenma’s own thoughts, a panicked repetition of, “No, not again.”

“Did you see that?!?”

“See what?!?”

“Something just shot into the water!”

“Was probably just a bird!”

Despite Ryuu’s dismissal, Shouyou and Kuroo were sure that whatever just made that splash
was no bird. They’d seen enough pelicans dive after fish to know the difference.

Their concerns were confirmed when Kenma resurfaced, covered from head to tail in fishing net. Just as quickly as he was pulled up from the water, the net was dragged across the waves, away from the Corvus by an unseen force.

“Kenma!” Kuroo leaned forward, fully prepared for all of one second to dive after him, but he knew he’d never catch up at the rate the merman was being carried off.

“What the hell was that?!” Ryuu leaned over the edge of the ship, squinting out at where Kenma seemed to be being reeled off to. At some point off in the distance, the end of the rope pulling him seemed to disappear completely, as if dragging into some sort of invisible... portal? He whipped his head around to find Hajime, who was already pulling up to the railing, musket in hand.

Smoke plumed all around their faces as the sound of the gunfire echoed throughout the area. There was a distant sound of the lead ball hitting something, but all they could see was sky and water, and a struggling merman being pulled against the waves.

“Don’t shoot at him!” Kuroo snapped up at them from the lifeboat.

“I didn’t shoot at him!” Hajime barked back.

There was a ripple, not in the water, but in the air as Kenma too, vanished from sight completely.

The crew stared at the now-empty expanse, some in in confusion and shock, and others in pure horror.

“What was…”

“Who cares!” Shouyou was tossing his shirt off into the boat beside Kuroo. “If there’s some kinda portal there, then we can go after him!”

Kuroo grabbed Shouyou by the shoulder, pulling him back from doing what he himself had almost done a moment ago. Shouyou shot him a disapproving glare, but Kuroo only pointed out at the supposedly-void space. When the deckhand turned his gaze back to it, his eyes grew wide.

The rippling in the air had picked back up. Waves of something distorted the view much like heat in a desert, but much more violent, and all of it emitting from the spot where Hajime’s shot had hit.

As the ripples began to die down, the space between them began to reveal something. Patches of brown and and red and black. Patches of wood.

“No fucking way.” Hajime lowered his weapon just as Daichi was stepping up beside him.

Their captain set his hands firmly on the railing and glared out at the unnatural sight. With every bit of wood that was revealed, a more distinct shape began to form in front of their eyes. That of a ship less than half the size of the Corvus.

“Pirates.” Something in Daichi’s tone made the others flinch.

“The Catfish Calamity?” Noya had already had his spyglass out, and was reading off the faded words painted onto the side of the ship.
“Pull Kuroo and Hinata back onboard,” Daichi ordered, casting glances at Ryuu and Noya, then to Hajime. “Iwaizumi.”

“Ahead of you already.” Hajime was motioning something to Tobio, who gave an understanding nod before running out of sight.

“Catfish Calamity,” Ryuu huffed as he tugged on the ropes opposite Noya, pulling the lifeboat back toward them. “Ain’t we heard that name before? Those laughing stocks?”

Along with the appearance of the new ship, the sound of voices carried through the air, albeit difficult to make out clearly from the Corvus.

On the Catfish Calamity stood a person with a hat covered in a ridiculous amount of unnecessary jewelry. Short, near-white blonde hair poked out from beneath the hat as the tall and lanky figure waved his arms about energetically.

“See? See, Morisuke?” he was shouting, grinning all too enthusiastically. “I told you stealing that medallion from that ghost ship was a good idea!”

Morisuke, a man about a foot smaller than the other with short, pale brown hair, hardly looked as excited. “We almost lost Kanji to a possession on that ship, Captain.”

“Eh, he turned out fine.” Another man with dark, curly hair said with a bored, half-lidded expression as he helped pull a net with a thrashing merman onto the deck.

“I’m fine!” Kanji announced from beside him, raising a hand from the net to his messy head of blonde and black, like some unholy combination of Noya and Kenma’s hair, in a salute.

“See?!” Their captain repeated, still grinning away. He held up a silver string, where a beautiful purple jewel was dangling from and glistening in the approaching sunlight. “And it worked! That other ship didn’t even see us. It’s almost like we’re ghosts to them!”

As if on cue, something shot through the air, just missing the captain’s hand and knocking the pendant to the ground. The jewel shattered, and the man let out a horrified screech.

“Whelp,” the dark-haired man said blankly.

“I guess they saw us,” said another from the helm. His eyes were narrow, and his hair much like Morisuke’s in color, if not more on the red side of the spectrum.

“How did they do that?!?” The captain was whining, all while Morisuke stared down at the broken jewel in disbelief.

“How did you do that?” Noya unknowingly echoed, jaw dropped slightly. He was looking through the spyglass again now that they’d gotten Kuroo and Shouyou back on deck.

“Do what?” Hajime raised a brow at Noya. “I missed.”

“You hit his necklace thing!”

“You think I can see some necklace from here?”

“You didn’t mean to do it?!”

Noya jumped when Kuroo snatched the spyglass out of his hand to use for himself. “Where is he?” he asked as Shouyou bounced up beside him, as if it would actually give him a better look.
“They just pulled him onto their deck,” Noya said. “Amidships, port side.”

Kuroo could see someone unfurling the sails to the Catfish Calamity before he locked onto Kenma, who was now being pinned down to the deck by Kanji and the darker-haired man. He scowled, and Shouyou turned around, eyes searching for Daichi.

“Captain!” he yelled, voice dripping with worry.

Daichi was already running along the edge of the ship, eyes fixed on the Catfish Calamity as he called out to his own crew. “Sails!” he shouted, and then Shouyou was rushing toward the mast with more determination than he’d ever had. He climbed up the rope ladder of the center spar as fast as he could, catching up to Taketora who was already preparing to let the massive cloths loose. Ryuu and Noya were soon following after to handle the others.

“Saeko!” Daichi ordered, turning his head to the woman at the helm, who was quick to turn the wheel before her.

“Aye aye!”

Tobio was soon returning, arms full of muskets which Hajime was quick to retrieve. The gunner tossed one to their captain and another to Kuroo before asking, “Where the hell is Koutarou?”

“Keeping our guest occupied.” Tobio saluted him before tacking on a delayed “Sir” at the end.

Hajime groaned as he took aim on the retreating pirates once again. “Stick the guy with the chef or something, we need Koutarou up here.”

With another salute, Tobio was off, and Kuroo was standing beside Hajime, eyeing the firearm in his own hands with unease. At the sound of another shot and the smell of smoke, Kuroo looked up at Hajime, then to the ship ahead of them.

“Relax.” Hajime didn’t even cast the first mate a glance as he removed a paper cartridge from the pouch at his side. He tore off the twisted end with his teeth and spat it onto the deck before pushing the remains containing the lead ball and powder down into the weapon. “I’m not going to hit the merman.”

Kuroo didn’t seem comforted by this statement. “You didn’t mean to hit that necklace earlier.”

“I’m not going to hit him, alright!?” Hajime cast him a quick glance with narrowed eyes before returning his gaze back to his target. Before he could even pull the trigger, he felt something zip past him, just missing his face by less than an inch. “Shit.”

Kuroo looked back at the dent the opposing shot had made on the Corvus’s deck. “Pirates still better than sirens?” he asked, tone unusually dry as he finally loaded his own weapon.

“Still better than sirens,” Hajime murmured as he fired.

Both ships were gaining speed now, and Daichi was desperately trying to formulate a plan to get the merman off the Calamity as he took aim at their helmsman.

“Captain!”
Daichi’s aim was thrown off at the sound of Hinata’s yelling from the crow’s nest. His shot hit the side of the pirate ship, completely useless and unnoticed by its crew.

“One of them’s preparing a cannon!”

The older man cursed under his breath. “Prevent them from firing at all costs!”

Noya and Ryuu were descending from the masts, and Taketora climbed down far enough for them to toss him a weapon before re-ascending.

Kuroo had locked onto their captain, figuring that the tall bastard would be an easy shot, but no. He was all over the place about as much as Shouyou during one of his absurd mopping competitions with Tobio.

“Hold still,” he murmured as he lowered his musket to reload.

But holding still was not something the Calamity’s captain was known for.

“Fire!” The pirate captain yelled as he ran up to the side of the cannon that Morisuke and Kanji had been preparing. He set his foot down on the wooden blocking and pointed an arm out dramatically toward the Corvus.

“We’re not even ready yet, Lev,” Morisuke hissed as the two rammed gunpowder into the contraption.

“Captain!” Lev corrected, spinning around and switching his finger’s point from the merchant ship to the hat atop his head. Morisuke ignored him.

“You know, Captain,” the dark-haired man was sitting over Kenma’s back, now tugging hard on a rope to keep the merman’s arms bound to his sides within the net. “A ship that size is gonna have way more artillery than ours.” Kenma had given up on trying to flail his way out from beneath the man at this point. “I hope you’re not planning on getting us sunk all for the wrong merman.”

“Thank you, Issei,” Morisuke huffed.

“What do you mean the wrong one?!” Lev hopped away from the cannon, pausing momentarily to glance back as one of Kuroo’s bullets whizzed past him.

“We kept trying to tell you before you shot off that net!” Morisuke would’ve been glaring daggers at Lev if he weren’t so focused on getting the cannon ball in its proper place. “The one Eita described was black and white, not yellow.”

“What?” Lev’s jaw dropped. “Wasn’t it just light and dark? This guy here is light and dark!” He gestured down at Kenma, who gave him a look that could easily freeze the very waves they were sailing through.

“It was definitely black and white.” Issei stood from Kenma and nonchalantly pushed their captain out of his way, and coincidentally out of the way of another of the enemy’s shots. He’d left the merman on the deck with arms and tail all bound uncomfortably to prevent as much movement as possible, and now moved to snatch up a firearm for himself, since the rest of their tiny crew was oh-so-occupied at the moment. “Wasn’t it, Takahiro?”

The helmsman nodded, grip firm on the wheel. “Definitely black and white.”
“We can still sell him off or something, can’t we?!” Lev had his hands out in front of him, palms turned upward and fingers wriggling about as though grasping at and idea or answer that wasn’t there.

“Focus on what’s in front of us first!” Morisuke pulled away from the cannon and covered his ears just before a loud bang filled the air.

The sound that followed was the horrific crash of wooden walls and glass being broken through as the cannonball collided with the captain’s quarters. Kanji was quickly blurtling out loud apologies to his crew, and Morisuke inwardly cursed over allowing Kanji to take aim rather than himself. They should be hitting the vessel below the water line for a better chance at sinking it, dammit.

Morisuke wasn’t the only one cursing.

Daichi regretted the fact that one of the first thoughts that ran through his head at the attack was ‘My desk,’ but he quickly brushed it off. Family heirlooms were important and all, but now really was not the time.

His eyes fell onto one particular part of the Calamity before he rushed down the steps to the lower deck, gun slung over his shoulder as he made way for the cannon that Ryuu was moments away from firing. The lower-ranked sailor quickly dropped what he was doing and stumbled out of the way at the sound of his captain’s footsteps, and Daichi turned the cannon before the fuse could set it off. The two of them and Noya turned away and covered their ears from the following cannonfire.

“What were you--”

“Their ship’s taken damage before,” Daichi said, turning to face the enemy once again. He put a hand on Ryuu’s shoulder, pulling him closer as he pointed out at where he’d just fired. A section of wood among that which made up the Catfish Calamity was cracked and caving inward around the waterline. Likely the result of another attack such as this one, or perhaps simply some reckless steering. It had likely been patched from the inside for it to still be functioning as it was now, but hopefully it would still serve as a decent weakness as far as the Corvus was concerned.

Daichi’s shot had missed that particular spot, as expected with his last minute aim, but it was only off by ten feet or so.

Noya gave an understanding and almost excited ‘Oooh!’ as he stood up on his toes to see where they were looking, and then he was off to prepare the cannon for the next hit.

The Calamity’s captain let out another horrified shriek as their entire vessel shook from the impact. “Aim lower!” Lev ordered, and finally took up arms for himself to contribute to the attack. Well, somewhat contribute.

His aim with a gun was dreadful. The pirate captain put almost no effort into planning his shots, and just about every single one hit the side of the Corvus rather than anyone onboard.

“Then you aim higher!” Morisuke growled back before turning to Kanji. “Go below and check the damage. I can handle this.”

“But--”

“I can handle this.” He’d never let his crewmates look down on him for his smaller size, and
he sure as hell wasn’t about to now. Even if it was a lot for one person to do on their own, they didn’t exactly have a lot of helping hands to go around. A crew of five people really was not ideal for going up against such a massive merchant ship.

“Maybe Lev should check on the damage instead.” Issei said rather quietly, but Lev still heard him.

“I am your CAPTAIN!”

Issei fired, and unlike Lev, managed to hit someone on the other side. What part of them he’d hit was hard to tell from this distance, but the way the messy dark-haired sailor reeled back was enough of an indicator for him. “Mhm,” was the only noise he gave in response to his superior.

A yell ripped from his target’s throat as the sailor stumbled back, firearm clattering to the ground and a now-free hand reaching up to cover the fresh wound. Kuroo’s shirt and jacket were quickly turning a deep red around the opening, and it wasn’t long before blood was oozing over his fingers and dripping to the wood flooring in front of him as he bent over in pain.

“Kuroo!”

Koutarou had burst through the door with an exhausted-looking Tobio close behind just as his crew-mate was hit.

“ Took you long enough,” Kuroo murmured. He was already curling over to retrieve his musket when Koutarou zipped past and snatched it up and away from him.

The boatswain surveyed the pirate ship as he lifted the weapon in front of him. “Doc’s down with Chef and Keiji! Go see him!”

“I’m not sitting this out!” Kuroo’s body betrayed him as his vision momentarily blurred, face distorting in a telltale wince as it did.

“Get down there before I throw you down the stairs myself.” Hajime sent a quick scowl Kuroo’s way before he managed to get a clear shot of the Calamity’s helmsman. He didn’t waste time watching Takahiro double over and went right to prepping for another shot. “Tobio, get Kuroo below deck, now.”

Tobio, dead tired of running up and down stairs and hallways when there was a pirate battle going on, reluctantly nodded and reached to lend Kuroo a shoulder, but the older man was quick to pull away.

“A few bandages and I’ll be fine! It can wait--!”

Kuroo stumbled back, but not as the result of an injury this time. The water between the two ships pulsed outward from the center of the gap, and both the Corvus and the Calamity were violently jerked back from the waves, causing the latest cannon fire from the latter ship to miss its target by a longshot. A low sound rumbled from the ocean, like thunder trapped below the surface, and the sea only grew more agitated with every growl.

Those aboard both ships struggled to keep their balance among all the rocking that pushed the crews even further apart.

Those aboard the Corvus were all thinking an unspoken, but completely in unison, ‘Again?’

“Captain!” Panic was dripping off Saeko’s voice as she called out to Daichi.
Said captain grit his teeth. “We’re not retreating!” he yelled back. “Our delivery is on that ship, and we’re not leaving until it’s completed!”

“You stubborn ass!”

He ignored her, but did not ignore the words that followed from Koutarou and Hajime’s mouths after.

“It’s…” Koutarou’s jaw dropped as he watched the water before them grow more and more unsteady.

Hajime lowered his musket to his side, knowing full well that it would be useless with what was coming. “It’s the same one,” he said, eyes hardening on the waves.

Beneath all of the disturbance, something shimmered below the surface. Something gray with hints of blue and green. Something scaled and far, far larger than both ships combined. The pulsing of the water drifted out from the center, the scaley mass brushing against the surface every so often until it had reached a point before the bows of both ships.

The vague sound of thunder became a booming roar as the waves parted for the source of the disruption. Water flew out in all directions as the mass shot up through the air, a pillar of scales and gills and death whose roaring became something of an ear-piercing screech along the way.

The serpent’s long, narrow head alone was the size of the Corvus, its face adorned with scars from previous scuffles, the most familiar to the merchant crew being the marred left eye from a lucky cannon ball shot off by none other than Hajime himself.

Water fell from its face in waterfalls back into the ocean as the creature observed them. Its gaping maw showed off rows of teeth, some sharpened and others chipped and cracked from who-knows-what, and the look in its one good, yellow eye was something between anger and hunger.

Ryu’s expression was completely twisted in horror as he leaned more toward Hajime’s direction. “Still better than--”

“Will you all fucking drop that already?!”

Chapter End Notes

how do ship battles
how do write kuroken

(Shout out to pockyboxes to coming up with and letting me use the brilliant names "Morrigan's Coast" and "Catfish Calamity")
The Serpent of Petal Reef

Chapter by ChosenOfKagami (kagapop), kagapop

Chapter Summary

OKAY SO. This is the last completed chapter that I have at the moment, which means that the whole bi-weekly updates thing is going to come to an end after this. You guys are just gonna have to wait to see chapters as I finish writing them now. ISN'T THAT FUN?
I AM writing bonus chapters when I'm not at the computer though, so maybe you'll have some of those to hold you over between main updates???

Anyway, here's chapter 8. All happy-fun-times 'cause that's just what I'm SO GREAT at writing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was early in the morning, moments before the appearance of the pirate ship known as the Catfish Calamity, and both occupants of the passenger cabin were far from comfortable in each other’s presence at the moment.

Keiji had hardly gotten any sleep after the previous day’s conversation with Koutarou. He had for an hour, two at most, but the majority of his night consisted of tossing and turning on the uncomfortable cot and more staring up at the ceiling. He completely gave up on all hope of getting rest when the shuffling and stomping of feet overhead became a constant before the sun had even fully risen.

He’d managed to touch up the makeup concealing his scales before the doctor showed up with a breakfast consisting of some fruit and porridge. Fantastic porridge, too. He’d have to get the recipe from the chef if he had the chance to meet him. Eating it had almost made him forget about his heavy eyes and pounding headache. Almost.

Now, Koutarou was there, sitting in an old wooden chair that had seen better days on the other side of the room and staring at a spot on the small table next to him as if it were the most interesting thing on the planet.

It was incredible, really, that these sailors had the gall to be suspicious of Keiji while they themselves required him to stay in a room under surveillance while they made this mystery delivery of theirs. There could have been some sort of illegal activity going on up on deck while he was stuck inside, for all he knew.

But he’d hold back his questions if it meant keeping Koutarou from asking more of his own.

The sailor kept shifting in his seat, as if sitting still in silence were an impossible task for him. Judging by what he knew of the man so far, Keiji was willing to believe that as fact.

It was unnerving, though. He continued to expect Koutarou to break the heavy silence
between them with that loud mouth of his, but it never happened. Odd, how someone who was usually so loud somehow seemed more annoying when they were quiet.

“Do you know how long we’ll be down here?” Keiji asked, almost reluctantly deciding to be the one to break the tension himself.

The other jumped in his seat, clearly startled by the question. “Huh?!” He really had been lost in his own little world there, hadn’t he?

Keiji offered a weary stare. “I was asking how long we’d be down here,” he repeated. “I’d thought this secret delivery job of yours might take some time.”

“Oh. Well. I mean, yeah, probably.” He really had no idea. He knew they were bringing Kenma out as soon as they were sure someone was with Keiji, but how long would it take Kenma to bring that treasure he mentioned? Were they even still going on with that deal? Maybe Kuroo and Shouyou would have convinced Daichi to just let it be a good deed and let the merman’s ride be free of charge.

“Probably?”

Koutarou shrugged, the motion large and exaggerated. “Probably!” he restated. “There’s the delivery itself, and then the payment, which might take a while, I think. It’s sort of a complicated trade this time.”

“And that’s if your crewmates aren’t as easily distracted as you are, I take it?”

“Hey!”

“Weren’t you supposed to be making a simple delivery at the sanctuary before you started stalking me?”

“I wasn’t stalking!” Koutarou stuck out his lower lip. “And I had plenty of time to kill after that delivery.”

“You followed me out as soon as I got off of work, even when I asked you not to.”

“Oh.” His lip went out further in the most childish pout Keiji had ever seen on a grown man. “Well, I wasn’t trying to stalk you.”

“And then you were at the beach in the morning.”

“I didn’t know you were there!” He smacked a hand down on the table beside him. “Coincidence! It was a coincidence! And if I hadn’t been there, you wouldn’t be on your way to Kingston right now. You’d have to swim the whole way.”

“Or get a ride from anyone else at the docks.”

“But then you wouldn’t have anyone around to help keep your secret safe.” Koutarou nodded, as if Keiji secret was something he was supposed to know of in the first place. “You could get on some strange boat and wind up someone’s prisoner!”

“To be honest, it feels a little like that right now, Koutarou.” Keiji shifted where he sat on the edge of the bed, legs crossed up on the mattress and elbows rested against his knees. He set his chin in the palm of his hand, and the old cot gave a few creaks at the slight movement. “Though I suppose the conditions could be much worse. I’d rather be locked in a room with a bed and warm
meal than in some pirate brig.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“Not yet, thankfully. And I’d like to keep it that...” He drifted off, feeling something off about the room now. No, about the ship. “...way. Are we moving?”

Koutarou seemed to have noticed it too, and the look on his face told Keiji that he was just as confused as he was. “Yeah... The hell, Kuroo? He was supposed to say something so we didn’t have to keep sitting down here.” He moved to stand from the chair, but stopped himself from making his way to the door. He only watched the barrier, instead. “There’s no way they’re done already, though...”

“Should we... wait...?”

Koutarou furrowed his brows. He could hear the distant yells of his crewmates from above. There had been yelling the whole time, but both of them had chalked it up to rowdy sailors being rowdy sailors. Now, it sounded more frantic, and it had him worried. “I should check.” He paused, then glanced back at Keiji. Shit. “Or. Stay here? Augh, if it’s nothing, then Daichi will get pissed if I leave you here alone!”

“Wouldn’t want me burning the ship down or anything.”

“I’m sure everything’s fine,” the sailor said, though not sounding very convinced himself. “Maybe they just weren’t in the right spot yet. We’ll probably come to another stop soon.”

“No one docks and sets sail this quickly, Koutarou...”

“Dock. Right.” He wasn’t about to explain that, no, they hadn’t stopped at an island. They were just dropping someone off in the middle of the ocean. “Still, it’s probably nothing--”

The ship shook, and Koutarou fell back against the chair, effectively knocking it over and smacking his head hard against the wall. The thunk that resulted from it was hardly audible over the loud explosive sounds from outside the room.

Keiji had managed to more gracefully catch himself from falling off of the bed. When he looked up at Koutarou, the merman’s mouth was agape and his sleep-deprived eyes were wearing something between question and alarm. “Are we being attacked?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing!” Koutarou repeated, jumping to his feet and ignoring the throbbing at the back of his head from the fall. His tone was all too panicked, and Keiji picked up on it instantly.

“What kind of delivery was this?!”

“A normal one!”

The merman wasn’t convinced, especially with the way that Koutarou was looking back and forth from him to the door, as though unsure of what to do.

Leave him and check on the others? But Daichi didn’t want Keiji being left alone until Kenma was out of the picture. Was Kenma even still with them? Shit.

Shit shit shit shit --
The cabin door swung open, interrupting Koutarou’s thoughts and bringing both of the room’s occupants to jump at the sound. In the doorway stood a very out-of-breath Tobio and a much shorter doctor behind him, one of his glasses lenses now cracked from a nasty fall that came with the ship’s recent movements.

“Hajime said…” Tobio started, still working to catch his breath from running up and down stairs and hallways. He was less exhausted from the actual exercise, and more so by trying to figure out where the hell Dr. Takeda even was. Why, why did their ship have to be so damn big at a time like this? “…Deck. Now.”

“I can keep an eye on Keiji,” the doctor said, a sense of urgency in his voice as he stepped out from behind Tobio. “We’ll be with the chef in the kitchen. If anyone gets injured among all this pirate business, Tobio will send for me.”

Tobio, as much as playing messenger wasn’t his job of choice, gave a determined nod.

“Pirates?” Keiji could feel himself regretting boarding this ship more and more with every passing moment.

Koutarou didn’t wait for any more explanation, giving an understanding nod instead and rushing past Tobio and the doctor. He glanced over his shoulder at Keiji on the way out, offering his most apologetic smile. “Sorry! You’ll be safe, don’t worry!”

He didn’t give the merman a chance to respond. Koutarou and Tobio were out of sight in a flash, leaving Dr. Takeda to lead Keiji into the kitchen while the chaos overhead continued.

Koutarou had received a brief overview of what had already taken place on the way to the deck. Something about pirates and Kenma being in danger. That was already that really sunk in, and all he really needed to hear.

Of course, when Tobio had explained all of this, he had assured Koutarou that there had yet to be any injuries among the crew, so the boatswain surely hadn’t planned to open the door to find Kuroo bleeding all over the deck. He also hadn’t planned on that goddamned sea serpent showing its scarred face before he even had the chance to fire a single, lousy shot at the enemy ship.

Koutarou peeled his eyes from the monster long enough to catch a glimpse of Hajime, and the look in the gunner’s eyes was all too familiar. Memories of a crew still disoriented from the siren’s song, running about the ship this way and that in attempts to both outsail and ward off the serpent flooded back through Koutarou’s head.

On the one hand, there were no sirens to lure them to their possible deaths this time.

On the other hand, they didn’t have the option of making a simple escape again. Not with Kenma still a prisoner of the Calamity.

“So,” Koutarou started, voice uneasy. If it weren’t for the captive comrade and an injured best friend, he might have been a little more excited about this turn of events. Okay, way more excited. He’d be throwing cocky remarks and bad puns at the damned snake-thing just about any other time. “Go for the other eye?”

Hajime studied the serpent, its one good eye focused more on the Calamity than their own ship for the moment. Still, they didn’t have time to sit around and think up a detailed plan. “Go for the other eye,” he echoed, lowering his gun and pushing his way past Ryuu to take control of another cannon.
The Calamity, on the other hand, was no longer in the position to make such an attack.

Takahiro was on his knees at the helm, breath unsteady and a concerning amount of blood already coating the deck beneath him. Issei was busy at his side, attempting to hastily cover up the wound, and Kanji was still below deck, presumably trying to patch up the damage on his own. Their captain was still giving off orders to attack, but for the love of everything they were not equipped to handle a sea serpent.

They weren’t even equipped to handle the ship they’d been picking a fight with in the first place.

“Lev, enough…” Morisuke’s gaze was locked with that of the serpent’s, its enormous slit pupil freezing him to the spot. What was it waiting for? Was it trying to gauge whether they were a threat or not? Was it trying to decide which ship to go after first?

No, it hadn’t done so much as cast the Corvus a glance since it showed its face.

“Enough!” He snatched his captain’s wrist and tugged him back, flinging the weapon that had been aimed at the serpent out of Lev’s grasp. “We’re in over our heads as it is, do not make this thing our enemy, too!”

“It hasn’t even moved yet, we can take it down, Mori--!”

The ship shook again, and both pirates looked to the source. The serpent had risen its head further out from the sea, the movement stirring the water around it. Then, with another teeth-gritting screech, it dived downward, open mouth descending upon the Calamity.

Blood-curdling yells mixed with the serpent’s scream.

Massive teeth clamped down upon the masts, tearing them all to useless debris.

“KENMA!”

Just when Tobio had finally managed to steer Kuroo toward the door, the man was turning on his heel once again, fully ignoring the pain shooting through his shoulder at the movement.

“Could you move it along over there?!” Koutarou tore his gaze from the creature to see the cannons, one being manned by Ryuu and Noya while Daichi and Hajime adjusted the other’s aim.

“You try getting a clear shot in this bullshit!” Ryuu snapped.

Koutarou decided to take the suggestion literally. He slung the musket over his shoulder and bolted for the opposite side of the deck, kicking the restraints free from the third of their four cannons and pushing it starboard, toward the others facing the serpent.

Another series of waves tilted the Corvus as the serpent lifted its mouthful of wood and cloth from the Calamity. Koutarou felt his footing slip, and the cannon began to roll back against him, only to be steadied a moment after by another set of hands.

“Dammit, Kuroo!”

“Yell at me later!”

More blood ran down the man’s clothes as Kuroo pushed against the cannon, and the two of them wheeled it to its destination among the others.
“You’re no help, you’ll just slip in your own blood!” Koutarou kicked the restraints back into place, locking the weapon in place a short ways away from Daichi and Hajime’s.

“It isn’t bleeding that much!”

It was bleeding very much.

More screams, and they could see the serpent’s tail-end lifting from the waves, violently striking upward against the Calamity from beneath. The vessel tilted, but unlike the Corvus, it wasn’t a mere jostle. There was no hope of regaining of balance afterwards.

The merchant crew watched in horror as the smaller ship tipped further and further until it was crashing on its side into the waves below.

“Captain!” Noya yelled, waiting for the okay to fire, but Daichi’s glare only hardened on the creature. They still didn’t have a clear shot of the damn thing’s eye.

“Those books of yours tell you about any other weaknesses?” he asked, casting Hajime a glance.

“Sure, got any orichalcum spears on you?” Hajime deadpanned, and then struck a match. “We need that thing to look our way.”

Unfortunately, Daichi knew he was right. The only weakness they were aware of was the one that put them at the most risk. Of fucking course.

“We’ll fire a distraction shot.”

“Koutarou and I can aim for the eye.”

Daichi nodded and turned to Noya and Ryuu. “You two. I need--”

The door to the deck swung open once again, this time to the sound of a very frantic doctor.

“You aren’t supposed to be up here!” he called as he paused in the doorway to catch his breath. The chef was close behind, and a certain passenger was storming across the deck to the cannons despite Dr. Takeda’s pleading.

“Pirates? Sea serpents?” Keiji’s expression was somehow more serious than anything Koutarou had seen on him thus far. “This is your idea of a normal delivery?”

“What are you doing up here?!” Daichi looked from Keiji to the doctor and chef in the doorway. “What is he doing up here?!”

Dr. Takeda stiffened where he stood, and the chef glanced away in a guilty manner.

The doctor had surely tried to keep Keiji from leaving the kitchen, but the man wasn’t exactly strong enough to hold him back, and Keiji had insisted that he knew what all of those screeching noises were and that the crew needed him in this case. Chef Aone had managed to hold him back with ease in the beginning, but with every quake and tremor that graced the ship, he became more inclined to allow Keiji’s help.

“You can’t take one of those out with a cannon.” Keiji only came to a stop when he was just steps away from the men at said weaponry. Past them, he could see the creature busying itself with the remains of the calamity, looking much more like a dog tearing into a new chew toy than a
territorial sea monster. “Why aren’t we sailing away from it while it’s distracted?”

“Our cargo is…” Koutarou paused in his explanation, eyes now focused on where the cannon was aimed. He could have the perfect shot if the damn thing would just look their way. “...There’s someone out there with it.”

Keiji’s brows only furrowed more. Which was it? Were they risking their lives over some dumb cargo, or did someone manage to fall overboard during this mess?

Whatever the case, the crew didn’t seem to have plans on abandoning their efforts any time soon, and they didn’t have time for more interrogations.

He considered, if only briefly, ditching the sailors completely and swimming to Kingston on his own from here. Away from all of this chaos that he certainly did not sign up for. But then, if he had the leftover strength to do that again, he wouldn’t need to be on this ship in the first place.

With an exasperated sigh, Keiji made his way around the cannons, pulling himself up onto the railing beside Koutarou and Kuroo. “Don’t shoot,” he said, tone authoritative.

“What do you mean don’t-- What the hell are you doing?!” Hajime’s jaw dropped as Keiji dove from the edge of the Corvus, a loud splash punctuating his leave.

Koutarou pulled back from the cannon, though the others didn’t show any intentions of doing the same. ‘What the hell?’ indeed. He couldn’t imagine that Keiji would try to take on something so big and dangerous on his own, but then, what did he really know about merfolk? They could shift between having a fish tail or legs, they needed to be submerged in water frequently to live, and their tears may or may not have healing properties. That was it. Whether they had some sort of magical powers capable of fighting off a sea serpent, he had no clue. Kenma hadn’t mentioned that, had he? He hadn’t mentioned the whole ‘some of us can have legs sometimes’ thing either, though.

Ryuu stopped gawking at the water long enough to turn to Daichi. “So are we shooting or not?!”

“We’re shooting!”

“We’re not shooting!”

Daichi’s and Koutarou’s words rang through the air at once, and both exchanged glances.

“Just…” Koutarou bit his lip and looked back where Keiji had just jumped. “…wait. He probably has a plan.”

“No plan that involves him recklessly jumping into the ocean is going to be of use to us!”

And Koutarou really, really hoped that Daichi was wrong about that.

As did Keiji.

At any other time, the sea might have felt welcoming to his over exhausted body. Now it felt like more of a nuisance than anything. Pushing through the water without use of his tail was not his favorite pasttime, even if he was growing more and more accustomed to swimming with human legs. Even now, he could manage faster than the average human, but something about it was almost… painful.
Keeping a human form was tiring, and being in the water without shifting felt like the worst possible tease.

But he wasn’t about to risk anyone else seeing what he was.

His clothes remained on to hide the rest of his scales, despite the fact that he’d be much faster without them weighing him down. He just hoped that the makeup wouldn’t be completely washed away by the time he returned to the ship after all this.

He also hoped the beast he was swimming toward would be even about half as open to conversation as the last he’d encountered.

Beneath the surface, the creature’s body twisted and turned into coils and loops, and Keiji was careful to steer clear of them, keeping a considerable amount of space between himself and the serpent as he swam alongside it.

He could hear crackling and snapping overhead as the Calamity was reduced to splinters, but no screams. No human noises to be heard. No signs that any of the pirates had survived the attack, but no blood or remains to show that they hadn’t, either.

No, that wasn’t right. There was definitely blood, but not that of any pirate’s.

Thin, red streams hung in the water before him, all leading down to their source. Sinking further and further was a body writhing in a net and covered in cuts and scratches from the debris.

*Focus on the serpent. Focus on the serpent. That’s what you came out here for.*

*Oh, hell.*

Keiji changed course, racing further down into the water until he was able to take hold of the net constricting the other.

Kenma’s eyes shot wide open and he whirled onto his side, fully expecting to find that crazy pirate captain attempting to drag him away again, even throughout all of this mayhem. The eyes he was met with were not Lev’s striking green ones, but instead an almost reassuring gaze of blue-gray. What was even more reassuring were the flaps of skin opening and closing at Keiji’s neck as water filtered through his gills.

Keiji kept his grasp on the netting, and reached with his free hand to pull something from his boot. Kenma pulled back as the other withdrew a small knife, and began to cut through the ropes as quickly as he could.

“Why…” Kenma started, but then the serpent shifted, flicking its tail end and sending a current their way. The two tumbled away from it, and Kenma managed to get his head through the opening in the net that Keiji had created. He pushed the rest of the constraints away, allowing them to sink down into the dark depths.

“Go.” Was Keiji’s only order before he spun around and started after the dragon-like creature once again.

Kenma hissed out a “What are you doing?”, but Keiji didn’t take the time to stop and explain himself, leaving the half-blonde to watch as the other swam up to what he could only assume was the man’s death.

When Keiji came to the surface, he found that keeping his head above water was a challenge.
With every shift of the tail and violent shake of the head, the serpent only created more waves. The merman managed to find a hunk of floating wood large enough to cling to as a raft, and he braced himself as another wave of water washed over him.

Then, there was a halt in the creature’s movements. Its good eye locked onto Keiji, and its mouth hung open to release the bits of what was once the Calamity’s bow. A long, breathy hiss left its lungs, followed by another screech.

Keiji breathed in the salty, danger-filled air, and yelled. What he yelled was no ordinary cry of panic or a plea for help, nor was it anything distinguishable to human ears. He had no idea that Kenma was still not far below him, watching up with narrowed eyes in, not quite understanding, but in mild recognition.

The serpent’s cries died down at the sound of Keiji’s... words...? And its body ceased all violent movement.

It slowly and almost uncharacteristically carefully lowered its head closer to the merman’s level. “You speak our tongue?” The sounds poured from the creature’s mouth and dripped off its breath in a slow current, and the air around Keiji suddenly felt far too thick. It was nothing but strange, uninterpretable noises to Kenma or anyone else within earshot, but the language rang perfectly clear to Keiji.

“I’m...” Keiji began, and he pulled himself up onto the wood. As soon as he slipped away his knife, he stood upon the planks, taking a moment to balance himself there as the water settled around them. “…a little rusty, but yes.” He watched his feet, wishing that he could have disposed of these heavy boots and garments upon coming here. Once he felt steady where he stood, he looked up to meet the creature’s gaze. “You wouldn’t happen to be kin of Gandril, would you?”

Another screech-like noise left the serpent, but this time it lifted and fell, mirroring something almost like a laugh. “You are familiar with my brother? Then you are a child of Eventide.”

Keiji sucked in a breath. “I... am,” was his uneasy response.

“What brings you so far from home, child?” The serpent’s eye scanned Keiji up and down. “And in a hideous form such as this?”

“I thought to ask what brought you here, too, if that isn’t out of line.” He glanced back to the water where he’d emerged from, and thought he caught a glimpse of yellow and brown scales flash beneath the waves. “This is hardly a day out from Owl Roost. I don’t recall this being serpent territory.”

The creature gave another laugh, this time its whole body shaking at the act. Thankfully it didn’t cause too much disruption in the water this time. “It is serpent territory now.” Keiji could make out a look akin to amusement in its eye. “Now that the merfolk of Petal Reef have been cleaned out.”

Keiji narrowed his eyes, lips moving to silently echo the name ‘Petal Reef.’ Those words were closer to human tongue, but a heavy accent still clung to and coiled around them like a snake.

“Have you been away from home long, child?” The creature mused, leaning closer to where Keiji stood ever so slightly. “That miserable little village had caused trouble for your people, you know.” It exposed its teeth in a way that Keiji could only describe as a grin. “And my brother refuses to leave your home as its guardian, and the siren refused to cooperate, so I took it upon myself to dispose of the threat for you lot.” Another high cackle. “Aren’t I too kind?”
Keiji’s legs suddenly felt very, very weak, and this time it wasn’t mere fatigue from keeping them for too long. “Took it upon yourself?” he asked, voice much calmer than he actually felt. “Then no one gave such an order?”

“Order?” The serpent pulled back. “I take orders from no one, child.”

“What about a request, then?” Keiji glanced over his shoulder at what remained of the Calamity. He thought he saw a few heads of hair bobbing among the planks of wood, but chose not to linger on them for long. If he got too distracted, then the serpent would be, too. “Just today, if you could allow any other ships to pass through unharmed...”

He was met with a loud, unpleased hiss at the suggestion.

“I understand that you’ve claimed these waters as your own,” he said, and did a good job of keeping his face from twisting at his own words. These waters belonged to a village of merfolk before now, not some bloodthirsty, revenge-driven abomination. “You don’t wish to be disturbed, but you’ve already taken care of one culprit. There won’t be any need for the other to cause disturbance without anyone to fight.”

“That’s right...” The serpent considered something, but it wasn’t all of Keiji’s words. Rather, it turned its head until the Corvus was finally in its vision. “...there was another.”

Okay, this was not the result Keiji was going for at all.

“Please, wait!” Desperation filled the merman’s voice. “They won’t be of any harm if you leave them be.”

“They won’t?” The creature’s tone faded from amused to rage-stricken. “I know that ship. That ship cost me my eye!” The last word was drawn out until it was blurring with another series of screeches.

Keiji cast the Corvus a look that said ‘unbelievable.’ Not that they could see it. “The next time they sail through here, they’re all yours,” Keiji insisted, and he inwardly apologized to the crew. He was running out of persuasive methods here, though. “But right now, I need their help.” Because he’d definitely pass out if he tried to swim anywhere on his own at this point, let alone Kingston. And that was definitely the only reason. Definitely.

“Are you to tell me these repulsive sailors are allies of Eventide?”

Keiji tilted his head, not quite nodding, but not shaking his head either, and made a noncommittal sound. “For now, they are my allies.”

The serpent turned its eye back on Keiji, narrowed with pure displeasure. “I want them dead. Every last one of them, skewered upon my very teeth.” It flashed said fangs. “You will send them my way once you are done with them?”

Keiji eyed the Corvus for a long moment before turning his attention back to the intense eye staring down at him. “As long as I am a child of Eventide, you have my word.”

And then, the creature’s grin returned. “I will be waiting for that meal.”

With that, it sunk beneath the water, creating enough of a wake to send Keiji falling to his knees on the wooden board. Once he was sure the serpent was taking its leave, he let out a long, shaky breath.
Petal Reef was…?

He remembered the merman he’d freed from the net, and leaned over the edge of the board. He ducked his head beneath the waves and scanned the area for any sign of him.

Sure enough, there was that tail of yellow and brown, several yards below the surface… but something wasn’t right. He wasn’t even moving. Blood loss? No, the wounds hadn’t seemed that bad. Was there another injury?

This voyage was just one thing after another, wasn’t it? He hadn’t even been off the island for more than a day, dammit.

Rather than taking the time to re-compose himself, Keiji dove back into the water after Kenma.

When he got to him, he found someone frozen not by physical pain, but with what was certainly outright fear. Kenma had his arms wrapped around himself, and his tail curled beneath him in a defensive manner. And he was shaking.

“What did it tell you?” Kenma murmured, clearly aware of Keiji’s presence now. “I can’t understand most of its language, but it said something about Petal Reef, didn’t it?” He didn’t look up to meet Keiji’s gaze. He only lowered his head, wishing that his bangs would fall in his face and hide his eyes like they did on land, instead of floating uselessly around the water.

“It… did…” Keiji bit his lip, now fearing the worst. “Were you…?”

The other lowered his head even more, and Keiji dropped his gaze to the depths below.

“That thing doesn’t belong here. Our village never had a guardian.” Kenma didn’t want to keep talking. He wanted to ball up and pretend these newfound fears didn’t exist.

No, he wanted to go home. He wanted to go home and find his family there as if nothing had ever changed. As if he’d never left and this intruder had never crossed their waters.

“And if it’s not our ally, then….”

Now Keiji was shaking, too. He opened his mouth, but even an ‘I’m sorry’ seemed useless.

Kenma uncurled from himself, his eyes still fixed downward. He began to move, but his wrist was caught by Keiji.

“You’ll just wind up like the rest,” he said, voice coming so, so close to cracking. But it didn’t. It remained deceptively calm, as always. “There’s… nothing there. Only that monster.”

Kenma froze once again, and a short choke left him. Everything around him seemed to shatter, allowing a whirlpool to consume and drown him if it were possible. Here he’d been worried about not seeing another apple pie cookie again. Forget that.

Now he’d never see his family again.

“I’m sorry,” Keiji whispered. “I’m so sorry. I know you want to grieve, but we really need to get you out of here. It’s not safe here, you--”

“The ship.”

Keiji inclined his head, eyeing the other with confusion.
“I need to get back to that ship.”

Kenma looked away, and Keiji followed his gaze.

The… Corvus…?

“…You were the delivery.” A lot of things were beginning to make sense to Keiji now. Koutarou had mentioned meeting another merperson, and they were all being so secretive about this whole thing. Keiji sighed, his grip on Kenma’s wrist loosening so that his fingers were just hovering there now. “Let’s go before that thing changes its mind.”

“You’re injured!” Dr. Takeda snatched Kuroo by his unharmed arm as soon as the man moved to follow Koutarou. Said boatswain was in the lifeboat now, already being lowered down toward the water by Ryuu and Noya. “They’re safe now, so don’t do anything unnecessary.”

The doctor sent a pleading look Chef Aone’s way, and the giant was soon stepping over and latching a hand to Kuroo’s good shoulder, physically holding him back from straining himself even further.

The doctor’s gaze was apologetic now. “Kenma will be up here shortly, so let me tend to your injury in the meantime, alright?”

“Kenma could be injured,” Kuroo spat. He made an attempt at pulling away from the chef, but to no avail. He knew better, especially in this condition. Had the pirate scuffle been a hand-to-hand ordeal, they would have had the chef up on deck in a heartbeat to get things over with.

“And I assure you I’ll help him right away if that’s the case! But, you know, Shouyou watched them from the crow’s nest. He said neither of them seemed to be in any serious condition.”

Dr. Takeda looked over his shoulder to see said deckhand leaning over the edge of the ship, practically in danger of falling overboard at this rate.

“He’s okay, right?!” Shouyou was shouting over the railing as Kenma and Keiji made their way to the lifeboat. “Kenma, are you alright?!”

Koutarou helped to pull the merman back out of the water while Keiji supported him from behind. The boatswain quickly realized that, yes, Shouyou had been right before. Kenma didn’t seem to have any serious injuries, aside from a alarming amount of cuts, but all of them were minor ones from what he could tell. Despite this observation, despite Keiji’s attempts to calm the other, Kenma was absolutely shaking as he met with the wood flooring of the boat.

“Whoa, hey…” Koutarou set a hand on the merman’s shoulder and received a sharp jolt from the other in response. “We’ll have Doc look at your wounds and fix you up, okay? You’re gonna be fine--”

As Keiji lifted himself onto the boat, he sent Koutarou a warning gaze and shook his head. The sailor nodded in silence, though not quite grasping the situation fully yet, and slowly retracted his hand from Kenma.
“You ready down there?”

Koutarou gestured an okay at Noya from below, prompting the shorter man to begin pulling them back up with Ryuu’s help.

When Koutarou glanced back to Kenma, the shaking hadn’t settled any. The merman’s hands were set flat on the boarding, his head low and bangs completely hiding his face from the world. There were no words, no audible sobs, but he was clearly distressed, and Koutarou did not know how to handle this at all. Keiji made it seem like they should just leave him alone, but he didn’t like just sitting there.

He looked up at the merman in human form next, then stiffened. “Keiji,” he whispered, and pointed at a spot between his own neck and shoulder in desperation.

At first, Keiji only raised a brow, but soon a hand was clamping down onto the same point on his own body. He hissed out a curse and tugged on his shirt in attempt to cover up the scales. “My face?”

“It’s fine.” Koutarou nodded, voice still hushed, which would have amazed Keiji at a less stressful time. “Well, the uh… makeup? Paint? It’s a little gloopy-looking, but you still can’t see them. Your shirt probably just rubbed off the other areas in the water.”

Keiji was already looking over the rest of himself, tugging on sleeves and the ends of his pant legs to ensure that everything remained out of sight as the boat was lifted higher.

“Kenma!”

Shouyou surely would have jumped into the lifeboat himself had Ryuu not been holding him back by his shirt. The smaller boy’s eyes were filled with worry, and the look only deepened when the merman didn’t seem to react.

Kuroo tried to lean over to see past the other sailors from a distance, despite the doctor begging him to stop fidgeting while he observed the injury.

“Please give him some space.” Keiji ignored the looks he received from the crew. Looks of astonishment. Perplexity. Suspicion. They’d have more questions for him, without a doubt, but now wasn’t the time. He turned to Kenma, but made no effort to get physically close to the other. “Are you able to move?” he asked, tone soft. “Will you be alright if we move you onto the ship now?”

The responding bob of Kenma’s head was so short, so lacking in emotion that it was hardly noticeable. Koutarou continued to watch him, like he was still waiting for a response, before Keiji nodded and bent to help the merman off the flooring.

The rest of the crew stepped aside, giving Kenma the space Keiji had requested as they brought the merman back aboard.

Saeko watched from afar, wondering what many of the others were. Was that sea water dripping from his face, or…?

“Captain.” She didn’t yell this time, but spoke just loud enough for the man to hear her. “We’ve reclaimed our delivery, alright? Let’s get out of here before that bastard comes back with friends.”
Daichi bit down on his lip, his gaze not leaving said ‘delivery.’ “Kenma.” He tried to keep his voice as close to comforting as possible, but the merman still stiffened at his name. Well, at least it was a response. “...Where can we bring you that’s safe? Is there another village?”

There was a negative shake of the head and nothing more.

“This area’s too isolated.” Keiji could feel Hajime’s eyes boring into the back of his head as he spoke. “Petal Reef had little contact with other merfolk, and it would take a few days to get to the next town that could take him in.” If the serpent hadn’t decimated that as well.

“So what? We just gonna drag him around the islands with us until we find somethin’?” Binoculars hung around his neck and weapon slung over his shoulder, Taketora made his way from the mast to the group. “We can’t keep the guy stuck in a barrel forever!”

Keiji’s jaw fell slightly at the word ‘barrel.’ The crew wouldn’t be the only one asking questions later.

“Well we can’t just toss him back in the water with things like that swimming around!” Shouyou jumped up, only settling when Daichi set a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Let’s start with not talking about him like he isn’t right here.” Everyone else seemed to suck in sharp, guilty breaths at that. The captain bent down on one knee, closer to Kenma’s level. “We can discuss this further at another time. Meanwhile, we can keep you with us while we set course for the next island.” Daichi tried for a smile, worn as it was. “Where we take you from there, we can figure out when you’re ready. Does that work for you?”

At first, he wasn’t all too sure that Kenma was even processing his words, until a moment of silence passed and was followed by another slow nod.

Daichi straightened and turned to see the Dr. Taketora still tending to Kuroo over his shoulder. “When you’re all finished there, Doctor?”

“I-I’ll be right there!”

As much as the shorter man would have liked to drag the first mate below deck and properly patch him up right away, Kuroo had insisted that he merely stop the bleeding in the meantime so that he could tend to Kenma if needed. The doctor had already applied pressure and wrapped his shoulder up in some cloths that Kuroo had sloppily torn from his coat, despite the fact that there were perfectly good bandages downstairs waiting to be put to use. Not to mention the bullet was still inside him.

“I’d really rather take care of this first, Kuroo. It looks like there might be swelling, and--”

“Check on Kenma,” Kuroo huffed. “I’m all yours after.”

With a defeated sigh, the doctor turned on his heel to aid the merman. “Please make sure he doesn’t move too much,” he said as he passed by Ryuu and Noya, each of whom saluted in response.

Daichi turned to Saeko, this time giving the okay to leave this godforsaken area, to which the woman groaned out a ‘Finally,’ and turned the wheel.
“We ask too much of you,” Daichi had said.

“No, no, it’s fine.” “I really don’t mind.” “I’ve handled much worse than this before!”

And yet, here was the familiar, perched up in a high branch among the woods of some nameless island in the middle of nowhere, exhausted beyond belief. It was a tiny island, the type that smaller boats would stop at during their travels to take a break from the waves or a piss somewhere other than in an old bucket or the ocean. The ground was littered with broken bottles and other discarded items. A real dump.

But Asahi was up in the trees, ignoring all of the trashiness below and giving his wings a much-needed rest.

It had taken the Corvus roughly five days to make the distance between Morrigan’s Coast and Owl Roost. Five days.

It took a ship that long, and ships didn’t need to stop and rest or eat or do anything that a living, breathing being like Asahi did.

It had only been two nights, and he wasn’t even halfway to reaching the Dockside Inn on Morrigan’s Coast. Such a long journey was not good when there was so much to worry over.

Would he find Suga safe and sound when he got there? Or would Daichi’s worries only be confirmed? And then he’d have to make the flight back to the Corvus to relay whatever he did find.

A sigh left him, a very bird-like, whiny-sounding caw of sorts. Asahi ruffled his wings in an attempt to get more comfortable amongst the leaves. There was no time to build a nest with his current schedule, but boy would it have been welcomed. Noya’s hair would have been just as nice of an option. Maybe he could spend a night in a nest of fluffy feather pillows when he got to Suga’s. Yes. Yes, that would be very good.

The crow made a small, satisfied noise this time as he closed his eyes, reassuring himself for the hundredth time that everything was fine. That Suga was safe and the Corvus would have had absolutely no issues in bringing Kenma home.

“You know, I think my arm needs a checkup, too.” Taketora gripped his upper arm in an overdramatic fashion and leaned against Ryuu with his opposing side. “One of them bullets musta grazed me!”

“Oooh! I think that’s some blood I see there!” Ryuu’s lips pulled apart in a grin. “We’d better get you over to Doc before we’ve got a real casualty--!”

“Quit bullshitting and get back to work.” Daichi leveled the two with a cold stare, prompting them to snatch their hammers back up and return to their progress on fixing the wall of Daichi’s quarters. “If either of you were really injured, you should have said so earlier.” Here is where he normally would have given one of those threatening grins, but he didn’t. He couldn’t.

Kuroo and Kenma were both below deck now, the former finally having gotten some proper,
much-needed attention to his shoulder. Shouyou was, Daichi assumed, down there with them. The chef was preparing a hot meal because, damn, they all deserved one at this point.

Everyone else was above deck, keeping an eye out for further threats and repairing damages from those ‘laughing stock’ pirates. Maybe if they hadn’t made fun of the Calamity’s reputation, the Corvus wouldn’t have a busted wall and a bloodied-up first mate to deal with. And, as far as Kenma was concerned… well, the serpent may have still showed itself even without the scuffle between the two ships. Who knows what would have become of the merman at that point.

Whether that meant things were better this way or not, Daichi didn’t care to think on any further.

The captain moved to retrieve another board to patch up the wall with - they’d have to get some professionals to do a better job on this when they arrived at Kingston - but paused at the sight of two others carrying a stack of planks past him.

“You’re still a guest on this ship, you know.”

Keiji stopped in his tracks, though Koutarou didn’t seem to notice and continued walking so that the planks pushed hard against Keiji’s stomach. He sent a quick glare the other’s way before returning to Daichi. “I told you I’d help with any chores if needed.”

“That’s fine, but you’ve really helped quite enough.” Daichi lifted two boards over his shoulder and rested them there. “If you’re trying to earn brownie points to keep us from asking questions again, it’s really not necessary.”

Keiji remained silent.

“I don’t know what you did,” Daichi continued with a shake of the head. “How you communicated with that thing, how you know anything about merfolk communities, or how you managed not to drown out there, but I’m not sure we’d be alive without your help.”

“You can’t tell me you’ve dropped all suspicions of me.”

“I didn’t say that.” Daichi shifted the wooden pieces for better balance. “I’m saying I’m grateful. We’re grateful, and I don’t want you to feel like you’re not welcome here after diving out into a minefield of pirates and a raging sea monster to help us.” He started past them, only turning back for a short moment to say, “And don’t worry about paying your way. After all that, this trip is on us.”

“Thank you, sir.” Keiji managed a respectful bow of the head before he noticed Koutarou grinning at him from across the planks still in their hands. “What?”

“You’re like the ship’s honorary hero or something now!” He belted out a laugh before Keiji picked his pace back up. “Which I’d rather be my title, but you being a hero is pretty neat, too, I guess.”

“I think you’re blowing this out of proportion. I was saving myself just as much as saving any of you.”

“But you even saved Kenma!”

“You’re awfully upbeat given all that just happened.”

“Hey! It’s not like I’m not worried.” The curve of Koutarou’s lips did a complete reversal,
setting in a big frown. “But we’re all here and alive now, so what’s the use in letting anything get to me?”

They set down the pile of planks, and heard Ryuu start to cackle as they did.

“Coming from you?”

Koutarou turned to the man and made a ridiculous face, tongue out and eyes all scrunch at Ryuu, who returned with a somehow even more obnoxious expression.

“Besides,” the boatswain said, returning his attention back to Keiji. “There’s kinda a bright side to this, right? Now we don’t have to be all secretive about as much! You know about Kenma now, so we don’t have to hide that from you anymore.”

“I’d rather that be under different circumstances, honestly…”


“I’d like to check on him.” Keiji lifted a single board from the pile. “But it seemed like he’d rather be left alone. Though, I don’t know how much of a good idea that is, either.”

“He has company down there, y’know.” Taketora said around the nails now steadied between his teeth. Keiji was amazed he hadn’t swallowed any thus far.

Company, sure. Kenma had company on the ship.

Just not a family.

Chapter End Notes

What happened to the Calamity? What happened to Sugawara? WHERE are the sirens?
Will any of this actually be answered any time soon? //SHRUG
Creaks and squeaks filled the air as sailors moved about, pulling this and that from the old wooden table that stretched through the Corvus’s ‘dining hall,’ a space separate from the actual cooking section of the kitchen with no real walls to divide the two areas.

The clinking of plates and glasses went unheard by Keiji as he kept his head down over his folded arms, back rising and falling in slow, even motions with his breathing as he slept through the evening meal.

Noya sat across from him, a loud gulp preceding his question as he swallowed a mouthful of potato soup. “S’tat guy okay?”

To the right of Keiji, Hajime gave a shrug and dipped a piece of bread into the remains of his own soup. “He only took two bites before he passed out.”

“And he even managed not to fall asleep in his food.” Noya gave a whistle before tearing off a bite of bread with much more force than necessary. “He’s got some skill.”

“Just because you do that every time…”

“Should we wake him? His soup’s gonna get cold. If he doesn’t eat it, one of us will have to.” The shorter man grinned, and Hajime rolled his eyes.

“I say leave him. Judging by the way he’s looked since he’s been here, this is probably the closest thing to a decent rest he’s gotten in awhile.”

“And it’s in here with all this noise?” Noya laughed loud, adding to said noise without much thought. “He must’ve finally hit his limit!”

“You’d think he’d would’ve passed out like a baby after all that fuckery the other day.” Ryuu stepped over and set his plate and bowl down with a careless clang next to Noya. “I sure as hell did!”

Hajime snorted. “I’m pretty sure you all drank yourself to sleep that night.”

“You didn’t?” Noya and Ryuu were grinning as they spoke in unison.

The gunner’s shoulders rose and fell with another shrug. “Two nights later, and I’m still having trouble sleeping. This whole thing’s got me on edge.”
“Maybe you should’f spent less time frowning earmuffs at usf...” Ryuu paused to swallow his food, “…and more preparing for other shit like that.”

Hajime narrowed his eyes on him. “We could’ve handled making an escape or injuring that thing a second time no problem. I’m sorry I didn’t factor in the possibility of having to stick around and rescue a merman off a sinking ship.” He leaned his head in his hand. “What sort of brilliant plans did you spend your free time hatching up, Ryuunosuke?”

“...That ain’t my job, man.”

“Then shut the fuck up?”

Ryuu huffed, and Noya fell into another short laughing fit. The empty mug of beer beside his bowl probably had something to do with that. Hajime wasn’t even sure how many times it’d been refilled by now.

“Have you tried asking this guy anything?” Noya pointed his spoon as the sleeping guest across from him. “He probably knows way more about ocean monsters than your lame books. Since he can… like… talk to them or whatever.”

“Daichi said not to pester him too much about it,” Hajime grumbled.

There was a shift beside him, followed by what sounded like a pained groan. All three pairs of eyes were soon set on Keiji, whose fingers were curling against the wood of the table with a sense of tired desperation.

Noya slowly lowered the utensil. “…Still wanna let him sleep?”

“It… could be nothing…” Each word from Hajime’s sounded more unsure, as Keiji visibly shuddered against the table.

“I dunno.” Ryuu swirled his soup around with his spoon. “Could be a sex dream.”

Noya covered his mouth to hold back another bout of laughter, but Hajime furrowed his brows at the man to his left. The way that Keiji sunk his head lower into his arms looked more akin to pain than pleasure for sure.

“Hey…” Hajime reached a hand out to Keiji’s shoulder, still hesitant and considering letting him sleep regardless of whatever was going through his head. A soft, harmless shake was all that he’d give him. Nothing too startling.

But the other was drawing in a sharp breath and jolting up straight where he sat before Hajime could even move past the making contact stage.

Keiji’s breathing was no longer steady as his eyes darted from side to side, taking in his surroundings.

Freshly familiar faces. A noisy, dimly lit hall. Tobio and Shouyou off bickering somewhere down the table. Saeko and Koutarou laughing over the voices of the rest of the crew as they tried to talk Daichi into god-knows what sort of drinking game. The smell of booze, salt water, and… iron? No, he was imagining that last part. He was also surely imagining the feeling of pins and needles stabbing and cutting at his legs. Despite himself, he still looked down, but he didn’t find any blood seeping through his pant legs.

The dream up until that point had been relaxing. For once. When the hell did it take such a
dark turn? When did any of them start taking such dark turns?

He knew the answer to that already, and his focus was pulled from it back to reality when Hajime snapped a finger in front of his face.

“Hey, you alive there?” He frowned. “Sorry. You were starting to shake in your sleep.”

Keiji stared down at his hardly-touched meal, still only partially aware of the gazes set on him. A few outside of the three closest to him had cast curious glances, but were already distracted by their previous conversation in no time.

“...Sorry.” His response was nearly inaudible. He looked to the empty seat that Koutarou had previously been occupying at his left and wondered at what point he even fell asleep. “I’m... going to head back to my room.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, toward the kitchen’s exit, without making eye contact with either of the three.

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea…” Hajime murmured, watching as their guest turned to take his leave.

Meanwhile Ryuu nudged Noya and whispered something about ‘not being a sexy dream after all.’ The smaller man made no efforts to hide his laughter that time.

“You guys are laughing, and not at something I said?” An arm came down around Noya’s shoulder, and there was Koutarou, cheeks pink and grinning away with his opposing hand carelessly swinging a half-full mug out to the side. “I can’t walk away for two minutes without missin’ somethin’ good!” He looked up across the table, and his grin faltered slightly at the sight of an empty seat beside Hajime. “Where’s Keiji?”

“Definitely not mastur--”

Ryuu didn’t even finish the word before both he and Noya were laughing again, despite the unamused look on Hajime.

“He’s heading back to his cabin.” The gunner gave a short tilt of the head in Keiji’s general direction. “Passed out after you got up. I think he had a nightmare or something.”

“What?” Koutarou followed Hajime’s gaze, and he could just see the kitchen doors closing behind the merman. He furrowed his brows, and then his legs were carrying him in that same direction. He didn’t pause to set down his mug, and beer sloshed around and out from it as he stumbled after Keiji. “Hey!” He caught up too fast, and nearly tripped in trying to regain his footing at the sudden halt. “C’mom, eat with us. Have a drink for once. You’ll feel better.”

The merman slowed his pace to a stop and sighed. “I feel fine, Koutarou.”

“Hajime said you had a nightmare. What’re you gonna do, go back to sleep and have another one?”

“I’m going to go back to sleep and hopefully not dream about anything. I can’t do that if you keep stalking me, though.”

“I’m not--!” Koutarou dropped his hands with a groan. A little more beer slipped out, and he fixed the mug into a better position, retaining what little was still left. “If you had a little fun for once, maybe you’d have a good dream instead.”

“I don’t look like I’m having fun?” Keiji deadpanned, and Koutarou wasn’t sure if he was
supposed to laugh or not.

“Yeah. You’re having the time of your life.” Koutarou gestured to Keiji with his mug, voice dripping with sarcasm. “So much fun that your eyes are bloodshot from it.”

Keiji had just begun to rub at his eyes, but quickly dropped his hand. “It’s nothing, so just go back and eat, alright?”

“You have nightmares a lot, don’t you?”

Those exhausted eyes watched Koutarou for what felt like several minutes, even if it was only a short matter of seconds. Without another word, Keiji turned on his heel and started back down the hall.

“That’s why you never get any sleep?” The sailor grabbed his wrist, but Keiji ripped it away with enough force to bring a stunned expression to Koutarou’s face. “It isn’t from keeping your legs like that?”

“Koutarou.” This time, Keiji whipped around with a look that could absolutely kill. “How many times do I have to say ‘I’m fine’ before you drop the questions?”

“How many times can you say ‘I’m fine’ without actually meaning it?”

“How many times do I have to say it for you to mind your own business?”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“I didn’t ask for your help. I asked for a ride to Kingston, and as soon as we get there, you’ll be rid of me, so what does it matter what you say or do now?” Keiji breathed in slow, trying to retain a sense of calmness. “Go help someone who needs you, Koutarou. Help Kenma. Help Kuroo. And ignore me, because I’m. Fine.”

“No one asked you to dive after that serpent, but you did it anyway!” Koutarou’s shoulders dropped, and he tilted his head back and rolled his eyes dramatically. “I get that you have stuff to hide, but do you have to be some damn closed off about everything?”

“I’m going to sleep, Koutarou.”

“You’re going to wake up screaming. I don’t like that.”

“I’m sorry for making your trip so unpleasant.” Everything about Keiji’s tone rang bitter as he turned away yet again, this time making a point not to respond to whatever Koutarou was shouting behind him when he took his leave.

He turned down the hallway, the sounds of Koutarou and the dining hall growing fainter as the distance between them grew. The corridors were empty, what with everyone stuffing their faces, save for Taketora who was presumably taking over the helm to give Saeko a break.

The further he ventured into the near-silence, the more relaxed he felt. That is, as relaxed as one could feel whilst their legs were still throbbing and stinging. He needed to revert back to his natural form, but it wouldn’t do him any good without being able to submerge himself in water, and he couldn’t exactly jump into the ocean and get back onboard without going noticed. He wasn’t about to stuff himself in a barrel like Kenma, either, even if they could manage to eliminate the risk of someone walking in on him.
He was almost at his cabin when he struck his palm hard against the wall, body following suit and falling against it for support when another sharp pain shot up from his legs to his head. His vision blurred for a moment, and Keiji found himself bringing a hand to his mouth, fighting back the urge to spill out what few bites of food he’d gotten down during that meal.

*I'm fine.*

He watched the floor, his sight fading from clear to blurred and back on a loop. When that proved too vomit-inducing to handle, he closed his eyes, hoping to find some solace in the blackness of his eyelids. What he saw instead was white dotted with spots and flashes of that *damned dream* he’d thought he’d been lucky enough to break away from moments ago. His legs, his chest, his head, they all pounded faster and faster with every breath. The smell of iron returned to his nose, but he knew he wasn’t really bleeding.

*I'm fine.*

Or maybe he would be if he could at least manage to get into his room until this all blew over.

Assuming that it *would* blow over again.

He ventured another step forward, hands still firm on the wall and over his mouth, and dared to open an eye half-way. Another mistake. The first thing he saw was a blur of wood flooring.

The sound of snapping branches and the crunching of leaves followed the group’s every step as they trekked through the thick island wilderness. Birds of all colors watched from the treetops, wary of the trespassers and the way that the lanky one kept hacking away at path-blocking vines and things with his sword.

It wasn’t until he nearly chopped the head off a jaguar, leaving the group to fight the animal off with what few weapons they had, that the shortest member tried to put a stop to the reckless actions.

“Lev, if you aren’t going to be more careful with that sword, then hand it over to me.” Morisuke made a grabbing motion with his hands, but the captain pulled the blade away like a possessive child.

“I’ll be careful!” He ignored the raised brow the shorter man gave him in return. “These vines are so thick, though. How are we going to find any food or anything if we can’t even walk through the forest?” He glanced up and around at their surroundings. “...Or... jungle? Which is this?”

“It’s a bunch of trees, and we’re stuck in the middle of it. Not sure the rest matters.” Issei shifted the weight of the man leaning on him to better support the other.

Takahiro’s injury was, by all means, not making this situation any easier on the pathetic pirate crew. The bullet hadn’t gotten too deep, and it’d already been removed, and the wound had been sealed, sure, but none of them were really convinced that their attempt at cauterizing the thing with some fire and a sword was really *safe*. There was no way it was properly cleaned enough before the ‘procedure,’ but it wasn’t like they had a lot of options when all of their medical supplies had
probably sunk to the bottom of the ocean. It was nothing short of a miracle that he even made it to land with them alive, and he was certainly still in no condition to be wandering around a strange island, let alone running away from or fighting off wildcats.

The helmsman winced as he and Issei stepped over an impressively large tree root. “I’d say rainforest, but, yeah, who gives a shit?”

“You two really should have stayed behind on shore.” Morisuke heaved a sigh so heavy its weight might have rivaled that of the sea serpent. “In fact, we’d all be better off out there than in here. We’ll be eaten alive by the wildlife if we don’t come across some hostile village, first.”

“There was no more food out there. You said so yourself.” Lev hacked at another wall of foliage, to which Morisuke gave a loud, disapproving huff. “You wouldn’t let us eat any of the fish we caught.”

“There’s no way those weren’t poisonous!”

“That, and those sharks were still hanging around after all the blood.” Issei cast a glance to Takahiro’s bandages, then to the cuts covering his own arms from the earlier chaos. “Unless those fins were some friendly dolphins coming over to give us a ride to civilization.”

“My vote’s on dolphins!” Kanji thrust the one hand that wasn’t covering the sizable bruise on his forehead into the air high over his head. He let out a loud yelp when said hand hit hard against a rough tree branch.

“Haven’t you bled enough as it is?!” Morisuke snatched Kanji’s wrist once it was at a reachable height and pushed it down to the man’s side. “You’re all walking disasters, I swear.”

Issei and Takahiro each sent flat stares Morisuke’s way. The guy didn’t look any less beat up than the rest of them.

“It’ll be fine, right, Morisuke? Look,” Lev spun around with a big grin and outstretched his arms. The sleeves of his coat were torn and hanging by threads, practically useless at this point. Hints of red could be seen lining his arms here and there as souvenirs from fighting his way out of the sinking Calamity. “We’re mostly all in one piece! We survived a giant monster, a shipwreck, and a rabid jungle cat so far. We’re practically on a roll, right?!” There was excitement and hope in his eyes as he watched the shorter man.

Morisuke had no reassurance to offer. “Our ship is gone, Lev.”

“But everything we survived has to be a good sign!” Lev lifted a finger toward the treetops. “We’ll steal an even bigger ship, and find double the treasure we had on the old Calamity!”

Kanji, who had been rubbing the fresh bruise on his hand until now, jumped forward toward Lev. “If we get a big enough ship, we can take down that snake and get all our old treasure back!”

Their captain’s eyes seemed to double in size with how they widened, and soon he was throwing an arm around Kanji’s shoulders. “That’s GENIUS!”

Morisuke ran a hand over his face as the two laughed on about the matter, as if losing years worth of treasure hunting and thievery sinking to the bottom of the ocean was some harmless joke.

Issei and Takahiro continued to watch on with those flat-eyed looks, not quite as amused with the conversation as they might have been any other day.
The latter let more of his weight fall against the man supporting him with a short groan. “If only we were putting that optimism into finding some food and shelter.”

Issei nodded. “Should’ve eaten the jaguar.”

Takahiro hummed in agreement. “Lost opportunity on that one.”

“Then, who wants to head back and try fishing for sharks, instead?”

Both Lev and Kanji began to lift hands in response to Issei’s question, determined “I do”s on the tips of their tongues before Morisuke snatched their wrists and tugged them downward. His attention then snapped to Issei with a look of warning. “Don’t you dare give them any ideas.”

“Won’t let anyone lighten the mood even a little, huh?” Takahiro made a sound like an amused snort, which quickly transitioned to another pained groan.

Morisuke frowned at the noise. “Yes, that sounded like just the thing to lighten the mood.” The man watched his injured shipmates with tired eyes for a long moment before pushing past the taller, hyperactive duo and through an opening in some bushes. “Let’s just try to find some not-seawater. Some food. Something.” Anything to keep them alive and from losing more than they already had. “Before nightfall, preferably.”

“He still hasn’t woken up?”

“Doc’s been in the room since you left last night. ‘Said he’s barely moved.’

“His pulse seems to have steadied. Though, there’s the matter of… well….”

Dr. Takeda looked over at the man sleeping in the bed beside his stool. The rag that had previously been keeping Keiji’s forehead cool was now soaking in a bucket of water between them, and an emergency box of medicines was laid out off to the side for when the man awakened.

Hajime was the first to find him passed out cold in the hall, and had been occasionally checking in on him while Koutarou and the doctor kept watch. Keiji’s breathing had been so shallow in the beginning that the three of them were, momentarily, convinced that he wasn’t breathing at all. Luckily Dr. Takeda had been able to distinguish this as false before Koutarou could go into too much of a panic.

Several hours later, his breath and pulse had reached something of a normal level, and there were no signs of any sort of nightmares like Hajime had witnessed back in the dining hall. While this was probably something of good news, the sun had already risen, and Keiji had yet to rise with it.

And Koutarou was not taking it well.

“‘It’s nothing’ my ass!” he’d shouted sometime after getting over the initial shock of ‘He IS breathing, right?’ The doctor had to shush him several times while Koutarou paced around the room, torn between distraught concern and rage. Whether that rage was at himself for letting Keiji walk away or at the other was something he wasn’t too sure of himself.
Now, he was… well, pacing again. He’d come to a halt at the doctor’s words, though. “The matter of what?”

Dr. Takeda exchanged looks with Hajime, the latter of which was leaned back in a chair, balancing only on the furniture’s back legs and the wall behind him. When the gunner moved his gaze from the doctor to Koutarou, he allowed the chair to fall forward and flat on all four legs with a thump.

“Koutarou,” he began, voice all serious and arms crossed as he eyed the boatswain. “Is there anything you know about Keiji that you’d like to tell us?”

The boatswain opened his mouth, but nothing came out aside from an uneasy breath.

Just say no. Just say no. Just say--

But then he saw it. Every other breath that Keiji took, something moved, and it wasn’t his mouth or nostrils. It was subtle, not noticeable if you were to just glance over him, but the skin of Keiji’s neck was moving with his breathing in a way that was very much not human.

Thin strips lifted and fell, opening and closing just enough for someone in his personal space to recognize them as gills.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” Hajime raised a brow. “You did know, then, didn’t you? And now we’ve got two unresponsive fish-people onboard.”

“Kenma’s still not talking to anyone?”

“Nice attempt at a subject change. Moving on.” Hajime uncrossed his arms to point one at the unconscious merman. “Do you know how pissed Daichi would be if he found out you knew about this and never said anything?”

“At this point he’d be thanking me! We’d probably be serpent chow by now if Keiji hadn’t been on board!”

Dr. Takeda lifted a finger to his lips with a “Sshhhhh!”

“I’m not arguing with that, alright? But if you were lying to the captain after that interrogation you gave Keiji--”

“I didn’t lie! I just… left out a few details.”

Hajime looked far from amused, and Koutarou gave the world’s most over-dramatic sigh as he plopped onto the end of the bed before Keiji’s feet.

“What I said was true, okay? Keiji told me the person looking for him is from his hometown.” His eyes wandered off to an empty corner of the room. “I just left out the fact that it’s an underwater hometown. I wouldn’t have lied to you guys, but that’s, you know, kinda personal information for him? I wasn’t even supposed to know in the first place.”

“Then that guy I ran into had gills too?” Hajime thought back on the man’s appearance and tacked on a mumbled, “Explains the hair…” Nevermind the fact that the crewmate standing before him had just as strange, if not stranger, hair himself.
Koutarou ran his fingers through said hair, frustrated. “I really shouldn’t be telling you any of this.”

“Well, we saw the gills already, so he can’t blame you for us finding out.” The doctor looked apologetic. “And I’d been wondering about that spot on his face for a while, anyway…. Now I’m guessing he’s covering scales like Kenma has?”

Another annoyed groan, and Koutarou was tugging at his hair this time. “Stop asking me questions!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Dr. Takeda shook his head a little frantically. “But it’s a good thing I know now, right? I’ve been keeping an eye on Kenma’s health these past few days, so maybe I can use what I know to help Keiji some.”

Hajime glanced over at their guest. “No offense, Doc, but I think he probably knows how to take care of his own kind better than you.”

“Ah, well, yes….”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate the offer anyway! Once he gets past the fact that you… know what he is….” Koutarou dropped his hands, but still refused to stay still. He kept glancing over at Keiji between exchanging words with the others. “You can’t tell anyone else about this, you know.”

“Even though we already have someone like Kenma onboard?” The doctor followed Koutarou’s gaze the next time he looked at Keiji. “He still wants it kept a secret, knowing that?”

Something stirred in the room, and then all eyes were on Keiji.

The merman turned onto his side, a strained groan punctuating the act. He pulled a hand out from beneath the covers and ran it over his face, rubbing against eyes that had yet to open. His head was pounding… significantly less than the night before, but still throbbing more than he’d prefer nonetheless.

And why was everything so bright?

“Is he… awake…?” Hajime watched him warily, half-expecting the other to jolt up or begin thrashing from another nightmare.

“Keiji?” Koutarou whispered, and the merman gave another groan.

“Too bright,” was what Keiji mumbled, and the three exchanged glances with each other before turning to the dim lighting of the room.

Koutarou looked back to the merman with a frown. “Keiji you… know your eyes are closed, right?”

A pause, and Keiji’s lids parted to reveal a pair of unfocused eyes. The view hadn’t changed. Everything he saw was pure white.

He murmured a curse, along with a, “Great,” because this definitely was not his first time dealing with this type of situation. Well, the three people crowding around him was new. And unwanted.

“Water. He needs to drink something.” The doctor thought a moment before tacking on a, “Probably.” Human fatigue, he could help with. He wasn’t so sure how different it worked for
“Actually, salt water would probably be more helpful in your case, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes... it would...” Keiji’s words were slower than usual. Every breath and thought felt like it was fighting through a thick fog just to make its way out his mouth. “Thank y--”

He didn’t finish the word, and despite the fact that Keiji’s eyes were completely unfocused on anything in the room, Koutarou could feel a glare being directed his way.

And that glare was quickly replaced by a sense of panic.

Keiji began to sit up, but he could feel his mind going more blank at the slight motion. “Koutarou, what did you--”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Please don’t move so quickly!” Dr. Takeda moved to the edge of the tiny bed, and gently placed a hand behind Keiji’s shoulder. The other gave a small jolt at the touch. “Sit up slowly. Can you see alright?” He looked over his shoulder. “Where’s that water?”

Right on cue, there was Hajime, hand outstretched with a glass of sea water from the pail.

“Everything’s... white....” Keiji was shaking. He didn’t realize it was even happening, but he was shaking for reasons that had nothing to do with fainting or nightmares or leg pains. How many people were in here? How many knew? What did Koutarou do?

The doctor helped steady him until he was sitting upright, but kept his hand at his back for good measure. “Drink,” he said, voice all calming as he took the glass from Hajime and held it to Keiji’s hand. “Hold it with both hands. Be careful. Eating will help, too. Do you think you can stomach anything? Even if you can’t, just chewing on something might--”

“Who else is in here?”

“Just Hajime. No one else knows anything, right?” Koutarou hoped that the doctor’s confirming ‘Yes’ that followed would put Keiji at ease at least a little.

It didn’t seem to.

“What did you do?” Keiji repeated, eyes scanning an empty space between Koutarou and Hajime.

“I said nothing! You gave yourself away with your neck-breathing!”

“My...” Keiji pulled a hand from the glass and slowly brought it to the side of his neck. The slits had ceased moving for the most part, but he could still feel his unsteady pulse beneath them.

“They were moving in your sleep.” The doctor set a hand over the one of Keiji’s still gripping the glass. “Please, drink. You’ll only faint again if you don’t get anything in you. I tried to keep your gills wet with a cloth, but I have a feeling that’s not quite enough, is it?”

“...Thank you,” Keiji murmured, and he brought the glass to his lips. The water was warm by now, but the feeling of it sliding down his throat still came as the greatest relief.

“It’s a good thing you woke up now.” Dr. Takeda offered a smile that came through his voice, allowing even Keiji with his temporary blindness to notice it. “I would have had to fetch Kenma for advice on what to do if you hadn’t.”
Hajime huffed. “If you could get him to talk.”

The doctor’s smile faltered. “Surely he’d answer to something like this, wouldn’t he?”

“He still isn’t acknowledging anyone?” ‘Still,’ Keiji said, as if he had any idea how long it had been since he was last conscious.

“I can’t believe you’re sitting here dying, and you’re more worried about Kenma’s slump.”

“I’m not dying, Koutarou.” Keiji took another sip of water. “I passed out. It’s happened before. Just… give me a moment.” He squinted, trying to make out any hint of shapes through the whiteness. Faint, greyish blurs were forming in people’s places, but he had to strain himself just to see even that much.

“Happened before?” Koutarou leaned over the edge of the bed, the slamming of his hands having far less impact on the mattress than he’d intended. “You said you were fine.”

“I didn’t wake up screaming. That’s what you were worried about, right?” Keiji closed his eyes for a moment and tried to focus on the water instead.

Koutarou opened his mouth to retort, but the doctor was quick to interrupt.

“Food! I said he needs food! Koutarou, could you please get something from the kitchen? Something plain. Bread or crackers will be fine.”

The boatswain spent another short moment watching Keiji before he pulled back from the bed and heading out the door.

The remaining occupants of the cabin stayed in silence, the two with working eyesight watching the door after Koutarou vanished from sight.

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

Dr. Takeda jumped and shook his head at Keiji’s words. “You’re no trouble at all! I’m just thankful that Hajime found you and got help before things worsened.”

“Found me where?” He opened his eyes again, not that he could tell the difference between open or closed with how things were now. “I… passed out in the hall. Is that right?”

Hajime fell back into his chair. “Laying on the floor in your own drool, yeah.”

“I would have been happier not knowing that part, thank you.”

The doctor chuckled. “Well, you seem to be having less trouble talking now, at the very least. How is your vision?”

Keiji squinted again. The grey blurs were more noticeable now, and had some level of depth with varying shades, but were still just that. Blurs. “I can see shapes.” It usually didn’t take this long for his sight to clear after the matter, though.

“That’s… something, I suppose. The water’s helping?”

“It is, thank you.” Keiji’s grip on the glass tightened. “You’re… not going to…”

“Tell anyone?” Hajime leaned his chair back against the wall. “I still think we should.”
Keiji sent an uneasy look in the direction of the greyish blob that sounded like Hajime.

“But!” Dr. Takeda pulled away from Keiji’s bed and sat himself back on the stool. “The captain also said not to pester Keiji with more questions. Even when he found out you’d passed out, he said, ‘I don’t care what it is, just make sure he wakes up.’” He tried for his most serious Daichi impression, face and voice and all, to which Hajime scoffed at. His warm smile returned shortly after. “You helped us a lot. I don’t think he’ll care whether you’re a merman or nymph or anything of the sort, especially when we already have Kenma aboard.”

Keiji’s eyes drifted to the doctor as he spoke, and with every word, his shape seemed to become at least a little more distinct. Something more human. “I’d still rather have as few people as possible know.” He began to fiddle with the now-empty glass, and the doctor gently plucked it from his grasp to refill it. “If your captain didn’t plan on pressing the matter more, then it makes no difference whether you tell him or not, right?” There was something almost hopeful in his otherwise mostly-stoic tone.

“I wouldn’t argue with that.” Dr. Takeda cast a glance Hajime’s way, while the latter stared long and hard at Keiji.

Keiji could feel his gaze yet again. “I know you’re still suspicious of me,” he said, and when Hajime spoke again, he could begin to make out more details of the room around them. The door, the walls, the end of the bed past his feet. He was finally beginning to piece together which shapes were what, even if they were still mostly coated in a sheet of bright light to him.

“It’s not even about whatever you’re hiding at this point. I just don’t like us having to hide shit from our captain. Even if that loophole you guys are aiming at sounds logical enough…”

“Then you tell the captain I talked you into it if word gets out and he gets upset.” The doctor smiled Hajime’s way, and the gunner raised a brow at the offer. “Which won’t happen, of course!” He quickly turned back to Keiji. “Word won’t get out. We promise. Right?”

Hajime tapped his fingers against his arm for a moment before huffing out a reluctant, “Hmph.”

And Keiji supposed that was good enough for now.

He took the refilled glass once handed to him. It seemed as though once the shapes started clarifying themselves, his vision began to speed up with its recovery process. What he was looking at now was a bright, black and white version of the room and its occupants. At least he could finally make out the features of Hajime and Dr. Takeda’s faces, cracked glasses and all.

“I didn’t think it would take him this long to get some bread,” the doctor pondered with a glimpse at the door.

“You don’t think he’s hit one of his moods, do you?”

“Moods?” Keiji repeated.

The others exchanged worried glances. “I’m on it,” Hajime said, and soon he was pulling out of his seat again and heading out the door, leaving the doctor to tend to Keiji alone, and leaving Keiji with an unexpected, mild sense of concern.
Shouyou had his arms folded over the edge of the barrel, his chin rested over them while he pouted down at its contents. He was in the room four hours ago, and Kenma was still submerged then, too.

“Hey. You sleeping or just tuning us out?”

No response. His pout only intensified.

“I know you’re upset. Talking about it might help though, you know?”

Nothing. The only movement within the container was the floating of two-toned hair and the slow opening and closing of gills.

“You’re not alone here. There’s me, and Kuroo, and I think even my dumb roommate would talk to you if you wanted. I think he wants to know you better more than he lets on.”

Silence.

“But then, I guess you don’t like talking much in the first place, huh? You could try though, couldn’t you? Just for a little bit?”

He might as well have been talking to an actual fish.

Shouyou bit down on his lip, then slid down against the barrel to the floor with a long groan. “C’mom, Kenma. We’ve left you alone for days now, but I don’t like leaving you alone when you’re like this! Could you at least tell me if that’s what you want or not?”

Maybe he was sleeping. But then, talking to him while he was awake seemed no different ever since they left Petal Reef. Shouyou couldn’t imagine what Kenma was going through. Or, rather, he tried really hard not to entertain the thought. The idea of coming home to a destroyed town with no parents, no little sister, no nothing… it made his stomach turn. It made him want to head back to Morrigan’s Coast and check on them, to be honest, even if there was no real reason to.

Even worse was the thought of going to check to see if they were alive and being told that he couldn’t. And that’s what Kenma had to deal with, judging by what bits and pieces of the serpent’s tale he’d heard from Keiji. If there were any survivors from Petal Reef, they had no way of knowing right now.

Shouyou turned so that his back was against the barrel, and he bumped his head against it while he stared up at the ceiling. “You’re barely eating. You won’t play checkers with me or Kuroo. You won’t tell us if you wanna be left alone or if you want company. We can’t help you if you won’t let us.” He was pouting again, this time at the woodwork above. The next words came out more hushed than the rest. “I know we can’t replace them, but something is better than nothing, right…?”

His attention was pulled from the spot only when the door to the cabin creaked open to reveal Kuroo, his arm now in a sling and his face wearing a gloomy expression.

“Still nothing?” The older man asked, voice quiet, but just loud enough for Shouyou to hear him across the room.

The deckhand tilted his head back, his eyes moving upward until they were almost rolling into the back of his head, as if this would give him a view of the barrel behind him, then looked back to
Kuroo with a frown.

The corners of Kuroo’s lips pulled down further. After watching the stillness of the barrel for a moment, he pointed over his shoulder with his good arm, past the door. Shouyou shook his head, and Kuroo had to sigh.

“I don’t like it either,” he said, dropping his hand to his side. “But he needs more time.”

Shouyou cast another glance at the barrel before reluctantly pulling himself to his feet. He imagined Kenma poking his head out from the side of the barrel, eyes peeking just over the edge and watching him in silent protest of him leaving the room, but it didn’t happen. The continued quiet and the final look over his shoulder before he stepped out confirmed that.

“He can’t stay like this,” the boy muttered once the door was closed behind them.

“It’s only been a few days, Shorty.” Kuroo started down the hall, leading the younger sailor toward the stairs to the cargo hold. “He’s lost his family, not a stuffed animal.”

“I know that!” Shouyou raised his voice for only a short moment. “I know it’s gonna take a long time, but Kenma doesn’t talk much in the first place. What if he just stays like this?”

This, Kuroo had considered, but had been trying not to dwell on because, hey, they didn’t really know Kenma that well, right? He hadn’t been with them for that long. Surely they were in no position to know how he’d handle this situation in the long run, so surely there was a chance that they were wrong and he’d be able to recover more than they were fearing.

That hope didn’t stand out as strong as he’d like, though.

Shouyou continued rambling. “If a bunch of weeks go by and he’s still not talking or eating right, I’m gonna do something.”

“Something?”

“I don’t know what yet!” They were halfway down the steps, and Shouyou was gesturing wildly with his arms as he went on. “I’ll make ten apple pies myself, if I have to!”

Kuroo actually managed to snort at this, because he knew Shouyou was no good at cooking. The chef always left him with tasks like potato peeling when it came to the kitchen.

“And I’ll make sure he eats all of them, because he probably needs it to make up for all the food he’s barely touching now. Oh, and I’ll drag that barrel out onto the deck so he can see all the stars or something! He said he never really gone to the surface before all this, so he’s probably never seen how cool the sky can look!” He nodded to himself.

“He’ll get sick from the pies first.”

Shouyou’s mouth hung open. “That’s something Kageyama would say.”

“What is?”

They were at the hold now, and said deckhand was in the middle of sorting through what antiques had yet to be damaged during the pirate mess when he heard his name mentioned.

“Anything awful and stupid.” Shouyou stuck his tongue out, and Tobio looked like he was struggling with everything as not to drop the box of expensive knick knacks in favor of grabbing
the shorter boy by the face.

“Status update?” Kuroo wasn’t sure if he was grateful for the change in subject or not. Focusing on other non-Kenma-related things that needed to be done for a bit was probably for the best, even if he and Shouyou would both be reluctant to admit it. “Any more damage?”

“Nothing new, sir.” Tobio straightened in what would’ve been a salute if his hands weren’t full. “Aside from the damages already reported, everything else should be in ready condition to deliver in the morning.” He lowered the box onto a stack, and Shouyou rushed over to get more rope to secure them all.

“Will we be there by morning?” Shouyou asked, not taking his eyes from the boxes as he pulled the ropes around.

“Either late tonight or early morning. That’s what the captain and Saeko are guessing, anyway.” Kuroo leaned his good shoulder against one of the room’s wood pillars with a yawn. “Someone’s meeting us at the docks, so I don’t think we’ll need any help delivering anything into town. You two will just have to help unload.”

“What about our passenger?” Shouyou threw the end of the rope over the top of the stack, because he was much too short to reach and he’d already been yelled at one too many times for jumping around the cargo. “I heard he was sick.”

Tobio nodded. “I heard he was dying.”

Shouyou whipped his head in Tobio’s direction. “What?! Dying?!”

“He’s not dying.” Kuroo had to pause. “Well, I’m pretty sure. I don’t know what the status is, but I saw Hajime dragging Owl-Head out of the kitchen before I came to get you.” He shrugged. “I think he was throwing another fit, but he looked more huffy than heartbroken. I’m gonna say Keiji’s still alive.”

“Kuroo’s amazing. He can translate his moods,” Shouyou said, and Tobio nodded in agreement.

Kuroo shrugged. “Nah. I’m just making guesses half the time. I don’t know how the guy’s head works. Figuring it out isn’t at the top of my priorities list at the moment, either.” He pulled away from the pillar and tilted his head until there was a satisfying popping sound. He ignored the cringes it received from the boys. “The ropes on those boxes to the right are looking loose. Do another check that everything’s secured before you head out here.” He punctuated the sentence with a small, lazy wave, and turned back to the stairs.

He could already hear the two starting up another pointless argument before he could make it out of earshot.

Morisuke had never been the greatest supporter of Lev's ideas. Why he even wound up traveling the seas with him in the first place is something of a mystery. Takahiro and Issei had their theories, few of which had any real facts to back them up.

"Lev saved his life once, and now Morisuke's indebted." "Poor guy."
"He's got to be under some kind of spell." "The captain's a siren."

They would toss ideas around every so often when out of hearing range, and Kanji would always ask if the tales were true, despite the answer always being the same. Two lazy shrugs.

What they did know, was that Morisuke Yaku had little patience when it came to their beanstalk of a leader, and this day was no exception.

"We have one sword between the five of us," he said, tone strict and heavy with warning. He stood beside an unlit fire pit, and the fact that the spot still felt warm only served to make him more uneasy. "Whoever is staying here is going to come back, and how exactly do you plan on getting us out of it, Captain?"

"Sword or no sword..." Lev stepped out from the worn tent that hung from a line between the island's trees. In his arms were jars filled with various preserves. He grinned at the shorter man over his success. "...we can take on one guy!"

"Assuming it's just one." Morisuke had noticed that the setup inside the tent appeared to only have sleeping arrangements for one, at least. "The last thing we need is more injuries."

"And here I was hoping for more." Takahiro winced as Issei wrapped some new-found bandages around his side.

"If the captain doesn't keep his voice down, you might be in luck there."

"I'm being quiet!" Lev turned to Issei and not-so-quietly insisted. The only thing louder than that statement was the yelp that followed when Morisuke stomped down on his toes.

"You're not quiet!"

"Not when you do that!"

There was some shuffling inside the tent, and then Kanji was emerging with a blanket hanging over his shoulders and a canteen in hand. He gave the container a shake, and his face lit up at the sloshing sound it produced.

"Maybe it's freshwater!" he said, and he popped the top open and ran his finger around the edge. The others watched intently as he gave the droplet a taste.

He didn't need to say a word to confirm it. The way that his eyes brightened said it all, and soon Lev was bounding over to him. He dropped a few jars on the way, of which Morisuke was quick to dive after and save from another tragedy.

"Good find, Kanji! Hey, how much you think is in there?"

Morisuke frowned. "Where do you think they got it from...?" he asked, and then he was kicking Lev in the legs when the captain began gulping down its contents. "Ration it! Or go back to drinking the coconut water you kept complaining about!"

Takahiro looked up from Issei's handiwork. "There has to be somewhere they're refilling that around here, right?"

"Or they just brought enough to last their time here." The other pulled away to survey his the bandages. At least these would hold up better than the makeshift ones from before. "They might have more with them, or we just haven't found it yet."
Lev, grip still tight on the canteen, pointed a finger at the tent. "Kanji!"

"Yessir!" Kanji shouted, warranting another warning glare from Morisuke, which only went ignored as he scrambled back beneath the cloths to search for more provisions.

"I can't imagine someone coming this far into the jungle just to stay a day or two, though," Issei went on. "So that's probably not it."

"All of the journals inside make it seem like they're here doing some sort of research, but it doesn't look like they brought enough to last an extended period..." Morisuke looked past the tent, into the plant life beyond the camp. "Maybe this spot's closer to civilization than we thought...?"

"Research?" Lev popped his head back out from the tent. "Then it's just some bookworm? We can handle that if they show up!"

"A bookworm who could possibly be armed with a long-range weapon. Which we don't have."

Takahiro gave an unenthusiastic hum. "Issei's mad that his favorite gun sunk with the ship."

Issei's lower lip stuck out ever so slightly. "At least I got a hit in before it was too late."

"Wouldn't mind having the rest of our belongings back, though. Or a doctor. That'd be great, too."

Morisuke looked to Takahiro, but tilted his head in the captain's direction. "We could always make Lev carry you if walking's too much trouble."

Takahiro paused, exchanged a glance with Issei, and the two of them shook their heads.

"No chance."

"He'll drop him for sure."

Morisuke tried and failed to suppress a snort as Lev cast them all an offended, open-mouthed look.

"Have a little faith in your captain!"

"Have you seen where we are?" Morisuke swiftly punched the taller man in the arm. "And for the last time, keep your voice down!"

Lev began to make a comeback, but the sound that came next was not from his mouth. A distinct click echoed through the campsite, and all eyes turned to the source.

Behind the bushes, beneath a collection of hanging vines, stood a man, firearm in hand and aimed at the tiny crew, at Lev in particular. Bored eyes watched them from beneath dark bangs that parted to the sides from the center.

"Couldn't have just been a squirrel..." he muttered. He sounded tired, but something in his tone gave the impression that it was just his usual way of speaking.

Lev defensively pulled the jars closer to himself, and Morisuke shot his hands up in surrender.

"Sorry! Sorry! We're lost, see, and--"
"And you thought you'd make yourselves at home." He kept the weapon raised, but sighed as if he was already done with the conversation. "I got it. Just drop the food and leave before I have to waste my bullets, will you?"

"Did you want the bandages back, too?" Issei asked, seemingly unphased by the new threat as he pointed to Takahiro's side. Takahiro lifted an arm to give the man a better view.

The wrappings were a little bloodied and dirty already, and the stranger cringed at the sight of them. "That's... fine." He turned his gaze back on Lev, and his finger moved closer against the trigger. "Drop them."

"But--!"

"If you wouldn't mind sharing just a little food--" He cut Morisuke off again. "Do I look like I have enough food for four people?" He saw his tent shake from the corner of his eyes, and raised a brow. "Five?"

"Five," Morisuke repeated. "Kanji, get out of there."

Said blonde popped his head out from the tent, and Morisuke continued.

"We don't need much. If you could even just tell us where to find some fresh water, we'll leave you alone."

The man scanned the lot up and down, taking in the torn up clothing they wore. "What are you? Pirates? I don't get anything out of helping you. Or trusting you."

"You get to keep your life!" Lev said, proudly, still holding the jars to himself in the most unthreatening manner possible. He looked like a child defending his stuffed animals, and Morisuke couldn’t do anything but bring a hand up over his face in shame over the whole thing. "It’s five against one, and your little gun doesn’t scare us!"

"I can count." The stranger said dryly. "And if you make one move, it’ll only be four against one."

Issei got to his feet and gestured to the stranger, who was just a few inches shorter than himself. "Still not the best odds in your case."

"Are you alright with losing one of your own, though?" The camp-owner glanced at Issei, and then his eyes were flickering about the area, still making a point to keep Lev in range. "Where’s the rest of them?"

Morisuke cast an exchanged glance with Lev. "Rest of who?"

"Your crew? There are just five here, so where are the rest? Back at the ship? You guys got wrecked at shore somewhere, didn’t you?"

Morisuke bit his lip, but realized that maybe they could use this assumption as some sort of threat to their advantage.

But of course their beloved captain had less-brilliant plans of his own.

"What’s wrong with a crew of five?!"

Morisuke would have dropkicked him right there if he didn’t think the sudden movement
would grant them a new bullet wound from the enemy.

“...This is it? It’s just you five? Really?”

Lev took a single step forward, and the smaller man raised his gun higher in warning. “No one underestimates the Catfish Calamity!” Lev sounded all triumphant, despite the cold stares and murderous intent emanating from Morisuke off to the side.

Takahiro muttered something about not being able to underestimate a ship that no longer existed, and Issei gave a quiet snort. Laughing at their usual shitty luck was about all they could do, even now as some supposed researcher had taken aim at their captain’s head.

The stranger didn’t seem too impressed, not with the declaration, or the former ship’s name, or anything about this situation, really. He didn’t even want to be out here. He didn’t want to be wandering around the woods taking notes and risking his life with wildcats and pirates when he could be back at home doing literally anything but this. Preferably nothing. Doing nothing sounded fantastic.

“Had to send me, didn’t they?” he said under his breath. “Couldn’t have just hired someone from the outside like usual? ‘Akira’s smart, he can handle it.’” He narrowed his eyes on the captain and raised his voice for the crew. “I’m giving ‘til the count of three. Start walking away, and I won’t fire. Take one step closer, and you’re one member short. I don’t have time for this.” Or the will power, really.

Morisuke took a step back, hands once again raised in surrender. Lev was a pain in the ass and not exactly the brightest asset of their crew, despite his title, but he still wasn’t willing to risk the guy being left on the ground with a bullet through the head. He’d kick him around a bit after this for sure, though.

“One.”

Issei looked to Kanji, who had only just finally stepped all the way out from the tent. The blonde seemed to catch his gaze, and gave a silent, understanding nod, which luckily seemed to go unnoticed by Akira.

“Two.”

Akira’s voice shook at that word, maybe because Kanji’s exit from his shelter was bringing him closer than further away. His finger was just hairs away from triggering a fatal shot.

A dry, mocking sort of sing-song voice finished off the countdown for Akira with a “Three,” and a crunching of leaves followed. The researcher spun around to face Issei, but the man had only taken a single step forward and didn’t seem to be advancing any more than that. His hands were raised like Morisuke’s, but something in his half-lidded eyes said, “You lose.”

Akira didn’t have time to process it, because then there was more leaf crunching, and this time it was rushed and getting louder and louder. He spun around again, and Kanji was running at him in some sporadic zig-zag pattern across the campsite. In a panic, Akira fired, and dammit how was a target as big as Kanji even possible to miss?

The researcher stepped back, fully prepared to swing the weapon at the guy’s head if it came down to it, but the thwack that sounded through the space instead came from Issei’s elbow against the back of his neck. Everything turned black in an instant, and his body went tumbling forward.

“We probably didn’t have to kill this one,” Morisuke mumbled, but then he noted that Akira
was still, in fact, breathing. The first mate lowered his hands with an audible sigh. “That was reckless.”

“Captain would’ve done something to get himself shot if we didn’t act.” Issei rubbed at his elbow, like it had been the real victim in this case.

“This was my plan from the start!” Lev announced, and Morisuke only turned back toward the tent with an unconvinced, ‘Sure it was.’

“Morisuke should do the distraction game next time. He’s smaller and harder to hit.” Takahiro got to his feet as slowly as humanly possible to avoid further strain. “We got lucky this guy panicked enough to miss.”

Kanji stood a little ways from the unconscious Akira now, a hand by his cheek pulling away to reveal a few drops of red.

“Oh, he grazed him.” Issei stretched his arms high over his head. “Couldn’t have been too panicked.”

“Trade ya,” Takahiro mused, gesturing to his side as he made his way over to the body.

“I’ll keep mine!” Kanji wiped the blood off onto his pant leg. “Face scars can be kinda cool for stories, right?”

“We’ll tell everyone you pissed off a cat.” Takahiro nudged Akira’s arm with his foot. “Think he’s got a map or something?”

Issei brought his stretched out arms together over his head, linking the fingers and bending his palms outward until there was a chorus of cracks. “One way to find out.” He moved over to Akira’s side opposite Takahiro and knelt down beside him.

“If there isn’t,” Morisuke’s voice came from within the tent. Soon he was appearing with travel bags to carry the jars of food with. “Then we need to find out from him where to find some food and water. Or a town, or anything helpful, really.” He held the bag out toward Lev, who clumsily dropped the jars inside. Morisuke was hoping the crackling sound he heard was just two banging together and not one of them breaking open.

“So,” Lev looked over his shoulder at the others once his arms were free again, save for the canteen. His eyes narrowed, all too cat-like. “We tie him up before he wakes up.”

“Aye aye,” Issei saluted the captain, as this was one of his more rare demands that no one was going to roll their eyes at. Not even Morisuke.

The shortest of the group was starting to think that, as rash and as many stupid decisions the others had made since arriving at the island, maybe their luck was starting to pick up again after all. They had food and a source of information. Some… medical help...ish for Takahiro. And they had two weapons now!

Whether or not they’d be able to find a new ship any time soon was another thought that he’d choose another time and place to linger on. For now, it’d have to be baby steps.
The small, oceanside town of Mooresville, Morrigan’s Coast was much more welcoming once bad weather was taken out of the picture. With the cobblestone streets rid of an excess of puddles or flooding, and the skies free of intimidating, gray clouds, the town was a pleasant destination complete with cheery citizens and the smell of… well, fish. The fish smell was less welcoming depending on where you came from, but for the most part, everyone would tell you it was nice to visit. A walk past the right tavern or bakery could make up for the fishy aroma, anyway.

Or, in this morning’s case, a walk past the Dockside Inn, whose windows were wide open to the breezy island air. A certain moussy-haired innkeeper’s mother had always obsessed over the scented candles from a small shop on the other side of town since he was too little to remember, and now the shop owner had been generous enough to gift the inn with an entire box of the things as thanks for their constant business.

And Hitoka was pretty confident that Mrs. Sugawara currently had the entire box’s worth setup and lit around the inn. The whole place, hell, the whole block smelled strongly of cinnamon now, and the small blonde already had to let down several visitors who’d been under the impression that their bar was serving up baked goods because of it.

“S-Sorry, no. Those are just the candles! I can, um, tell you where you can buy them, if you want? Oh, n-no, sir. You can’t eat them…”

With a long, exhausted yawn, the girl leaned her head down against the tabletop of the front desk. Making beds and cleaning up the messes of past guests was always hard work, and sometimes horrifying and/or disgusting depending on the customers, but at least it didn’t call for as much interaction.

It wasn’t that Hitoka disliked people. She actually really enjoyed making conversation, but she was not the best at it when she wasn’t yet acquainted with the person. Suga was much better at this. He was all smiles and stutter-free when it came to greeting the guests, and she was… intimidated by any man taller than average height and any woman who looked worthy of painting a portrait of. Among other things. A lot of other things. Hitoka Yachi was not difficult to intimidate by any means.

Mrs. Sugawara had her son’s charisma-- or, more accurately, Suga probably got his from the woman. But, alas, she was set on tending to the rooms herself now that she’d returned to the inn, and Hitoka was stuck here. Being awkward as humanly possible. If the scary drunk guests from the bar weren’t giving her a headache yet, the candles were certainly bringing her close.

She kept her face down against the table, mumbling incoherently to herself about how the inn was doomed to fail because she couldn’t properly speak to tall businessmen and pretty ladies.

She didn’t look up until a tap sounded from one of the open windows. Next to a tray of three flickering candles - completely unnecessary with the light shining in through the window and all - was a bird, covered in black feathers and watching the girl in a way that was very much not bird-like.

Hitoka froze, then slowly turned to see if anyone else was around. A customer, another employee, preferably someone bigger than herself. When she found no one, she looked back to the crow, who hadn’t moved from its spot, and waved her hands in a small, gentle motion.

“Shhhoo… shoo!” Her attempt at warding it off might have been successful if not for the tiny non-threatening gestures and the near whisper her voice was at. “There’s no pie in here for you okay? Please leave….”

The bird did the exact opposite of leaving.
It took flight, letting itself into the building and landing upon the countertop. Hitoka quickly reeled back, her chair tipping until she was falling back against the floor and kicking the guest book right off of the counter. The bird jumped and flapped about in a panic in turn.

That’s when the thought crossed her mind. Crows weren’t common so close to the docks, but she had occasionally seen one accompany some regular guests of theirs every so often.

The girl lifted the guest book that had oh-so-gracefully landed over her face and peered up at the alarmed bird. What was it she’d heard Yuu Nishinoya call it?

“Asa… hi…?”

The panicked flapping came to a slow calm, and the bird scooted toward the edge of the counter to look over at the fallen girl. It cocked its head one more time, and she sighed.

“You’re going to scare people if you show up without the others…” She pulled herself back to her feet and brushed off her skirt. “Where… are the others?”

Asahi shook his head, but she wasn’t quite sure what to make of that. She wasn’t quite sure why she was talking to a bird in the first place, but everyone else seemed to do it like it was completely normal.

“You’re not, um, alone, are you?” She was surprised when he bobbed his head up and down. Okay. So the others weren’t so crazy for talking to this thing. Probably.

She tried to think of a way to word the next question, because ‘Why are you here,’ wouldn’t get a very useful answer if Asahi could only give nods and headshakes as responses.

But then, the door connecting the inn and bar creaked open, a soft ding sounding from the bell that hung from it, and Hitoka jumped again, this time without falling on her back, thankfully.

A head of short, dark hair poked out from behind the door, worry etched in his features. “Is everything alright, Hitoka? I heard something fall-- What is that?”

Hitoka stiffened. “Chikara!” She looked at him, then at Asahi, then back. Her expression was hard to determine, mouth closed tight and unsure before she spoke again. “This is. Um. A friend of Suga’s.” He raised a brow, and she clarified. “Koushi’s.”

“That’s a bird.”

“Y-Yeah…”

“It’s not his long lost pet coming to look for him?” He stepped out from behind the door now, letting it close behind him with another soft ring.

“No, he’s uh. More like his friend’s pet? Or something….” she trailed off, tapping her index fingers together.

Chikara Ennoshita crossed his arms and watched the animal, which seemed more uneasy than himself. Something about it felt almost too human, but he wrote it off, because he surely didn’t know that familiars were actual existing things. “You and Mrs. Sugawara swore when I took this job that there wasn’t anything weird going on in this place.” He gave a short tilt of the head toward the door past his shoulder. “Your last bartender disappears, and now you’re telling me the mysterious Koushi is friends with a crow, of all things?” He looked more amused than actually suspicious, one corner of his mouth turned upward in a half smile.
Hitoka tapped her fingers together a few more times before dropping her hands by her sides. “I don’t think Asahi is a bad omen or anything! And… Suga said that the last bartender was being suspicious or something! S-So, I’m sure it’s not like anyone’s going to target you or…”

Chikara laughed and shook his head. “I’m not actually worried, you know. I’m sure all those things are coincidences.” He leaned to the side a bit for a better look at Asahi. “You don’t think his friend would know where he disappeared to then, do you?”

Asahi looked up at Hitoka from the counter, his tiny bird eyes filled with what was undoubtedly, even to her who knew very little about him, fear.

“I’m… not sure….” She averted her eyes from the crow. This wasn’t exactly a subject she was excited to discuss with anyone. “I don’t know if Daichi or anyone has heard from him since they left, but it was really soon after that… His mother’s been filling in for him, since she used to be in charge before him, but…”

Asahi was flapping his wings wildly again, and in a moment the frantic tap tap tap of his talons hitting against the table could be heard as he scrambled around in search of something to make this communication a little easier. He picked up the pen that had been near the guest book earlier with his beak and dropped it on the counter in front of Hitoka. She stared down at it for a bit, then met the familiar’s gaze.

“You want me to write a letter? For Daichi…?”

Asahi bobbed his head yet again, following with an urgent caw.

The girl nodded, and spun around in search of the guest book. On the floor. Right. Forgot about that. She dipped down to pick it up and tore out a page, all while Chikara watched the bird with a fascinated and mildly creeped out look.

Hitoka pressed the paper down on the table and got to writing, though she wasn’t really sure what to write. She began to recite the words out ahead of time, occasionally glancing at Asahi for his approval before putting them on the paper.

“He was just here one night and then gone the next morning. I’d already went home by then, but… someone mentioned seeing pirates near the docks? But we hear rumors like that a lot, and I don’t know what a pirate would want with Suga without leaving a ransom note or anything.” Her hand was shaking a little, because she really didn’t even want to think about the possibility. Asahi gave another caw, and she took it upon herself to decide that meant it was worth mentioning anyway.

Chikara frowned. “Hitoka, are you…”

“I’m alright!” She blurted, though she clearly wasn’t. It was so painfully obvious that just trying to write the letter was hard for her. “Do you think any customers have come into the bar from the front entrance yet? I know it’s early, but you know how some of these people getting home from long sailing trips can be.” She wasn’t looking at him as she spoke. Just continued to stare down at the paper, scribbling down words in handwriting that was much messier than her usual.

“Yeah… I’ll… check on that.” He took a step back toward the door, one hand reaching to push it open while he continued to face Hitoka and the strange crow. “Let me know if you need anything? And go take a break in the office if you need it. I don’t think Mrs. Sugawara will mind.”
She nodded, holding something back until Chikara had vanished back inside the bar and allowed the barrier between them to close. Her writing slowed to a stop, and then something clear was marking the paper rather than the ink intended for it.

Asahi looked up from the single tear stain and took a step closer before she managed to choke something out.

“Asahi,” she said, her voice cracking and another tear making its way down to the paper. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her arm. “How much does the Corvus charge for deliveries?” She closed her eyes tight, and a soft sob escaped her throat. “How much to bring Suga back home?”

Maybe it was a good thing that Asahi couldn’t speak in this form, because he had no idea what he could even say to that. That it was on them? That Suga was their friend, and they would find him and bring him home no matter what? Normally, Daichi wouldn’t be all that crazy about going out of their way for some unpaid rescue mission, but given recent events and the fact that this was Koushi Sugawara they were talking about… he had a feeling the Corvus would be straying from the usual deliveries for a few days once he got the news across. He’d honestly be disappointed in the crew if that weren’t the case.

So, yeah. That’s what he’d tell her. If he could manage to say it without sobbing himself, because this sweet, pure girl’s crying was definitely contagious, even if he hadn’t already been an emotional softie himself.

The tapping of his feet against the tabletop inched closer to her, and soon the bird was nuzzling his soft, feathery head beneath her chin.

A louder sob rang out, and she pulled her arms around him, loose as not to harm the animal, but desperate for comfort all the same.

They’d both need it.

The room was dark, closed off, providing no indicator of the time of day for the single captive within the ship’s brig. How many days had passed now, anyway? That, the prisoner was unsure of.

What he was sure of was that he liked pirates even less now than he had before, and that he'd definitely lost feeling in his arms at this point. At least that meant he didn't have to feel the tight pull of the shackles binding his wrists to the wall above him. Staying positive. Good plan.

There were bruises and small cuts decorating his arms and face, and his clothes had gained a few bloodstains as a reminder of what small wounds had already healed. And when was the last time he bathed?

Suga leaned his head back against the cool wall with a light knock, thinking that how he'd never complain about his mother's obsession with those overly-strong candles again after this. It'd smell better than he or this ship did right now, anyway.

He told Daichi he could handle himself, and he meant it, but this was definitely no the most convincing scenario. What was he going to tell him when he got back and had more cuts on his face than the Corvus captain? 'Oops'? 'Still not as bad as when we met, right?'
Yeah, that wouldn't blow over too well.

He heard a creak, which by now he recognized as the brig's door opening from around the corner. It allowed for a brief ray of light in the room, only to be replaced by nothing but the visitor's dim lantern once it closed again.

"Koushi!"

Suga sighed, shoulders falling as much as they could with the current hands situation.

"Today feels like a lucky day." Satori set the lantern down on a stool across from Suga's cell and stretched his arms out in front of him. "The day where you finally talk and get to end all of this interrogation crap."

This again.

Suga tilted his head enough to look at the pirate, a very much forced smile on his lips. "You're too kind, but I'm going to have to decline."

"Why are you so boring?" The pirate spun a knife in his hand, catching it and changing directions every so often. "You were always kinda boring. 'Shouldn't have expected any different from someone who ditched the sea for some shit inn."

"Well, the inn does smell nicer."

Satori caught the knife in its spin and set the back of his hand on his hip with a laugh, and leaned forward, toward Suga's cell. "Tell us who has the merman, and maybe we'll let you have a bath."

"'Maybe'? You could at least make it a promise." Suga's smile softened somewhat.

"I can promise to put in a good word and not have you tossed into shark-infested waters when we're through with this." Satori's eyes narrowed on him, and that look would never stop being uncanny to Suga. Even Daichi's intimidating stares had nothing on Satori Tendou's... whatever his face was. "If you talk," he added.

"Generous as ever."

"Anything for an old friend." He spat the last word like it was poison on his tongue.

"Are we reminiscing now? Is that what this is?" Suga cocked his head to the side and managed to give something like a grin. His teeth were still bloody in places, and one eye looked worryingly swollen. "If you just wanted a reunion, you didn't have to kidnap me."

"You're the one dragging this reunion out, Koushi." Satori kicked against the cell bars. "So, who do you want to play with you today? Me, or our canine friend?"

Suga groaned and leaned his head back against the wall.

The corners of Satori's mouth pulled down in a frown as his eyes narrowed more on the other. "Why do you care so much about some damn merman?"

"Why do you?"

"There's something in it for us. What's your excuse? That you're a softie?" His frown curled up in a nasty grin. "Or are you protecting whoever snuck the fish out of town?"
Suga sighed, the clinking of chains from his shackles accompanying the sound when he shoulders drooped once more. “Isn't it entirely possible that this merman just found its way back into the ocean? How would you expect me to help you find them then?”

“I knew it was that,” Satori said, ignoring Suga’s suggestion completely. “You were like this with that guy back then, too.”

Suga could see it, the gears turning in Satori’s head. The way that his eyes widened just slightly as he spoke, and how his grin seemed to stretch further into something disgusting and mischievous.

“It’s him, isn’t it, Koushi?”

Suga searched for the right response, but his face betrayed him. His mouth hung open just a little too long, waiting to get the words off his tongue, and it was just enough hesitation for Satori to take as confirmation.

“I think we have our lead.”

“I think you’ll waste your crew’s time running on assumptions.”

Satori waved a dismissive hand as he stepped back from the bars. “He’s got his own ship now, doesn’t he? I’ve heard his name a few times going around the region.” He was spinning that knife around again, amusement clear in his features. “Shouldn’t be hard to track down.” The spinning ceased just as quickly, and he dragged the blade through the air near his own throat, mocking the act of slicing it. “And he’ll be wishing you left him for dead in that fire when we do.”

Suga’s gut reaction was to lurch forward, wrists yanking hard at the chains restraining him despite how pointless he knew it was. “You won’t find anything when you get to them!” He struggled to keep the shaking of his voice under control, and Satori seemed absolutely delighted by it all.

“I’ll be nice and count this as cooperation for today, Koushi.” He gave a wave of the knife-holding hand and turned to the exit. “Less blood for us to clean up that way, anyway.”

The sound of his footsteps retreating was punctuated by the closing door, and Suga fell back against the cell wall once more. Daichi’s words rang through his head again.

‘You can’t save everyone, Sugawara.’

He felt ready to vomit.

Morrigan’s Coast was an island well-known for its fishing trade, but with relatively small, charming towns and villages outside of that. Places like Mooresville attracted a good amount of traffic, but were still considered small in population when compared to the busier ones of Owl Roost, which had a greater variety of markets among them, despite the latter island being much smaller than the former.

But neither island nor its settlements compared in size or activity when it came to Kingston.
The hustle and bustle of the city’s occupants could be heard from the Corvus before the ship even docked. For some, the sounds fueled their excitement. Bird sanctuaries were great and all, but this was it. The big city had all sorts of taverns and shows and *royalty*. Royalty of which Noya, Ryuu, and Taketora hadn’t stopped gushing over since they got out of bed. Daichi had already scolded them to focus on their work about ten times now. That was, Keiji had heard about ten, and he was sure there were plenty more he wasn’t around for.

“Ah, Kingston, Kingston,” the merman heard Kuroo say all mock-dreamily as he leaned against the railing near the ramp. Others were already transporting fragile crates down to their recipients, and Kuroo had been doing nothing but barking orders the whole time.

“Now you decide not to push the injury?” Koutarou had one too many boxes in arm, and Keiji was watching him carefully from behind with worry that they’d go tumbling from his grasp at any given moment.

“Hey, no one’s lives are at stake now. I ain’t pushin’ *shit*.” Kuroo rolled his good shoulder. “I gotta get back in shape for the next pirate attack.”

“The fact that you’re anticipating more is a little unsettling,” Keiji murmured.

“Better safe than sorry after all that. And it’s not like Kenma’s in any state to protect himself if it happens.”

It was subtle, but Kuroo’s tone grew darker, and Keiji decided that they didn’t need to be talking about pirates or sea monsters or *anything* even vaguely related to the subjects right now.

“Well, this would be the place to stock up on supplies if you want to be prepared. How long will you all be here, anyway?”

“Hopefully not long!” Koutarou snapped as he made his way past Kuroo and down the ramp.

Keiji continued to watch after him and his too-many-boxes even as he slowed to a halt near the top of the ramp. “Does he really hate the city, or is he just in a mood from yesterday?”

Kuroo gave a single-shoulder shrug. “He doesn’t hate the city. He gets all happy-go-lucky the second he gets out there and gets sucked into all the touristy stuff. I think he just gets worked up ‘cause the people around here can be kind of…”

“Rude?” Keiji finished, and Kuroo nodded.

“It’s the city. Some people just think being in the same general area as the queen makes them better than everyone else or… something.”

“Yeah, the *queen*!” Koutarou marched his way back up the ramp to the two. “Not king. Queen. What kind of city has ‘king’ in the name and doesn’t even have one! It should be called ‘Queenston’!”

“That’s about as valid an argument as you can get.” Kuroo nodded, but Keiji could definitely sense something condescending in the motion. Koutarou didn’t notice at all.

“I know! And what kind of bullshit is ‘the City of Kingston,’ anyway? You can’t just name your city after the island! Or the island after the city, or… which is it?”

“Does it matter?” Keiji mumbled, and started past him to get his own cargo off his hands.
“It does! ‘Cause it makes everyone from here sound even more snooty!”

“Isn’t Tobio from Kingston?” Kuroo raised a brow.

“I’m from Kingston.” Hajime shot them both a look as he and Daichi carried a larger container off the ship.

Kuroo forced a snort and tilted his head Koutarou’s way. “You’re going to get your ass kicked.”

“I can take him.” Koutarou lifted an arm and slapped his opposing hand down on his bicep with pride. The action received a questioning look from Keiji as he made his way back, and then Koutarou was up in his face, raising an index finger in front of him. “And you’ve helped enough! Are you even in any condition to be lifting things? Quick how many fingers am I holding? What color are they?”

Keiji jumped back a step, his brows all furrowed at the other. “One, and the same color your skin was before…. I told you my vision is fine now, Koutarou. You and your doctor helped me plenty to recover yesterday.”

“I did?”

Koutarou’s face brightened much too much. It left Keiji perplexed, too, because weren’t they supposed to be fighting or… something? What the hell were they even doing yesterday? Koutarou had stormed out of the room, and when Hajime brought him back later, Koutarou had been unusually quiet and unresponsive. Not in the same way that Kenma was, but more like a kicked puppy. Come morning he was all bright and obnoxious as ever, and Keiji seemed to be the only one on the ship that was thrown off by the whole thing.

“You did….” Well, mostly the doctor did, but this was much better than watching Koutarou sulk and whine at him about not getting enough sleep.

“Y’hear that, Kuroo? I’m a miracle worker.”

“I don’t see you doin’ any work right now.” Kuroo grinned, and before Koutarou could argue, Daichi’s voice made itself known behind him.

“Neither do I.”

Koutarou jumped, and a hand shot to his forehead in a salute before he scrambled off to help with the remaining cargo. The captain followed after with a roll of the eyes, this time not even bothering to remind Keiji that he didn’t need to help, because the other had already made it clear once again that he didn’t mind doing a few more chores before departing the Corvus.

Kuroo watched them disappear from sight before casting a glance Keiji’s way. “So, you actually got someone to meet in the city, or was that just an excuse for a boat ride? Planning on sticking around for the sailor life?”

“After all this?” Keiji sighed. “Don’t worry, I’ll be out of your hair soon. If I wait much longer, it’ll probably be hard to get a hold of him, anyway.”

“Meeting up with a busy guy?”

“Unfortunately.”
Another raised brow from Kuroo, but he didn’t question it further. “Then maybe you should get going. We’re almost done here, and we’ve got all the help we need anyway.”

“I know, but….”

“But Koutarou will throw a fit if you leave without a goodbye, right?”

Another sigh from Keiji, and a light chuckle from Kuroo.

“As much as Bird Brain wants to, we won’t be setting sail again today. I don’t think the captain or anyone’ll object if you stop by for a visit after you get your errand over with. Unless that’s going to take more than a day.”

“I hope it doesn’t,” the merman mumbled. “But if that’s alright, then I probably should head into town now…”

“I’ll let him know you’ll be back.” Kuroo flashed a reassuring grin. Keiji didn’t point out that every positive expression the man had to offer seemed clouded over by some sort of unrelated stress or concern.

Instead, Keiji thanked him, retrieved his belongings, and made his way back down the ship’s ramp, this time with a lack of boxes and only a small bag over his shoulder.

If all went according to plan, he’d find the guy he was searching out at one of his usual spots, get what he needed, be out before evening, pop over to the Corvus long enough for another round of thanks and a goodbye before Koutarou could get the chance to stalk him on this island too, ‘cause he probably would if Keiji didn’t hold his word, and then… well, he’d hit the next roadblock when he got to it.

One thing at a time.

The crowds only seemed to thicken the further he got from the docks, and he was reminded of one of many things he disliked about this place. Their reasons differed, but Koutarou definitely wasn’t alone on that note.

The markets on Owl Roost were busy, especially the ones around the sanctuary, but at least the people in those parts were mostly civil to one another. Here, it felt like what he imagined pushing through herds of angry cattle would be like, but with more cursing and insults.

His first stop was an overcrowded inn that Keiji had always made a point not to linger around during these visits because of just how noisy the place was. That is, even noisy by the city’s standards.

It was an over the top place, chandeliers and all, and he was pretty sure that most of the people he usually saw filling the entrance couldn’t even afford to stay there in the first place. It seemed like a popular place for people to just gather and talk and exchange tales of their travels, and the owners didn’t seem to mind as long as they could at least suck the visitors into buying a few drinks, at the very least. And those who could afford a night probably overlooked the noise because a) they had luxurious beds and probably pillows with chocolates on them or some fancy shit, and b) they could afford this much, but not the even fancier lodging nearer the castle.

Those were good enough guesses, anyway.

It was also a good guess that the person he was looking for wasn’t there today, because Keiji surely would’ve heard him even over the chatter of the too-many people present.
So, moving on.

He went from location to location, marking them off his mental list as he did. The inn was a bust, and so was the popular hang-out beneath the bridge where horse-drawn carriages often gathered to offer tours of the city. Nothing at the cafe. No luck at the bookstore, either.

The next was a tavern that, as much as Keiji didn’t want to spend much time in, he really hoped he’d find the guy here. This was taking way too long, and he didn’t want to have to wander back to the Corvus in the dark just to say two words he could have easily waited around to say earlier on.

The Sailor’s Knot was all too popular among travelers coming through Kingston, perhaps even more so than the inn, whether they came from the piers or wandered from the far side of the island by land. It was much larger than the place that Koutarou had dragged him to before, and it provided a much larger selection of foods and alcohol.

It also provided a good news source, if you were the type to start up conversation with tourists. Or if you were the type to eavesdrop. Both reasons that made this yet another destination on Keiji’s find-the-bastard-and-get-this-over-with list.

He pushed through the door and down the steps into the building, the lighting growing more and more dim with every step he took. People pushed and shoved their way up and down the narrow stairway, and the liveliness of the place became more apparent as Keiji reached the bottom. As did the smell of smoke and booze and incense that was honestly not doing any good in covering up the former two.

Keiji’s nose scrunched at the scent when it hit him, but it was just after that did his face relax with something like relief at the sound that carried over the booming of the tavern’s guests.

It was laughter, but the way that it rose and fell in unnaturally smooth, rhythmic waves over the voices of the others was such a painfully dead giveaway to Keiji.

*Found him.*

With a small ‘here we go’ sort of huff, he turned to the source and braved through the flocks of men and women alike crowding the man in question, pampering him with questions and compliments that he clearly had no issues taking in.

There were a few offended comments from others as he made his way to the front, but he ignored them and stood just across the table from the other.

Milky brown eyes widened at the sight of the merman, and soon the man’s laughter was quieting into a soft chuckle. He leaned back in his chair, tipping his head to the side in a way that made that eye-matching hair bounce in an unnaturally attractive way.

“Jiji! Long time no see! You should have written so I’d know you were coming.”

*I asked you not to call me that.*

Keiji bit his tongue. “And you should make yourself easier to find.”

“Well, you found me.”

“I guess I did.” While he was very much aware of the jealous stares coming his way, Keiji did his best to remain impassive as usual, and kept his gaze on the one in front of him. “Could I get a
word with you, Tooru?"

Chapter End Notes

Alternatively titled: "I Made Yachi Cry and I Feel Like A Monster"
Chapter Summary

oikawa has arrived

There were chatters of, “Hey, get in line,” and, “Who does this guy think he is?” behind Keiji, but he ignored them without much trouble. The man seated across the table before him looked much more amused, however.

Tooru Oikawa had his mouth quirked up in a knowing smirk and his hands hung over the back of his seat. He was clearly basking in all the attention, and it was an image Keiji was accustomed to seeing whenever these meetings took place.

“You know, Jiji--”

“Keiji.”

“Jiji,” Tooru repeated. “I’m so sorry, but I’m all booked for the day. I hope you didn’t travel all the way here just to see me.”

“I did, and you’re lying. You never take appointments.” Keiji glanced around the room, once again choosing not to pay any mind to the disapproving stares of its occupants. “Not here, anyway.”

Tooru leaned his head back slightly, averting his eyes guiltily but still keeping that smile plastered to his face.

“So, a word? In private, preferably?” When Tooru continued to avoid his gaze like he was looking for something more interesting to focus on, Keiji gave the heaviest, most tired sigh. “Information for information.”

At that, Tooru’s gaze snapped back onto Keiji, his entire head turning at the motion. The moonstone that dangled from his right ear bounced about in turn, and Keiji had to wonder how having so much junk pulling down on ones skin like that didn’t hurt. He also wondered if Tooru had been wearing a moonstone the last time he saw him and he just hadn’t noticed.

“Well,” Tooru said, pushing forward from the seat and getting to his feet. He raised his hands apologetically, turning to the flock of people around his table, all smiles. “Now I am booked for the day. Sorry everyone, you’ll have to come back tomorrow!”

The volume in the area raised considerably with complaints and, “but I have money,” and people waving about small bags of coins and trinkets in the man’s face.

Tooru kept the smile in place, and even winked at a pair of girls who’d been whining and pouting in the most overdramatic fashion. Keiji fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“Tomorrow,” he said again, before waving them off and taking Keiji’s wrist with his free
hand to pull him out from the tavern. All further complaints went ignored as he dragged the
merman back up the steps, and they could hear the bartender yelling at the crowd to quiet down as
they left the place. As if the Sailor’s Knot was ever quiet to begin with.

But now, they couldn’t hear any of it, and Tooru was pulling Keiji through alleys and around
sharp corners. Keiji had said he wanted to speak in private, but he had a feeling that wherever
Tooru was taking him now was probably a bit excessive.

“Just leaving the tavern would’ve been enough,” Keiji said as Tooru brought them out from an
alley and onto a less crowded street.

“I don’t know what sort of private matters you had to discuss, but I have my own. There’s
something I need to show you.”

Keiji furrowed his brows. “If you had to show me something, then why did you tell me you
were booked in the first place?”

Tooru released his hand and spun around to face him. The earring gave a faint jingling noise
at the action, thin chains of silver clinking against the moonstone that was now reflecting all sorts
of colors in the light of the sun. Of course, all of the bracelets and necklaces gave off the same little
noises, but that was nothing new. The moonstone was new. Keiji was starting to feel pretty sure of
that.

“I didn’t mean it! When don’t I make time for you, Jiji?”

What an ass.

“Are you going to charge me for whatever this is you’re showing me, too?”

Tooru waved a dismissive hand. “No, no. I do expect that whatever information you brought
for me is worth whatever you’re going to ask for, though. Do you have any idea what sort of
boring news people have been pestering me over lately? I want something interesting.”

Keiji watched him, gaze passive as ever. “Maybe you should just lower your standards.”

Tooru rolled his eyes, turning around once again to lead Keiji further down the street. “This is
my job, you know. Lowering standards is not an option.”

As he said this, he led them past an old carpenter’s place and to the door of an old, barely
standing toyshop. Keiji could see why it was in this state, too. The wooden puppets hanging in the
display window were not only poorly made, but were outright creepy. Definitely not something he
could see any child willingly playing with. If the inside was anything like the exterior, a lack of
customers would make perfect sense.

And, of course, that was exactly the case. The bell at the door gave a light jingle as Tooru
passed through, Keiji following close behind and trying not to grimace too openly at the sight of
the lopsided faces adorning several stuffed animals lining the shelves. One sloppily sewn together
teddy bear in particular made him the most uncomfortable. He thought it was maybe supposed to
be smiling a happy grin, but it reminded him too much of an angler fish.

“This was your idea of a private place?” he asked, daring to take his eyes off the toy despite
the unnerving and completely absurd feeling that it was watching him.

Without giving an answer, Tooru raised a hand to wave over at the desk to the left of the shop,
where a small, old woman looked up with a soft smile. Her grey hair was pulled back into a bun,
and a clay pin in the shape of a flower rested beneath it. She looked… completely harmless. Normal. Pleasant, even. It was a stark contrast to the rest of the shop.

“It’s just me, Miss Misaki,” Tooru said, smiling a smile much warmer and much less fake than the one he’d been showing off to the flocks back at the tavern. “I’ve brought company, I hope that’s alright!”

The old woman simply nodded at him before returning to something she was knitting. As the men stepped past the desk, Keiji saw that it was a toy rabbit, and it had the most soulless eyes he had ever seen on anything, inanimate or living.

What the hell.

Tooru didn’t say anything else until they were up the stairs in what appeared to be living quarters above the store.

“She’s sweet. Her granddaughter owns the pottery shop down the street.”

“Is her pottery as, um….”

Tooru laughed. “Disturbing? No. Her grandmother has just… lost her touch? I’ve seen her old toys. They were much cuter. The drop in quality could be from her eyesight or--”

“You’re one to comment on eyesight.”

“Rude.” Tooru stuck his tongue out before removing a rusty old key from his pocket. “She lost her husband too, though,” he added, volume dropping closer to a whisper. “It sounds like she lost some of her enthusiasm after that. Hana had already started up her own business by then, too.” He moved to a door past the tiny kitchen and slid the key through the keyhole.

“And now you’re taking her husband’s place.”

Tooru stuck his tongue out again, this time in utter disgust, turning to Keiji to make sure he can see just how appalled he is at the suggestion of him courting some wrinkly old woman. “Rude,” he repeated. “I’ve been giving them some tips on other businesses and rumors and things to help pick them back up. They didn’t have the money or anything useful to offer, so they’re letting me stay here.”

He pushed the door open, revealing a room barely larger than the one Keiji had stayed in aboard the Corvus. Upon the dresser were a few wooden toys that were, in fact, much more appealing than those they saw downstairs.

Keiji repeated Tooru’s earlier statement. “Lowering standards is not an option.”

“Well I can’t spend every night hopping around fancy inns!”

“I don’t see a problem with this. It’s just not very… you.” Keiji looked around the room, thinking it had a cozy sort of feeling to it. Maybe any room was going to feel that way after being stuck on a ship for so many days, though. “Is the gossip thing not paying off as much as it used to?”

Tooru whipped around and raised a finger. “Informant,” he corrected. “And I’m doing just fine, thank you. But like I said, I haven’t been getting a lot of good material to work with lately.”

“So, you’re not doing just fine.”
“Says the fish out of water who can’t afford to cover up the circles under his eyes.”

Keiji immediately brought a hand to lightly touch beneath one eye, and Tooru’s lips pulled down in a frown. Something close to concern, if Keiji wasn’t mistaken.

The airy lightness of the informant’s voice dropped to something deeper. More serious. “You didn’t swim here,” he said, scanning Keiji up and down. “When’s the last time you reverted?”

And then Keiji was averting his gaze. “Not… too long ago.”

“For what, all of two minutes? You haven’t slept, have you?” Tooru’s eyes settled on Keiji’s own, and he hooked a finger beneath the merman’s chin to yank his attention forward again. The exhaustion in Keiji’s eyes was too easy to read. “You can’t. The nightmares are too much.”

“I’m managing.”

“The ocean’s calling you, Keiji.”

The tone of voice, the way Tooru said his real name instead of some silly nickname, it all made Keiji’s stomach turn. He swatted his hand away from his face with a scowl. “I appreciate the concern, Tooru, but this isn’t what I came here to discuss.”

“You’re losing that calm mask of yours. You really are exhausted.”

“It’s… not a mask.”

Tooru simply hummed at this.

“It isn’t. Aren’t you the one wearing too many layers to cover his own exhaustion?” Keiji noticed the way Tooru’s brows gave the slightest twitch at his observation. “Your kind have even less ‘human’ traits than regular merfolk. You have more to hide than I do.” Keiji folded his arms and sat himself on the edge of Tooru’s bed. “And you’re not even far from the water.”

Tooru stuck out his lower lip and set his hands on his hips, turning his head up all defiantly. His tone reverted to that playfully light one again. “You know as well as I do that Kingston is the worst place to go splashing around with a fin in.”

“Then why are you lecturing me?”

"Because Owl Roost is at least a little safer than this place." Tooru leaned back against the dresser across from the bed, one hand rested on the edge while the other plucked up a small, wooden doll. "Even if you think it's smart to keep a human form to lay low, you won't be able to outrun your people if your legs feel like they're shattering with every step."

Keiji fell silent for a moment, watching Tooru turn the doll over in his hand. "You do this all the time. How do you get used to it?"

Tooru paused in his fiddling with the toy, his gaze fixing on its face with a thoughtful look. The doll wore a red dress, the color faded with time. Strings of brown yarn fell from its head and were tied into pigtails, falling over its shoulders and framing a face made up of only two black dots for eyes. Even without a mouth, it was cute. Charming. Simple.

He didn’t much care for it.

His lips pulled downward just slightly. Just enough for Keiji to catch.
"You don't." Tooru lifted his gaze from the doll to glance Keiji's way. "The ocean's calling you now, but it's only coming in whispers. The longer you try to ignore it, the louder it gets."

"I did go for a swim the other day, you know."

"And? It didn't last, did it? You have to spend a few days in your natural state at the very least to recover. You know that." Tooru lowered the doll to his side. "And I mean to relax in your natural form. No rushing from island to island like I'm sure you have been."

"I really think you're being awfully hypocritical by lecturing me right now."

"I'll still have more at my disposal than you even if this does take its toll on me. I still have my voice."

Keiji sighed. "This isn't exactly what I sought you out for, you know."

Tooru hummed again. "You want to know if I have anything on your people."

The other's mouth twisted with unease. "They aren't my people."

"They're all children of Eventide, just like you."

"I'm no child of Eventide now." Keiji met Tooru's gaze with a hard look. "Have they been here?"

Tooru set the doll back on the dresser behind him. "They haven't. They've been sending outsiders to do their work, as usual." He turned around then, pulling open a drawer and shuffling through clothes and papers in search of something. "And you're lucky I notice everything, or else you would've been dead the second you set foot on this island."

Keiji raised a brow and opened his mouth to ask for elaboration, but then Tooru was turning around with a pile of papers hanging between his fingers. He held them out to Keiji, whose jaw dropped at the sight.

"This is what you wanted to show me?"

"They're pretty good drawings. I don't think they could be mistaken for anyone other than you, scales or no scales."

Keiji reached forward and plucked the papers from Tooru's grasp.

Posters. Wanted posters.

And all depicting Keiji's face, save for any signs of merman traits.

He gave a groan, shoulders slumping and head lowering as he flipped through them all. "Where did you get these?"

"They were posted all over the city a few days ago. I've been taking them down as I find them." Tooru gave his hair a proud flip with a hand. "You're welcome."

Keiji looked up again, perplexed. "I thought you were a neutral in all this."

"I was until they sent pirates to recruit me." Tooru's nose wrinkled in disgust. "Pirates, Jiji. Can you believe that? And Eventide has more than one crew working for them, too." He blew a stray hair from his face. "They must be offering something impressive in exchange for pirates to
align with them."

“Recruit you?” Keiji casted one more uncomfortable glance to the papers in his hands before setting them on the bed beside him. “For what? Your information or your voice?”

“Both, but mostly the latter, I’m sure.” Tooru stuck his tongue out again. “As if I’d really stoop so low as to lend my hands to some brutish, smelly pirates.”

“You wouldn’t happen to remember the name of the ship, would you?”

“Who do you think I am?”

Keiji only blinked tired eyes at him, waiting for an actual answer.

And Tooru huffed. “I do, but you’re going to have to hold up your end of the deal before I tell you anything else.” He turned a palm upwards and gestured back at himself with his fingers. “So, let me have it. What juicy news did you bring for me, Jiji?”

Choosing to ignore the stupid nickname this time, Keiji nodded. “We ran into some trouble on the way here—”

“We?”

Keiji’s eyes gave the smallest twitch. “You said so yourself I didn’t swim, so how do you think I got here? I came by a merchant ship—” He saw Tooru make another disgusted face at the thought of sailors, “--and there was a trespasser around Petal Reef’s waters.”

Tooru furrowed his brows, and then he lifted his hand up before him. “Stop. Don’t tell me you came all the way here and all you have for me is some serpent sighting.”

Keiji gaped. “You knew?”

“Jiji, that thing has been coming and going for months now.” Tooru was outright scowling now, though his eyes were off of Keiji, focusing on some memory instead of the merman in front of him. “It got all territorial on a ship that passed through when I was there last, too.” He brought his hand to his chest, fingers splayed out against the loose cloth hanging over his torso in a dramatic display. “I tried to guide them out of its path, but one of those horrible sailors must have been hard of hearing or something, because they started shooting at me!” He started mumbling something about ‘ungrateful seamen’ after that, but Keiji was too concerned with other bits of the story to care.

“It’s Gandril’s brother.”

Tooru paused in his ranting to look at the other, a faint look of surprise in his eyes.

“So that’s news to you?”

“I’m not a child of Eventide. I speak plenty of languages, but serpent isn’t one of them. I didn’t get to stop and ask it to join me for tea.” He raised a brow. “That thing is related to all this, then?”

“It didn’t sound like Eventide sent him, but more like he was acting for them by his own decision.”

“To do what?”
“Probably what those pirates came to you for. Petal Reef just… didn’t get off so easily.”

The room fell silent then, a stillness sitting in the air until Tooru decided to step over to the bed, seating himself on the edge with only the wanted posters between himself and Keiji. “Maybe you should start from the beginning on this one.”

The docks at Kingston were still lively as always, but at least now there were less sailors going back and forth with fragile boxes, which meant there was less shouting and scolding on Daichi's end.

The man stood before his ship now, arms crossed as he stared up at her. Beside him stood another man with a big, round mess of brown hair that Shouyou had earlier said reminded him of broccoli. Daichi had told the deckhand to stay onboard and keep his thoughts to himself after that.

"Well, it gave us a temporary fix, if anything." Daichi said, though he was frowning as he eyed the shoddy repairs his crew had done to the side of the Corvus. It was hard enough to look at the crappy 'fix' from inside his quarters, but seeing it from the outside somehow got him down even more.

"It looks like shit." The other man stated.

Daichi felt himself slump.

"But not beyond help." The 'vegetable head,' as Daichi's oh-so-mature crewmates had called the man behind his back, clamped a hand down on the captain's shoulder. "We'll get the Corvus looking like her majestic old self again in no time."

Daichi groaned. "How long is 'no time,' exactly?"

The other pursed his lips as he looked up at the damage, mulling things over for a moment. "I’ll have to take a look at the inside, but I’m gonna guess… two days tops. Maybe even under one."

"That's it? Really?"

"That's if we have the glass for the broken windows, but yeah. You got lucky. They could've done way more damage here." He nudged his elbow into Daichi's side. "You'll have to tell me how you got those pirates off your tail later, though!"

Daichi’s eyes wandered off to the side, an uneasy laugh leaving his lips. “It’s not that interesting of a story, but sure…. Once he’d take out the invisible ship act, merman, and sea serpent, it really wasn’t that interesting of a story. He’d only sound crazy if he left all of that in, though. “I don’t suppose you know anyone who can restore an old desk, do you?”

“...Did the cannon hit the desk?”

“The cannon destroyed the desk.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to get a new one?”

“It had sentimental value…” And his father would probably kill him if it was lost for good.
The other rubbed the back of his head. “I’ll take a look at it, alright? Let me get some of my people out here to start on inspecting the wall damage, first.”

Daichi gave a grateful nod of the head. “Thank you, Ogano.”

When Ogano left with a grin and a “Don’t mention it,” Daichi headed back up the ramp of his ship, choosing very purposely not to look at the out of place boarding covering up the massive cannonfire hole.

“So!” A small figure jumped up and landed in front of Daichi, giving the man a start. “The Corvus gonna get fixed up, or are we gonna have to start calling ‘er ‘Patchy’?”

“We are not calling the ship ‘Patchy,’ Noya.”

“I’m calling the ship ‘Patchy’ until there’re no more ugly patches.”

Daichi gave Noya one of his infamous looks, and the smaller man stiffened with an awkward smile.

“So scary,” he said, and the captain started past him toward his quarters. Noya followed.

“Any word from Asahi, yet?”

Noya’s lips shaped into a frown so exaggerated that it pushed up his nose and pulled his brows down and together. “No,” he said, huffing air out through his nose. “I keep telling you guys, I don’t have that much magic! Granny gave me enough to bind Asahi to me, but that’s it. I think that was like… all she had left? I can’t hear or feel him from across the ocean.” He ducked under Daichi’s arm when the man held his cabin door open to him. “I can barely even feel him when we’re on the same ship.”

Daichi just wanted a yes or no. He should have expected a full-blown rant when it came to this subject. “Ah, well, he can sense you though, right? That’s how he always finds his way back to the Corvus.”

“Yeah. He can. I can’t.” Noya stomped on over to the chair behind the busted up cherry wood desk and plopped down onto the cushions. “I don’t know if it’s ‘cause he’s made of magic or whatever, but it sucks.”

“That’s my seat.”

“Oops.” Noya quickly stood up, glancing down at where his butt had just been before turning to observe the remains of the desk. “The chair didn’t even get scratched. Impressive.”

“Impressive is not the word I’d be using,” Daichi said, wincing at the very sight of the family heirloom.

Noya nodded and nudged a fallen drawer from the desk with the toe of his boot. There was a small cracking sound, and he paled at it. Without even looking up, he could feel Daichi’s glare settling over him.

Sure, he could feel that, but not his own damn familiar.

“Well, when Asahi does come back,” he started, making sure not to look at Daichi as he stepped back from the furniture. “He’ll probably go to you before me. We all know you’re losing your head over Suga status right now.”
“I’m not ‘losing my head,’” Daichi said, and Noya failed to suppress an unconvinced snort. “I just want to make sure he’s alright. There’s been way too much craziness going on lately for me not to be cautious.”

Noya dared to look at the captain, but the man was no longer sending cold glares his way. Instead, he was staring out a window that had yet to be shattered.

“I just wish we didn’t have to wait so long for an answer.”

Noya crossed his arms, but there was something sympathetic in the motion. In the look in his eyes. “Yeah, well… if the whole familiar-telepathy thing decides to become real, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Daichi breathed out, long and tired, coated in a hint of distress. Noya stepped past him, reaching up to set a hand on his shoulder. The smaller sailor tried for a reassuring smile.

“She told you he can take care of himself, boss. He’s gonna be fine!”

Suga was not fine.

“Guess who we’ve got word on!” Satori was practically skipping down the steps to Suga’s cell.

Suga felt something sink inside of him.

“Your merman-thief friends were spotted heading south of Owl Roost recently. Did you know they’d be there, Koushi?”

Of course he did. “I’m not friends with any thieves.”

Satori’s playful grin melted into something irritable. “You’re still trying the dumb act, huh?”

Suga watched him with his own smile. Tired. Strained. “Aren’t you the ones trying to steal a merman, here?”

“We’re not trying. We’re on the brink of succeeding.”

“The process of that is still called trying, I’m pretty sure.”

“Trying implies that there’s a chance of failure.”

“Well, you haven’t caught anything yet, have you?”

Satori stepped up to the cell, hands gripping around smooth metal bars with a lopsided grin. “We’ve got you.”

“A lot of good that’s doing you.”

“You don’t think Scar-Nose would be willing to trade a fish to get you off this ship?”

Suga’s smile faltered for only a short moment.
“You don’t have to answer. I already know he will.” He stepped back from the bars, tossing his arms out to the sides. “And if he doesn’t, then that just means the rest of us get to have a little fun with him!”

“I can’t imagine what sort of reward you’re being bribed with to go this out of your way for one merman.”

“Can’t say it really concerns you.”

Suga tilted his head up to look at the shackles binding him to the wall, but even doing that felt like too much strain on his starving, weak body. He spread his fingers out and directed his gaze back to Satori. “Kinda concerns me.”

“Stay concerned with how you’re gonna beg your merchant friends to save you when we find ‘em. As fun as snatching up the fish by force would be, I think our captain would be happier if everything went smoothly.”

Suga relaxed his fingers with a jaded chuckle. “I wouldn’t want to let your captain down.”

And then, Satori’s grin returned, eyes all narrow and fox-like. “No, you wouldn’t.”

Akira Kunimi was never agreeing to leave the village after this.

“He’s smart, he can handle it.” “It’s just a short research mission. We can’t hire an outsider for this one.” “It’s not like your lazy tail is busy with anything else, right?”

Was this karma? It had to be karma. Maybe if he’d been more driven to help with his people’s cause beforehand, he wouldn’t have gotten stuck in this situation.

More specifically, stuck to a tree. A very old tree with peeling bark that was poking uncomfortably at his back, though that wasn’t quite as annoying as the rope that bound him to it and dug into his chest and arms.

And that wasn’t quite as annoying as, well….

“I can’t even read any of this!” Lev flipped the notebook in his hands over, squinting at the words scribbled on the pages as if either of those actions would somehow make the foreign language easier to decipher. It didn’t. “These don’t even look like letters! What are these? Magic symbols or something?” He held the notes up higher, toward Kanji who’d been hovering over his shoulder. “Does this look like magic to you?”

Kanji, too, squinted at the page with much consideration, though neither of them seemed to be coming to any useful conclusions.

“Don’t hurt yourselves.”

“I see smoke, and it’s not coming from the firepit.”

Morisuke actually snorted at Issei and Takahiro’s commentary. He was stepping over to the tree they’d oh-so-kindly tied Akira to, a jar from the camper’s tent in hand. He plucked a small slice of some sort of fruit from it. Something like jam or marmalade dripped from it and back into
the jar in thick globs, and he popped it into his mouth. It was sweet, almost citrusy, but there was a mildly salty aftertaste to it. It tasted like the ocean. All of the food from this guy’s stash tasted like the ocean.

He decided to focus on the refreshing feeling of food moving down his throat rather than the urge to smack a palm to his face when he heard Lev ask, “Where are you seeing smoke, Issei?”

“So,” Morisuke started once he’d swallowed down that slice, keeping his gaze on Akira rather than his idiot captain. “You’re going to have to show us where you’re getting fresh water from. And probably tell us where we are.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Morisuke raised a brow. “You know, you’re getting off pretty easy here. We can do worse than tie someone to a tree. *Pirates,* remember?”

Akira still wasn’t convinced that these guys were actually pirates. It still felt like some sort of dumb prank that he really wished would be over with already.

“We’re just asking for a little guidance.”

“And my food.”

“...And your food, yeah. Sorry.”

“Are you actually?”

“No!” Issei and Takahiro shouted from the warmth of the fire pit, where they were heating up a jar of some kind of stew. It also smelled like the ocean.

Akira let out a long breath and tipped his head back against the tree. “If I show you where to find some water, you’ll leave me alone?”

“And tell us where we are, yes.”

*You’re in the fucking jungle.*

Akira decided *not* to say that, because he was already in a defenseless situation as it was, and he didn’t want another whack to the neck or any other part of his body. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that.”

“We don’t know what island we’re on!” Lev announced, dropping the notebook in favor of inspecting the map he found folded up within its pages. The writing on that was no easier to make out than the rest of the notes, though. “We just floated to the first piece of land we could find after that serpent nearly ate us all!”

“Serpent?” Akira repeated, voice dropping to a near-whisper. “He’s still hanging around here?”

Morisuke offered another questioning look, but Akira decided it was better to distract from that topic.

“You’re on Ironfall.”

Morisuke slipped another fruit slice into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully for a moment before swallowing and asking, “Which Ironfall?”
“North.”

Every pair of eyes in the crew was soon settling on Kanji, though he hardly seemed to notice with how intensely he was eying the map in Lev’s hands. A moment of silence had to pass before he finally looked up, glancing from each face that had locked onto him.

“What?”

“Kanji,” Morisuke was sure to put extra stress on his name. “We’ve been on your homeland this entire time and you didn’t even know it?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” The taller man jumped to his feet, not realizing that Lev had actually been using him as a sort of support where he was crouched himself. Their captain fell back on his rear, and Kanji stepped aside with a quick, apologetic glance. “Ironfall has four islands! Four! I’m from West Ironfall, you know! There aren’t any towns or anything on the northern island. It’s all…”

“Untamed.”

Kanji pointed and shook a finger at Issei, nodding in agreement. “Right! No one ever comes here, so how would I have known?!”

Morisuke looked absolutely dumbfounded. “Because someone who spends most of their life on the water should at least recognize their own set of islands from the outside?”

“I had a lot on my mind out there!” Kanji whined.

“Hate to interrupt,” Takahiro said, raising a hand like a grade schooler, “but what you’re telling us is that we’re not going to find civilization anywhere around here unless we want to paddle over to the next island?”

“Or we steal another boat in the meantime.” Issei turned to Akira.

“You think I have a boat?”

“You had to get here somehow.”

“If you want to search the island for a boat, you’ll starve yourselves before you find anything.” On second thought, maybe he should just let them.

Lev propped himself up where he’d fallen, hands on the ground behind him for support and lanky legs stretched out in front of him as he watched Akira with interest. “But you have all this food and stuff. You didn’t get stranded like we did.”

“I’m not stranded, and I don’t have a boat. Can you let me go now?”

This time, Issei was the one raising his hand for attention. “I wouldn’t mind getting some water. After losing the ship and nearly being eaten alive, it’d be a little embarrassing to have ‘dehydration’ as the cause of death on our headstones.”

“Who’s going to bury us?” Takahiro asked, looking rather passive despite the hint of amusement in his voice.

“I’ll dig my own grave if we don’t get off this island soon.” Morisuke looked to the ropes keeping Akira in place. “We have your weapons, and you’re outnumbered.”

Akira looked up at him with what probably would have been a glare, had a little more effort
been put into it, but then something was obstructing his sight of the smallest pirate. A stringbean of a body loomed over him with an eerie, catlike grin, and Akira thought for just a second that maybe Captain Lev actually did carry some degree of intimidation.

Was it just the height?

Lev leaned over, hands on his hips, the childlike carelessness he seemed to be all about moments ago buried beneath something uncomfortably intense. “So, no funny business, alright?”

Akira Kunimi was never agreeing to leave the village after this.

"So, how many humans know what you are now?"

At some point during "Story Time With Keiji," Tooru had wound up on his back on the bed, legs stretched out up against the wall. If Keiji tilted his head just right, it almost looked like the informant was sitting on the wall with the bed as his backrest. It didn’t look comfortable.

"Three..." he muttered. "Assuming that the other merman they had with them doesn't say anything."

"And you trust the sailors not to?"

"I... think so."

Tooru snorted.

"I know you wouldn't, but you don't trust anyone without gills." Keiji bit his lip. It surprised himself that he’d even say this, considering the distance he was still putting between himself and the Corvus crew.

"I barely trust anyone with gills." Tooru tipped his head to look at Keiji, who'd only just flopped down onto his own back, legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. "Especially not with how Eventide's been acting lately."

"Which would be the perfect transition for you to give me your end of the bargain."

Tooru closed his eyes and hummed with a thoughtful nod of the head. "Right. Right. I'm not sure how much is news to you, since you already knew Eita Semi had been at Owl Roost, but I'll tell you everything I've gathered on your fellow children."

"They aren't my--"

A loud crash from downstairs cut Keiji off. He sat up slowly, eying the door, while Tooru hardly moved.

"What was that?"

Tooru shushed him, remaining still but looking off at nothing in particular with a seemingly focused stare. It was quiet at first, but then there was another crash, followed by the horrified scream of an old woman, and then Tooru was pushing off the wall and to his feet.
He rushed through the bedroom door and down the steps faster than he's probably ever used his legs, with Keiji only a few steps behind.

At the foot of the steps was a table, flipped onto its side and surrounded by wooden chips and pieces from broken toys. Beyond that was Miss Misaki, on her back, but struggling to push herself back up.

Tooru moved to her side, bending to assist the woman. He asked if she was alright, but she couldn’t get a single word out. She only pointed a shaky finger ahead, where a variety of toys laid scattered among the ground. Poorly made stuffed animals and wooden dolls, all carelessly strewn about.

Save for the one, single clay figure that stood upright in the midst of it all. It was a simplistic toy, much like the rest. It had a round shape to it, with arms that hugged close to the body with little real definition, and stood at a height only about half the length of Keiji’s hand.

And, like it was on an invisible wheel or disc, it slowly turned its black, painted-on eyes to Tooru.

The men stiffened, Keiji not moving his eyes from the figure as he asked, “What did you bring here, Tooru?”

“You think I have something to do with this?!” Tooru gaped and cast a quick glance the old woman’s way. “Miss Misaki, what happened?”

She shook her head, still too shaken to speak.

“To… ru….”

His eyes were on the toy again, wishing so badly that he’d imagined what he’d just heard.

The toy didn’t flinch in the slightest then, but the voice repeated from what was clearly its hollow body.

“To… ru…?”

“I’m sure you have nothing to do with this,” Keiji muttered.

The figure shifted forward, as if being pushed by some unseen force. It spoke again, its voice rising and falling from something high pitched and childlike to something deep and far from comforting with every other word. “To… r u…. He l p… us…?”

Us?

Tooru leaned back, urging for Keiji’s attention without taking his own off of their ‘guest.’

“Get Miss Misaki somewhere safe.”

“Safe from what?”

The sound of wood scratching against wood had Keiji turning around to see several of the knocked-over toys moving into upright positions. Those with movable joints stepped toward the group, while other more solid toys pivoted forward as the clay one had.

Couldn’t have gotten a break after the goddamn sea serpent, could he?

Keiji ran to the woman’s side, moving beneath her arm to help her to her feet as Tooru pulled
The latter straightened, standing tall and holding his hands out to his sides in a welcoming manner. “Now, now, no need to crowd!” His voice was overly-friendly as he spoke. “I don’t usually work out of home or while visiting friends, but I’ll make an exception this once. What can I help you with?”

As the toys came closer, he watched Keiji guide the shop owner to the front exit from the corners of his eyes. The toys didn’t seem too interested in their retreat, thankfully.

“Help us… Tooru… Oi kawa…”

A fake chuckle fell from the informants lips. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what with, you know. I usually ask for some kind of payment, too.”

“Sing for us.”

Oh no.

“Save us.”

He felt something brush against his feet, and soon that something became several somethings as tiny hand-stitched puppets and wooden horses swarmed around his ankles.

He kept that smile plastered as he looked down at them. “Can I ask who I’m really speaking to?”

The clay one moved closer, now standing a few feet from Tooru and the other toys.

“Eventide… Dying…”

His smile was wiped clean in an instant, and Tooru swept a foot off the floor, effectively kicking about half of the toys off and sending them skidding across the room.

“Save us,” the voice from the clay one repeated, and soon it was joined by others. Inhuman voices rang from all around the room, from the shelves and tables and window displays.

“Help us Tooru.”

“Like hell.” He kicked at the rest near his feet, and immediately regretted it as toys started tumbling from the store’s shelves like falling water in retort, all of them making their way toward where he stood.

It was probably about time he went back to staying at inns.

Hajime knew that he’d get the scolding of his life at some point down the road if his parents found out that he’d been on land and didn’t bother to pay them a visit.

So, he left to do so, after apologizing to Daichi for not sticking around to help with the proper ship repairs.
“That’s what I’m hiring other people for, Iwaizumi. Go see your family.”

He was looking forward to filling his belly with his mother’s cooking. Chef Aone was plenty talented, but there was just nothing he could eat aboard the Corvus that would ever give him that same, amazing nostalgic feeling as being home for even just one meal.

The anticipation put a little bounce in his step as he ventured down the city streets. A few passerby offered him strange looks, but he paid no mind. After all the freakish stuff he just witnessed, he was allowed to act however the hell he wanted, as far as he was concerned.

Though, truth be told, he didn’t even notice how upbeat he was acting until someone called him out on it.

“Is that Hajime Iwaizumi?”

He turned to the source of the voice calling out to him, already pretty sure of who it was before he even laid eyes on them.

He was met with brown eyes, brown hair, and a warm smile belonging to a girl not much older than himself.

“What’s it like, stepping on land for the first time in years?”

“It hasn’t been years since I was last here, and it’s not like I’m out at sea at every waking moment.” He smiled back at her. “How’ve you been, Hana?”

Her expression lit up and she started past him, slow enough that he knew she was expecting him to follow. “Not so bad. My shop’s been picking up business, you know? A restaurant even wants to use the dishes I’ve been making.”

Hajime made an impressed noise. “You’re not selling out of your grandmother’s shop anymore?”

“Oh, no, no. I branched out a few years ago!”

“You’ve come pretty far since I last saw you, then.” He chuckled. “I should have stopped by during one of my last visits.”

She waved a hand in front of her. “I’m sure you had other things to worry about. Granny probably wouldn’t mind if you stopped by, though. She still talks about ‘that nice strong neighbor boy’ all the time.” Hana tipped her head to accommodate an eyeroll with a light laugh, her shoulder-length hair bouncing in response.

“Is she in? I could stop by on the way to my family’s place. I’d like to see what she’s been making lately, anyway.”

Hana’s smile faded into something a little less comfortable. She made an unsure ‘errr’ sound as her gaze wandered off to said shop further down the street.

Hajime frowned, leaning forward enough to get a better look at the shorter girl’s face. “Did something happen?”

A sigh. “Granny’s… lost her touch? A lot of things are wearing down at her age. She can’t see too well, and her work just isn’t as well-made as it used to be. I think that losing Granddad might have something to do with it, too....” The girl’s lower lip stuck out in a tiny pout. “But that
doesn’t explain why her more recent creations have been so…”

Hajime watched as she tried to find a word, but she seemed to be struggling.

“...Creepy,” she eventually decided on.

The moment the word left her mouth, the door to the storefront up ahead swung open, and out stumbled a young man with an elderly woman relying heavily on his shoulder for support. Both wore a look of panic, though the woman seemed the most shaken of the two.

Hana gasped, and quickly abandoned Hajime’s side to aid the woman.

“Granny?!”

“Keiji?,” Hajime’s gaze hardened, because holy shit, was this guy a magnet for trouble, or what?

“What happened? Is she alright? Granny, are you alright?” Hana’s gaze kept searching between Keiji and her grandmother. She bent beneath the woman’s arm opposite Keiji to help steady her. “Do I need to call for a doctor? What happened?”

When the woman shook her head, her granddaughter and Hajime immediately looked to Keiji for an answer.

And boy, did he wish he had one.

“I’m... not sure. There wasn an intruder...” he trailed off, not sounding too convinced of that response himself. “We have it under control.”

“What?”

“‘We’?” Hajime repeated, watching the merman with that same skeptic look he’d given him from day one.

“Please, just get her somewhere safe.” Keiji brought his hands out in front of him as he stepped back, offering the most desperate, pleading expression he could. And then he was whirling around and rushing back into the shop.

“Wait, tell me what’s going on!” Hana held her grandmother tightly, clutching one of her trembling hands into her own. She watched the shop with uneasy eyes, unable to see anything past the curtains of the windows aside from the fact that the puppets that used to hang there were nowhere to be seen. A robbery? “What do you mean intru-- Hajime don’t you dare!”

The man froze, one hand already on the door and the other reaching for a concealed weapon at his side.

“Don’t you barge in there all reckless, we don’t even know what’s going on!”

“I won’t know if I just stand around out here! Get your grandmother to safety or to a doctor or something. I’m gonna make sure she has somewhere safe to return to when you get back.”

He pulled the door open with maybe a little too much force, marching inside just far enough for the barrier to swing shut behind him.

And what the actual fuck was he looking at?
He stood beside Keiji now, both equally stunned as hoards of toys charged after the man in the center of the room.

Said man seemed to notice Hajime, too, because he stopped to fling a stuffed mouse that had crawled up his arm at the wall and addressed him. “Sorry! Store’s closed for the day!” Tooru was trying for that too-friendly tone again as he waved at Hajime. He used the same hand to smack away a leaping teddy bear a moment later. “Come back again tomorrow! Thank you!” Despite the circumstances of the situation - whatever that was - he said the last words in a sing-song, playful way.

Hajime wasn’t sure why the guy’s voice invoked the urge to punch something, but it did.

He decided to focus on the more pressing matter for now. “Keiji, what the hell is this?”

Every toy in the room seemed to come to an immediate halt. In that moment of stillness, of near-silence, the only thing that could be heard was Tooru’s quiet, “Oh no.”

The toys that weren’t clinging to Tooru’s hair and jewelry turned almost in sync to face Keiji instead.

“Ke… j i …?”

“Why did you have to do that?” Tooru whined, ripping another toy off of himself and slamming it down on the floor with a hard thwack.

The clay doll stood between Tooru and the others, apart from the rest of the toys that had been climbing the former, and repeated Keiji’s name once more.

The rest of the toys chimed in, a chorus of the merman’s name ringing through the store like some sort of ritual that Keiji really wanted no part in.

“What are they talking to you?” Hajime asked, taking a step back and withdrawing a pistol from his side.

Keiji stepped back along with him. “I don’t know, Tooru, why are they?”

“Keiji.”

“They’re not very happy with us!”

“Traitor.”

Keiji barely had time to register the word before the tiny army was charging and jumping at him, latching to his arms and clothes. He stumbled back, swatting them off himself all while they continued to chant his name, mixed in with whispers of “trai…tor” and “found you.”

Keiji fell to the floor, and whatever toys weren’t still busy pulling and tugging at Tooru’s flashy accessories seized the opportunity to climb atop the fallen merman.

Hajime fell to his knees and quickly started tearing the little shits away from Keiji, making a point to throw them aside as hard as possible in hopes that the damn things would break and leave them alone.

With the wood and clay figures, he had more luck.

The stuffed animals, on the other hand, came back with avengence. Granted it was…
relatively harmless avengence. A few plush kittens softly patting their paws against Hajime’s back was not much to be threatened by.

The string puppets tangling themselves around Tooru’s legs and throat were a little more troublesome, though.

Once he and Hajime had successfully tossed aside enough of the toys, Keiji pushed himself to his knees and reached into his boot. By the time he was on his feet again, he’d withdrawn his knife. He bolted for Tooru, kicking their ‘attackers’ out of his way and urging the other to keep still as he reached to tug at a puppet and slice the string, freeing the man’s throat.

The informant gave an animalistic hiss as he drew air back in and brought a hand to his neck. What had once been normal, neatly trimmed nails had grown during the short span of time, now replaced with long, almost claw-like ones of a dark, reddish-brown color. He bent to hook one of those claws around the strings trying to bind his legs, and broke them with a snap.

He threw the puppet responsible for said strings to the floor and stepped down hard on its thin, wooden skull, not completely crushing it, but effectively cracking the top.

“What did they say to you?” Keiji asked after slicing open the anglerfish teddy bear.

“Apparently,” Tooru started, snarling to reveal teeth that had grown much sharper than what he’d been flashing in his smiles up until now, “Your people wanted to send us a friendly message!”

“What?” The look on Keiji’s face was, at first, incredulous. Then it was startled, because Hajime had fired a shot right between the two of them. It had hit a wooden bird that had, evidently, been hanging from the ceiling above. Now it was on the floor, cracked and flapping its spring-attached wings helplessly on the ground among the other merchandise they’d managed to destroy during the struggle.

“I really don’t want to waste more bullets on a bunch of children’s toys, if I can get away with it.” Hajime lowered his weapon and stomped down on the tail of one of the plush kittens that was trying to crawl its way toward Keiji. “Can’t you do something about this?”

Keiji pointed a finger to himself once he realized just who Hajime was addressing.

“You got a serpent to leave us alone by asking it nicely, and you can’t do something about…” Hajime bent down and scooped up the cat by its neck. It squirmed helplessly in his grasp. “…this?”

“I don’t even know what’s causing this.”

“Ick, Jiji, you brought one of your sailor friends here?”

Hajime lowered the still-squirming cat plushie to his side. “Who the fuck are you?” He kicked aside a toy wagon that had been wheeling over his feet like it was just an annoying insect at this point.

“Talks like a sailor, too.” Tooru waved a clawed hand in a shooing motion. “You can leave now. Your assistance is no longer needed here.”

With a glare and a quick flick of the wrist, Hajime tossed the stuffed animal at Tooru. The cat clung to his face and the informant fell back on his butt with an undignified squawk.
“So, what about the others?” Hajime asked, turning to Keiji and ignoring the whines of the other man that was now wrestling with a stuffed cat on the ground. He gestured to what toys still remained on the shelves around them, unmoving. “These gonna attack too, or are they not demonic like the others?”

Keiji frowned. “I don’t think any of them are demonic, or possessed, even. I’m sure that the spirits could have just taken over something else once we broke the toys.” He stopped in his thoughts, then jerked his attention back to Tooru. “Where did that clay one go?”

Tooru ripped the plush toy away from his face and tossed it right back at Hajime, who caught it without much issue. “Didn’t it go after you?”

“Forgive me if I was a little distracted.”

Tooru got back to his feet, brushing off his clothes of dust and wood chips. “Well, I didn’t break it. Unless something I kicked hit it. Did your brute friend shoot it?”

“I have a name, asshole.”

Tooru flashed a smile that was so obviously fake and obviously meant to taunt him that Hajime had to, once again, resist the urge to punch something.

“I’m sure you do,” he hummed, and something about the tone of voice made Hajime’s stomach turn. “But let’s save the introductions until after, hm? We can’t stick around here for much longer.”

“I’m not letting Miss Misaki or Hana come back in here until we know it’s safe.”

Another thoughtful hum. “Being that we don’t know how these things are being controlled, I’m not so sure how to be sure it’s safe at all.”

Keiji plucked the stuffed animal from Hajime’s grasp and turned it over in his hands. “Tooru, you said something about Eventide?”

“Yes, Jiji, but I’d really rather not talk about this here where they’re listening.” Tooru pointed to the toy in his hands.

Keiji shoved his knife into the fake fur of the toy, and it fell limp in his hands. He dropped it to the floor with a look of guilt. “How are we going to make up for the damages….”

“Her toys just tried to kill us!”

“That’s Eventide’s fault, not her’s. I… think.” Keiji continued to frown down at the toy.

When he looked up, it was because of the abrupt sound of hurried footsteps and the loud crashing of something falling over again. He jumped back with a jolt. A bookshelf that had once displayed many of the toys they’d now destroyed was laying flat on the floor, toppled over by what Keiji could now see as a few remaining wooden toy soldiers from behind it.

“To… r u… K e i… j i…”

Tooru groaned as loud as he could, making a show of his frustration as he sat up from the floor. Rather, sat up from Hajime. In his attempt to shove him out of the way, he’d rather ungracefully wound up on top of the sailor. Not in any compromising situation, mind you. That would have been preferred, in fact. Instead, their heads collided during the fall, and both were
sporting rather ugly forehead bruises.

“Why is your skull so hard?!” he whined.

“T o o r u.”

“Shut up!”

He got to his feet, only pausing for a moment when his head spun. “You can say my name in
that creepy voice in those creepy toy bodies all you want, but I’m not helping any of you!” He
reached to his side to withdraw something, but soon found little need to.

Another shot fired, and the single bullet broke through three of the toys from just the right
angle.

That was… kind of impressive.

Of the remaining toys, Hajime pushed to his feet, never mind the blood dripping down his
nose from his forehead, and he crushed a few of the smaller, fragile ones with his boot. Among
them, a roundish clay figure was making an attempt at hobbling away, but he snatched it up from
the ground and tossed it at the opposing wall with great force.

The sound of shattering clay was followed by a loud, sizzling snap that echoed throughout the
room, startling all three of the men inside. They exchanged worried glances, and then Keiji was
bending forward to sift through the broken shards.

Among them, a single, folded piece of parchment lay covered in the debris. He bit his lip,
then tapped it with his finger for good measure. When nothing seemed to happen, he picked it up
and unfolded it.

“A love letter?” Tooru teased despite himself, and both Keiji and Hajime sent him very much
not amused looks.

“They don’t look like any language I’ve ever seen practiced in Eventide.” Keiji turned the
paper over, observing the scribbles marked all over it. The piece was smaller than his palm, the
paper faded and the writing in a dark, reddish-brown ink. At least, he hoped it was ink.

“K e i j i…?”

The voice came from the paper, there was no doubt about that now. Keiji held it further away
from him, but Tooru stepped closer to inspect it.

“Our culprit,” he said, eying it curiously.

“W h y?”

Something was off about the voice now, however. That is, off in a very different way than it
was off to begin with.

“W h y   i s   t h i s…?”

The mixture of childlike voices and the more unsettling tone was mixed with a third now. A
third that sounded more alive. Confused. Less like some nightmare fuel and more like an actual,
breathing being, even if it was somewhat hard to make out among the other voices.

“...t h ing… no t… working…?”
The previous two voices were dying down with every word, making the third, new one a little easier to hear.

Keiji lowered the paper slightly, and the look he gave it now was an unimpressed one.

"F u ck. D i d th ey really break all of them?" It was a male’s voice, warped as if it were coming through a thick glass wall and water, but it was undoubtedly male. And undoubtedly…..

“Yuuji Terushima,” both Keiji and Tooru sighed out the name.

Silence, and then an awkward sputtering sound, followed by embarrassed laughter.

“You can still hear me? Well, shit. I’m never gonna get the hang of this magic-y crap. But hey, those toys at least did some damage, right? You guys hurt? You’d better be. Do you know how long it took to write all those stupid spells? That store better at least be a mess after all that trouble I went through.”

He laughed again, the sound still distorted through bubbling noises.

The store was, in fact, a total mess. Broken toys, tables, shelves. Hajime shuddered at the thought of Miss Misaki having been in here alone. A bookshelf could have fallen on her. One of those string puppets could have….

“But hey, Keiji! Nice to hear your boring old voice again! We’ve been lookin’ all over for you, brother.”

“What are you trying to do, Yuuji?”

“Trying to give your informant friend a little scare, obviously! It got the point across, didn’t it? I mean, someone could’ve really gotten hurt here, you know? And I wanted to test out these little guys! I didn’t think they’d actually listen, but hey, now I can try controlling something even bigger and more threatening! Probably…..”

‘I have no idea what I’m doing,’ was all Keiji was hearing at this point.

Tooru pursed his lips and snatched the paper from Keiji’s hands. “If you wanted to threaten me, a simple letter would’ve been enough!”

A bored whistle-like sound came from the paper. “You guys are no fun. The others said the same thing. This worked out better in the end, though! I wouldn’t have known where our little traitor was if I hadn’t tried the golem… ish… spell… thing….”

He really had no idea what he was doing.

“And how did you get these papers here without setting foot on Kingston?” Tooru’s voice feigned a sickeningly sweet curiosity, but there was a sneer behind it.

“Haha! You want me to tell you? I thought you knew everything that went down in this city! Nuh uh. I wanna brag and all, but I’ll just get lectured again, so fuck that. Just take the warning and start using your brains for once, will ya?”

“Coming from the most impulsive merman I know,” Keiji said, and Yuuji came back with an offended gasp.

“You’re digging your own graves, you know! If you don’t shrivel up on land first, you’ll be
dead with the rest of us. Remember that! When all of Eventide is full of our corpses, it’ll be your fault for interfering, Keiji! How’s it feel to be responsible for your entire village’s death?”

Keiji bit his lip and scowled down at the paper in Tooru’s hands.

Yuuji belted out a ‘Hoooeey!’ sort of sound and laughed again. “You know you can’t even argue! That’s the worst part! What a piece of shit! You’re really going to choose some island of fish-hating land-walkers over your own kind? Well, here’s what I have to say to you and your siren friend and your precious little island.” He mimicked what was probably supposed to be the sound of a trumpet. “Long live the Queen! HahahahahaHAHA--”

Yuuji’s laughter came to an abrupt halt, and Tooru was then holding a torn piece of parchment in either hand. Another snap sizzled throughout the room as the magic broke from it.

“Well,” he hummed, crumpling the paper into a single ball. “He’s a real delight.” He slipped it into his pocket, figuring he’d take a better look at the strange markings written on it later. “I’ll have to get someone more familiar with spells and things to come in and make sure this place gets cleared out for the Misakis. I wonder if he can restore anything back to normal, or if we’ll have to pay for the damages…” He brought a hand to his chin and scanned the place over.

“We can’t stay here.”

“Yes, Jiji, I was just saying that before we were so rudely interrupted.” Tooru pushed a hand back through his fluffy hair. The claws had shrunken down somewhat, but they were still an inhuman reddish color, and still longer than the average fingernail.

“I mean we can’t stay here. On the island. At all. Tooru, you have to leave Kingston.”

The informant was pouting, but he knew Keiji was right. Keiji always had to be right.

“. . .I’ll get my things,” he said, calmly, but reluctantly. “And then we’ll continue this conversation elsewhere.”

He turned and stomped his way up the steps. Keiji and Hajime watched him for a long moment, a hundred thoughts going through their heads and leaving the room silent.

Hajime had so, so many questions.

Leave the guy alone? Don’t pester him? Sorry, Daichi. There was no way he was going to hold back at this point.

But of all the questions he had, of all the concerns regarding magic and sort-of-golems and whatever the hell Eventide was, the one that kept pushing at the front of his mind right now was…

“What did that guy just call your friend?”
No Singing Allowed

Chapter by ChosenOfKagami (kagapop), kagapop

Chapter Summary

Literally no one is fond of their options right now.

Chapter Notes

Really regretting not just calling Koganegawa "Kogane" instead of using his given name like I have been. I'm sorry in advance if "Kanji," "Kenji," and "Keiji" make things too confusing.
But hey, I didn't name 'em.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hajime Iwaizumi remembered each and every magical encounter since he’d joined Daichi’s crew with absolute clarity.

He remembered the warmness of the old witch that Noya had introduced them to like he remembered his own grandmother.

He remembered the first time he saw smoke plume around a crow and form the figure of the feathered man that was Asahi just as well as he remembered the steam rising from Chef Aone’s cooking the night before this one.

He could recall, without a moment’s hesitation, every crashing wave and every rock of the ship when the living whirlpool nearly dragged the Corvus under. Every scratch and nick that marked the face of the serpent that now inhabited Petal Reef’s waters.

But no memory was more vivid than the first time he heard the siren’s song.

He didn’t like to tell the story. He wasn’t much for bragging or showing off, even during his proudest moments. Whenever Koutarou decided to recall the tale, it always started off with an overused, “It was a stormy night,” complete with exaggerated hand gestures and all the works.

That opening statement was only half true. It had certainly been storming, but it wasn’t night. Late afternoon, more like.

They had just left the ports of East Ironfall, course set for Owl Roost, and most everyone was up on deck, taking whatever actions necessary to keep the Corvus afloat during the rough conditions.

Hajime could still hear Daichi calling out, “Reef the mainsails!” among other commands when he thought back on it. The sound of his captain’s voice growing further and further as the gunner rushed down the steps below deck, careful of the puddles of water already accumulating
They’d needed more buckets, because whatever areas they hadn’t already closed off in time before the downpour were in danger of flooding by then. There were only five sitting in the closet when he got there, and he remembered *that* because he’d slung two over each arm, and had to carry the other separately because the rope handle had been broken.

He recalled reminding himself to later scold whoever left that in there without fixing it.

He recalled the heavy crash of thunder and the way the ship tipped with the sound, how he stumbled and let the fifth bucket slip from his grasp.

He recalled the sinking feeling when he thought the Corvus was close to capsizing.

He recalled a *voice*.

A wordless melody that barely rang over the raging storm, but it was *there*, out of place and driving a sinking feeling further down Hajime’s gut.

He let the buckets clatter to the ground and made a run for the stairs, but Koutarou was there before he could reach the exit, drenched and out of breath.

“You can’t go out there.”

Another crash of thunder, and a flash of lightning broke through the open crack of the door, partially illuminating Koutarou from behind. Hajime had never seen such fear in those golden eyes until that moment.

Before he could ask what happened, before he could even open his mouth, Koutarou was jumping forward and clapping his hands down over Hajime’s ears.

He was panicking. Koutarou was casting uneasy glances over his shoulder and biting his lip as he warned Hajime not to go outside. He kept going on about how “weird” the others started acting once the singing started, and how he had no idea where the sounds were even coming from.

But like hell they were going to just sit around.

So, out came the earmuffs, and out onto deck ran the only two aboard the Corvus who had yet to succumb to the siren’s song.

And, hell, Koutarou was not kidding when he said the others were acting “weird.”

Hajime had tried to envision a few different things after meeting Asahi and Noya’s witch friend. What he was seeing then was much like what he’d imagined the undead to act like.

Their crewmates were scattered about the deck, hardly moving save for a slow swaying and whatever involuntary reactions the jerking of the ship provided them. Some stood on the spot, practically frozen in the midst of whatever task they were performing before the song met their ears. Ryuu was still leaning over the railing, seeming unbothered by the heavy rain hitting his face in his daze. Tobio and Shouyou had fallen over one another near the bottom of the main mast, the latter’s leg bent in a position that Hajime knew the doctor would have to deal with after this.

Others were strewn about here and there, lying in wet puddles like they’d been knocked out by some unseen force.
Except they weren’t.

When Hajime ran to Shouyou’s aid, he was met with open, clouded over eyes.

The shiver that ran down his spine was unforgettable. The realization that Tobio and everyone else had the same, empty look, was a nightmarish feeling that he’d never shake off.

He’d checked them for pulses, but the confirmation that they were still alive served as little relief. Shouyou didn’t look like Shouyou, but rather a still-breathing shell of himself.

He swallowed the feeling down and tried to help the deckhand into a less dangerous position, but the next violent wave had him scrambling to keep his own balance instead.

He heard the muffled thump through his earmuffs of Koutarou falling back against the floor with Ryuu in his endeavor to get him somewhere safer, followed by the boatswain scrambling to his feet and running up the steps toward the helm. Hajime couldn’t make out the words, but he could tell that Koutarou was yelling at someone.

As soon as he managed to get Shouyou off of Tobio, he realized that this someone was Saeko.

Saeko, the only person among the crew whose empty eyes were accompanied by an action other than an unsettling sway.

Saeko, whose hands were glued to the wheel, steering the ship in a direction that Hajime knew wasn’t in Daichi’s travel plans, nor would it serve any help in putting the Corvus on a safer route with the weather.

Koutarou pried her from the wheel, voice raising in hopes of breaking her from her trance, with no success. She put up little fight, her hands limply reaching out to regain control of the ship, but Koutarou wouldn’t let her. His yelling persisted, and Hajime could make out desperate cries of “Wake up!” amongst the muffled downpour and that goddamned singing.

Whatever it was, whoever it was coming from, it needed to stop.

So he ran, feet splashing against a flooding wooden deck, and snatched up a firearm. He didn’t know anything about magic, but he had desperately hoped that shooting whatever the cause of this was would solve all of their problems.

He ignored the corpse-like stares from his comrades, the way Daichi lay on his side not far from the helm, part of his face bruised from the fall he’d taken upon hearing the song, and his eyes instilling a fear far worse than anything his usual intimidating looks gave off.

*They would live. They were all going to live. They had to.*

Hajime ran to the edge of the ship, straining to follow the voice without removing the earmuffs.

“*Steer into the wind!*” he had yelled when he saw that Koutarou had taken control of the wheel.

“I know how to drive!”

But as Koutarou turned the Corvus toward what was presumably the safest route, a series of events happened all too fast for either of them to process.
The song became louder. Shriller. Desperate to be heard over the barriers they had brought with them.

The Corvus was picking up speed in the wind, and Hajime’s feet were carrying him toward the stern before he knew it.

The waves grew more aggressive, despite the storm itself not being any more violent than before.

And, among all of the tossing and raging of the waters, he spotted it. An enormous fish, or at least the back end of it, covered in long, trailing spines of reddish browns and whites that glistened with the ocean among flashes of lightning.

The voice died down as it submerged, but Hajime still fired. Once. Twice. Three times.

The song fell completely, but the waves continued to thrash the Corvus about, sending him falling to his back and his weapon skidding across the deck.

The next thing he heard was a roar that melted into an inhuman scream.

The next thing he saw was a tower of blue and green scales, and a pair of large, yellow eyes that would be narrowed down to one by the time he was through with it.

~

A finger snapped before his face, bringing Hajime back to the present.

"Please try to stay with us, Mr. Sailor Mouth."

Hajime's lips curled downward at the siren across from him. The other’s forehead, like his own, was wrapped with a thin bandage thanks to their unfortunate collision in the toy shop. Keiji gently pulled Tooru's hand back from the sailor's face with a silent apology.

Once they had brought the Misakis to a doctor and were assured that the elderly woman's fall hadn't done any serious damage, Tooru had called for an acquaintance to inspect their residence for any further magical business that may have been left behind. Nothing upstairs seemed to have been touched, and supposedly what magic slips of paper were downstairs had now been removed completely.

Tooru had left a bag of coins with the family to help cover the damages, despite Hana's objections, and then he brought Hajime and Keiji here, to some new tea shop that Hajime was sure wasn't around when he last visited the city.

The shop was bustling with chatty customers and pleasant smells, but Tooru had just sat in his seat, arms crossed and nose scrunched at the teacup in front of him.

He didn't like the place. The tea was "the cheapest he's ever tasted," but he knew better than to go to any of his regular spots at a time like this. Eventide could have eyes and ears anywhere, and going somewhere in his usual routine or somewhere too quiet was just begging to be overheard.

But now, his arms were no longer crossed, and he watched Hajime with one brow raised.

"Do I need to speak slower so you can understand me?" he asked.
"I'd rather you stopped talking completely."

Tooru's jaw dropped, and he shot Keiji a look as if to say 'Did you hear that?!'

"Drink your tea, Tooru," was all that Keiji said as a sipped at his own.

"It's gross."

"It isn't that bad."

"Even the smelly seaman hasn't touched his. He knows it's terrible."

Hajime's glare hardened on him. No, he hadn't touched his tea, but the quality had little to do with it. He had too many other things on his mind. The fact that a damned fish had the gall to call him smelly didn't need to be one of them.

Keiji lowered his volume to a whisper just loud enough for the two to hear. "The longer you waste time complaining about the tea, the longer we're here, putting ourselves at risk." He turned his gaze to meet Hajime's. "I told you I'd answer what questions I could before we left. It's only fair after all of this."

"Does 'all of this' include the oversized water snake thing, or no?"

"I was referring more to the toy shop situation, but, yes." Keiji breathed a worn out breath. "That, too. What question did you have first?"

Without missing a beat, Hajime turned to Tooru and snapped, "What did you do to the Misakis?"

"What do you mean what did I do?"

"You expect me to believe you didn't have Hana or her grandmother under some sort of spell-song?"

At this, Tooru leaned forward, fingers laced beneath his chin and elbows rested firmly on the table beside his ignored drink. "Tell me, Mr. Sailor. How do you think my kind work, exactly?"

"I have a fuckin' name."

Tooru rolled his eyes before correcting himself. "Tell me, Haji-mean, how you think our songs work."

He grimaced at the name. "Hell if I'd know the specifics! You sing, and it gives you some kind of control over people."

Tooru hummed, and Hajime’s jaw clenched at the sound.

"You think we're like puppeteers, don't you?"

"How else would you describe it?"

"Hmm..." Tooru absentmindedly began to run his finger along the edge of his cup. "A lure."

Hajime was the one scrunching his nose this time. "Like, what, a fishing lure?"

"A fish with a fishing lure," Keiji said, expression flat despite the comment.
Tooru leaned his head into one hand as the other continued tracing the teacup. "I can lead someone in a direction or toward a specific point, but that's it." The corner of his lip turned up slightly. "Would you like a demonstration?"

"If you do so much as hum again, I will shoot you down right here."

Tooru's finger stilled over the rim. He watched the sailor, surprised, for only a short moment before leaning back and tossing his arm up to shield his face in a dramatic show. "And after all I've done to help you and your neighbor friends!"

"From what I'm gathering, there wouldn't have been any trouble to begin with it it weren't for you two."

Tooru lowered his arm, and both he and Keiji averted their gazes from the sailor.

"Which needs explaining in and of itself. I'm not really buying the whole innocent 'my family's looking for me' story at this point."

Keiji bent his head. "Understandable..." Even if it wasn't completely a lie. "Then, we're starting with that?"

"I want to know about that, yeah, but first you should tell me why the hell you're hanging out with a fucking..." Hajime paused, deciding it best not to say 'siren' or anything too suspicious out in the open like this. Instead, he pointed a finger at Tooru. "...this."

Tooru's next offended gasp went, once again, ignored by both of them.

"Tooru is an informant. He knows a lot about what goes on in Kingston."

Said informant childishly stuck his tongue out at Hajime.

Keiji's shoulders fell slightly. "He's relatively harmless otherwise."

"Are you defending, or insulting me, Jiji?"

"Both."

Hajime didn’t look any more convinced. "‘Harmless,’ says the guy who talks to sea monsters.” Keiji’s mouth twisted as the sailor went on, still aiming an accusing finger Tooru’s way. “And he doesn’t sound harmless.”

Tooru squinted. “You can stop talking about me like I’m not right here.”

“How many others have you met, exactly?” Keiji asked.

The sailor grunted, finally dropping his hand from pointing at Tooru’s affronted face. “That ugly snake you confronted back there? That was our second run in with it. Some asshole sang us into its path the first time.” He sent an accusing look to the siren from the corner of his eye.

While the two exchanged tense, displeased stares, Keiji balked at them.

“‘You’re kidding me...’” he said under his breath. He knew that wasn’t the first time the Corvus and Gandril’s sibling had crossed paths. The serpent had made that perfectly clear when they spoke. “I’m going to take a wild guess here and say that you shot at the one singing”

“My crewmates were acting like a bunch of brainless corpses. Of course I shot at them.”
Elbows on the table now, Keiji sifted his fingers back through his hair, head sinking into his hands as he closed his eyes and breathed out for a moment. There was a brief silence, save for the chatter of the rest of the shop, but then the smallest, faintest chuckle escaped him.

Tooru’s eyes blew wide at the small sound. “Jiji’s laughing,” he said, as if the single little noise was a fit of hysterical laughter. “You broke him, Hajimean.”

“Don’t you casually start calling me that, shithead.”

“At least it’s more creative than ‘shithead.’”

“It’s really not.”

“Less vulgar, anyway.”

“This is ridiculous….“ Keiji said under his breath, but the others kept on with their bickering, paying no mind to him.

Ridiculous. Stupid. There were a lot of things he wanted to call this situation - maybe even the two arguing in front of him - right now. Every second wasted sitting in the shop was another second that some Eventide lackey could be nearing them. As much as he felt that they owed Hajime an explanation, every word of bickering and every mention of this sea serpent misunderstanding was bringing him closer to reconsidering doing just that.

But then, diving into the ocean that put the warrant on him in the first place didn’t seem like the safest option, either.

Head still stuck in his hands, Keiji looked up at the two. He briefly wondered if he was going to have to physically restrain Hajime with the way he was outright fuming in Tooru’s direction. The siren was easily dismissing every accusation tossed his way, but he honestly wasn’t making the situation any better from what Keiji could see.

“Could you two wrap this up? We’re on a bit of a time constraint, here.”

Both turned to Keiji, Hajime with a scowl more untrusting than any of the looks he’d received from the gunner himself while onboard the Corvus, and Tooru with his lips set in that pout that he knew far too well.

“I understand if you’re wary of Tooru, but we’re putting time aside here to clear up what just happened in the shop, not to discuss his disagreeable personality.”

“My what?”

“So,” Keiji continued, “If we could focus on that and get out of here before someone comes running at us with nets and spears, it’d be much appreciated.”

Tooru huffed, clearly insulted.

Hajime sent the siren one more peeved look and a huff of his own before he reluctantly turned to nod to Keiji. His next question was just as sharp and accusing as the others.

“Why are they after you to begin with?” he asked, but then his lips twisted as another thought came to mind. “Better yet, who are they? There was some word or name those toys and that guy kept mentioning. Ev…” He thought it best not to say it out loud. “The ‘E’ word.”
Keiji silently mouthed the name ‘Eventide’ as he pulled his hands back from his head to rest them on the table. “It’s a place. It’s… It was home.”

“So you weren’t **completely** lying to our faces. Okay.” Hajime crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his seat.

A waitress paused near their table, presumably to see if anyone wanted another serving of tea, but the atmosphere seemed to scare her off. Keiji wished they could do a better job of laying low, but that was a difficult task when it was beginning to feel like he was babysitting at this point.

“Is this ‘former home’ of yours the same village that guy mentioned? He said something about it dying.”

Keiji visibly flinched, his nails uselessly fighting to dig into the wood of the table. He bit his lip, and it was enough of a sign for Hajime to figure he was right.

"'Dying' is a bit... extreme," Keiji said, eyes locked to his hands as he balled them into fists. "They're in danger, yes, but their means of fixing that involve putting others at risk. I didn't agree with their methods, so I left."

"In danger of what? How the hell is sending a bunch of demon toys after someone supposed to fix whatever their problem is?"

"That would be Yuuji. He gets... carried away sometimes." Keiji paused to cringe. "All of the time. I have a feeling he did this without anyone else's knowledge. I can't see Kenji allowing that little stunt. Or, at the very least, he would have made sure it was handled with more tact than that."

"That's not the same person I saw on Owl Roost, is it? You said their name was Eight... something."

"No, Eita wouldn't have allowed it, either. I think that Yuuji was hoping to scare Tooru into aiding their cause. I don't think he really intended to do any harm to the Misakis."

"But he could've been using those paper slips to eavesdrop for who-knows-how long." Tooru's eyes were distant, occasionally tracking other customers that passed by them. If not for his response, Keiji would have thought he'd tuned him and Hajime out already.

"Stop staring at people. It's rude," Keiji said, nudging the siren beneath the table.

Tooru didn't react much to the nudge, his attention still apparently set on unrelated things. "That's my *disagreeable personality* at work, Jiji." He hummed, and remained unfazed when Hajime shot him a glare for the sound. “Do you have any other venues in mind for continuing this little chat? I can’t take the smell of this flavorless tea any longer.”

“You want to waste more time running around this island for a better drink?” Keiji frowned, but then he saw the way Tooru’s eyes wandered from one table to the next. He wasn’t staring. He was very deliberately making sure not to look at something. Or someone. “...We don’t have that leisure right now. What do you suggest?”

“A show.”

“Tooru.”

“I’m not having the arguments, Jiji. We don’t have that leisure right now.” Tooru pressed his hands to the table and slowly rose from his seat. “Hajimean, cover your ears.”
“Excuse me?”

Tooru looked up and ahead, past Keiji’s shoulder. Another two tables away, a gruff man was getting to his feet, watching the group carefully. One hand clutched a paper next to him, while the other reached for a holster at his side.

Keiji remained still and repeated Tooru’s order. “Ears, Hajime.”

“Do not tell me he’s--” Hajime bit his tongue, cursed, and drew his hands up to smack them over his ears. He heard the beginnings of a loud, but unharsh ‘ahh’ from Tooru’s parted lips, but he pressed his palms almost painfully close to the sides of his head to block the sound out as much as possible. He could still hear it, even as Tooru stepped away from the table. It was muffled, but audible. Familiar.

And, for a moment, Hajime swore he could see the tables of the tea shop replaced by the deck of the Corvus. He felt the ground beneath him rock with the sensation of waves that weren’t really there. And he swore, he swore he heard thunder and the screeches of that serpent somewhere in the distance.

He cursed again when he realized he couldn’t withdraw a weapon of his own when he had both hands busy with blocking out the song now filling the room. The occupants of the shop were frozen in place, eyes vacant and reminiscent of the stares Hajime had seen in his crewmates that night. The man that Tooru had been approaching let the hand reaching for his weapon fall limp at his side, and the paper in his grip slipped and floated its way down to the floor. He stared at the three without really looking at them. It sent a shiver down Hajime’s spine.

Tooru lowered himself, wordless melody still spilling from his mouth as he plucked the paper up from the ground. Despite Hajime’s best efforts to block out the song entirely, it was still there, and with every second more clear that this was undoubtedly the same voice he and Koutarou had heard before. He pressed his hands harder to his ears, enough that he could feel his pulse beating hard against his palms. There wasn’t a distance the height of a ship between him and the voice now like the last time, though. Nor were there the heavy storm noises and crashing of waves to help drown it out. They were in the same room, and Hajime was getting dizzy fast.

A tap came to his shoulder, and there was Keiji, mouthing “Come on,” while he tipped his head toward the exit. The merman ushered him out through the doors and onto the streets. Neither of them were too fond of the strange looks they were receiving from passers-by. Two men rushing out of a shop with one covering his ears like a canon was about to go off was surely a suspicious sight.

Tooru caught up to them shortly. Rather, he bolted past them and took a turn down an alley, expecting that the two would follow without question.

And they did.

The siren seemed to know his way around the city better than Hajime, who had grown up there. At least, he and Keiji hoped this was the case, and that Tooru wasn’t leading them blindly through a maze of side streets.

Hajime had uncovered his ears a few turns back, but only after receiving the okay from Keiji. The sailor had since withdrawn a pistol for good measure, but he hadn’t found the need for it. Yet.

He was definitely debating giving Tooru a good whack to the back of the head with it, at the very least.
They slowed their running to a stop on some road between the backs of a butcher’s shop and a ship chandlery, Tooru leaning back against the brick side of the latter while Hajime kept sharp to their surroundings for pursuers. He was fairly certain that the man in the tea shop hadn't even managed to track them since they'd left, thanks to Tooru's little stunt inside.

He cringed at the thought.

"Three," Keiji said, bent over his knees as he caught his breath. "That's the third time this week I've been chased out of a building mid-conversation. And that's not counting the serpent the other day."

Tooru, back pressed against the wall, broke his own attempts at catching his breath to laugh a wheezy laugh.

"It's not funny. I'm exhausted."

"You're exhausted because you're an overly cautious fish out of water, not because of your dumb luck." Tooru snickered, then yelped when Hajime punched him hard in the arm. "What now?!"

"Be happy that wasn't my gun."

"I just saved us from a bounty hunter, thank you!" Tooru lifted the paper he'd snatched, now crumpled in his hand. Another wanted flier with Keiji's face. "That's the second time today. Would a Thank you, Tooru, really be so hard for you?"

"Fuck you, Tooru."

"Two out of three words," Keiji scoffed. "Close enough."

"It is not!"

"That stupid song of yours sounds just like the one I heard on my ship." Hajime gripped the flintlock pistol just a little too tightly. "I'm grateful that you had the decency to warn me to block out your voice back there, but are you really expecting me to say 'thank you' to the asshole who tried to make my ship serpent-chow?"

"I've done no such thing!"

Keiji let out the loudest, most agitated sigh.

"As much as I'd love to clear up this ridiculous misunderstanding between you two, I'm really through with running around this island in search of a safe place to talk."

"Misunder--?"

"Stop," Keiji snapped. "No more questions. I'm not having another Story Time session until Tooru and I are off of this noisy chunk of land."

"Yes, Jiji, let's drag your brutish sailor friend down under so we can have a nice chat with him while all of the air leaves his lungs--" Tooru yelped again. "Stop hitting me!"

"We're not going underwater," Keiji said. "Eventide could have our names spread across who-knows how many communities as criminals down there by now."

"Not much different from up here," Hajime huffed.
"Which is why traveling over the surface is the safest bet. There's less risk of running into other merfolk on a ship."

"I beg to differ," Hajime said.

And then he stiffened, because both of the seadwellers were now watching him expectantly.

"Hell no."

"We can pay you, you know--"

"Hell no," Hajime repeated. Tooru pouted over being interrupted. "No siren is setting foot or fin on that deck if I have anything to say about it."

Keiji watched the sailor for a moment before turning to Tooru. "No, it's fine, Tooru. We'll find another vessel. Their crew has dealt with enough of this chaos as it is." He tipped his head slightly, eyes wandering as if he was considering something. "I don't know how they'll find a new home for their other guest without anyone else who can breathe underwater, but I suppose that's their problem."

"Really? You're going to try to use Kenma as an excuse for another ride?"

"Kuroo had me promise to visit Koutarou before you departed, too...."

"I think he'll live."

Keiji didn't point out the fact that Koutarou appeared to be very… moody, and that it was very possible he may not actually live. He didn't point it out because it seemed like a selfish thing to say, but Koutarou did seem... unusually worried with him, for whatever reason. For someone he had just met, anyway.

"I'd like to keep my promise, at the very least."

"Then keep it. I'm only telling you that this thing," he said, pointing a finger to Tooru without looking at him, "stays away from our crew. And you get off the ship before we set sail. We run into enough shit without criminals onboard."

"Are you entirely sure the Corvus isn't just cursed?"

"I'm not. If it is, we don't need to be adding more risk to it."

"Alright," Keiji sighed, "but I'm not going anywhere without Tooru. It'll be too much of a hassle to track him down again."

"I can hear you, you know, Jiji." Tooru moved from the wall and gave Keiji a gentle nudge, allowing himself to step into Hajime's sight. "Are you the captain of this ship in question, Hajimean?"

"The hell does that have to do with anything?"

"If you're not the captain," Tooru said, hand now on his hip and looking smug as if he hadn’t been practically falling against a wall out of breath a moment ago, "then you have no right to tell us we can’t come aboard."

"Excuse me?"
“Look, I find this about as exciting as you do. Do you really think I want to spend any amount of time stuck on a hunk of wood with a bunch of rotten sailors?” Tooru waved a hand as his expression turned to something of disgust. “But if I have to, I’d at least rather it be on a ship where someone already has an idea of what’s going on. It’s better than risking more icky seamen finding out.”

There was a clicking sound, and Tooru jumped as Hajime set the hammer of his pistol to a cocked position.

Keiji leveled Tooru with a flat stare. “You know he has to actually load that thing before it can be of any real threat to you, right?”

Tooru crossed his arms and turned his nose up, eyes closed. “I know that! His eyes are just so scary that it spooked me anyway.” He peeked one eye open, watching Hajime’s weapon carefully.

“I’m pretty confident I can still knock you out with it.”

“Mean!”

“And for the record, my captain is about as enthusiastic about all this magic bullshit as I am. Keiji can keep his damn promise, but you’re waiting for him at the docks under my supervision.”

“You’re telling me I need a babysitter?”

“I’m telling you, for the hundredth time, I’m not letting you near that damn ship.”

Keiji looked to Tooru with an apologetic expression. "I won't be long," he said, though Tooru continued to huff and pout like a child all the same.

"Since we're in such a rush to get out of here, at least let me scout out an alternative while you visit your new best friend." Tooru tipped his head to look at Keiji over his shoulder. "I'll find us the least smelly ship I can by the time you get back."

Hajime arched a brow at the siren. "You complain a lot for someone who's probably gonna smell like a living fishing boat themselves after a day at sea."

"I take very good care of myself in this form, thank you very much." Tooru stuck his tongue out.

"Then you can answer whatever other questions Hajime had while you're looking. Perfect."

Tooru scrunched his nose at Keiji. "What? No, don't make me talk to him. It's bad enough you think I need a bodyguard to begin with."

"'Babysitter' was more accurate," Hajime grunted.

"I bet I'm older than you."

"Taller doesn't mean older."

"So, my bodyguard is just a grumpy old man, then?"

"I'm tired enough without this," Keiji muttered. He stepped past the two, ignoring their bickering and hoping they'd take the hint and follow.

They followed, granted Keiji had to pull Tooru to the lead, because he really had no idea were
they or the docks were at this point.

And, as they made their way through the streets, Keiji had to wonder if his revived headache was purely the result of his continued refusal to get back in the ocean, or that of the non-stop arguing that Tooru seemed to insist on starting between himself and the sailor.

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East of Kingston Island, deep beneath the water's surface, the sea floor parted way to a trench that was infamous among merfolk far and wide. Its walls were littered with pale blue crystals that glowed in the dark of the ocean, serving as guidance for the trench's inhabitants, with the aid of bioluminescent fish that traveled pathways formed by rocks and coral.

Domes and spheres shaped from shells and the wreckage of sunken ships dotted the edges of these paths, these underwater streets. Faint glows shined out from windows and the cracks of doors in the structures, a telling sign that the merfolk of Eventide Trench were awake. Stirring.

In some cases, plotting.

Or, in the case of the three huddled within the small room of one of these spherical homes, attempting to plot.

Yuuji Terushima was, as the brunette currently hovering over his shoulder had once said, "The most annoying ass to hold a conversation with, let alone formulate a decent strategy."

To which Eita Semi had once replied, "You could stand to be a little more cooperative, yourself."

Now, they were intruding Yuuji's personal space, crowding around him and the small jar held in the grip of his black, scaly fingers.

"That's it?" Eita pursed his lips at the tiny, curled up piece of paper through the foggy glass of the jar. What had once been the pair of legs that Hajime had seen on Owl Roost was now replaced with a long, trailing tail of alternating shades. The scales climbed up from his fish-like half to coat his sides and back in jagged patterns, fading below his neck and leaving him with a more 'human' face than the others.

Yuuji, blonde hair crawling out from shorter sections of dark brown, tugged the jar back toward himself. He stuck his tongue out at his house guests, revealing the small spot of metal he had pierced through it. Keiji used to tell him he was sure that thing was a health hazard, but then, he said that about the snail shells and other accessories curling through Yuuji’s ears, too.

"That's all you wanna say to me? After you spent how long on land looking for that traitor?" Yuuji's tail unfurled as he floated to the side, putting some distance between himself and the two. "And here I find him when I wasn't even looking for him! That's amazing. How don't you think this is the coolest thing?"

"Because it's a piece of paper." The brunette that had been behind Yuuji pushed through the water toward him and snatched the jar from his hands. Yuuji tried to reclaim the glass, but the other merman slid back through the water, tail of varying chocolate shades curling toward himself as he settled.
"A *magic* piece of paper," Yuuji corrected, looking rather pleased with himself. "Give it back, Kenji. You don't even know how to use it."

Kenji Futakuchi rolled his eyes. "Don't sound so proud like you put the spell on it yourself. How much did you even pay for this?"

"I just traded some junk Eita brought back from Owl Roost."

Eita's mouth twisted just a little more. "You traded the knife you *begged* me to get you?"

Yuuji was grinning away like this was obvious. "Yeah."

"So, you made Eita hunt around for something on land, so that you could trade it for a bunch of magic papers, and then you hired someone to plant all of them in one location?" Kenji watched Yuuji's reaction carefully, but the other didn't seem to show any signs of regret. "Am I missing anything?"

"The part where I managed to pinpoint the siren and our traitor, yeah."

"But you planted all of those papers in that toyshop."

"And?"

Kenji smacked the back of Yuuji's head. "So we don't have any to make use of now! This piece here is useless on its own!" Kenji have the jar a little shake. "How does it even work? You talk into this and whatever you stick the other papers in mimicks you?"

Yuuji gave a nonchalant shrug. "Somethin' like that."

Kenji pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It's cool though, right? You can't see anything on the other end, but you can hear it. It's kind of hard to direct what you're controlling, though." Yuuji scrunched his nose slightly. "Like, I could think of vague orders for the toys to follow, but it's hard to do anything else when you can't. Y'know. *See* anything. The challenge is kinda the fun part, though."

Kenji watched him past his fingers. "So, you used man-made siren magic on a siren, is what you're telling us."

Eita moved closer to the jar, inspecting it carefully. The curled up slip of paper inside didn't look particularly magical to him. "Can you get more?" he asked, giving the jar a curious tap. "It'd be easier to keep contact with Akira with something like this."

"Wanna go find me another knife?"

Eita squinted at him. "I'm not going back on land."

Yuuji laughed. "Yeah? Well, me neither!"

"I still can't believe you wasted all of those on a toy store..."

Yuuji's laughter cut off, and the merman snatched his precious jar back from Kenji. "I heard you the first time! I accomplished something great with this, so how 'bout you two quit being such killjoys about it?"

Kenji leveled him with a dour look. "You could have just written the siren a threatening letter,
you know." When the other pouted, he rolled his eyes. "But I'm glad your showing off did some good, for once."

Eita idly floated back from the two, peering up at the coral ceiling in thought. "Why would Keiji go somewhere as dangerous as Kingston, though? He knows that's our target, and he has to know we're looking for him."

"If he didn't before, he sure as hell does now," Kenji said with a glance at Yuuji.

Yuuji tossed his hands up, temporarily letting go of the jar. "Because he's a dirty traitor!" He looked up as it gently floated to the ceiling. "...And He's trying to stop us." He swam up to cradle it back in his arms. "That asshole's trying to get us all killed."

"We know it's more complicated than that." Eita crossed his arms. "I don't think Keiji left with ill intentions."

Kenji made a sound like an exasperated whine. "Doesn't make him much less of a problem, though. The fact that he went to Kingston at all is suspicious."

Eita took his gaze down from the ceiling. "I'm with you there."

"Fine, fine," Yuuji groaned. "Not trying to get us killed, but sure as hell isn't doing much to keep it from happening. Either way, he's a fuckin' risk to us, and Gandril ain't gonna be happy."

"More like devastated. Gandril liked Keiji." Eita looked back to the glass jar in Yuuji's hands. "I don't know what'd be worse, him dying trying to stop us, or dying from land-exhaustion."

"You know what'd be worse?" Kenji asked, closing one eye while the other stayed trained on Eita. "All of Eventide dying out because one of our own snitched on us."

"So we get him back!" Yuuji blurted the obvious solution. "We get word out to Waka's crew, and have them do all the stupid on-land work for us. Nothing's changed, there. Let the crazy fin-ditchers deal with each other. It's literally the same plan we’ve had all along, but now we have more guidance thanks to me."

Eita gave the tiniest amused smirk. "I'm surprised you're not more eager to do something about it yourself."

Yuuji belted out an unattractive laugh. "Not if it means splittin' my tail in two!" He pulled out an arm and smacked a hand to his muscles. "Get him down here, then I'll show him who's boss!"

"We're not going to attack him unless we're sure he's trying to do harm." Kenji released a sigh-like 'breath,' gills parting at his neck as water filtered through them and his mouth. "Even though you technically already have with your stupid toys."

"Don't be jealous because you missed out on all the fun."

"That's what this is," Kenji deadpanned. "If you want more fun, then try to get us more of those slips so we can keep contact with Wakatoshi and Akira without having to shift forms every time."

"I don't have anything else to trade for more of those!"

"That's not my problem!"
"Who died and made you boss?"

"Well, I'd rather take orders from Kenji than from you," Eita interrupted. "He's at least a little more responsible."

Kenji furrowed his brows before lifting one at Eita. "What do you mean 'at least a little'?"

With a small smile and a snicker, Eita floated back toward the room's door. "I mean you're doing fine, don't worry about it." He rested a hand on the knob, a glass one that Yuuji had taken from a shipwreck some time ago. "So, Yuuji's got his new assignment, and you and I still have a meeting with Gandril."

Kenji's expression only looked more displeased, and Yuuji grinned next to him while the brunette murmured a sarcastic, "Great."


From the docks of Kingston, the Corvus looked stunning as always. With Ogano’s men and their workmanship, the gaping hole in the captain’s cabin had been repaired before the day was over.

Daichi was impressed, to say the least.

He was just… more impressed by the outside than the inside.

Of course, he understood that a paint job wasn’t on the list of immediate repairs. He hadn’t expected anyone to match the new woodwork to the interior, but boy, did it stand out. A big painted, bland patch amongst a wall of beautiful dark wood. Maybe they had a banner or something he could cover it with in the meantime….

“I don’t know why you wasted the money.”

Daichi had been so preoccupied by the awkwardness of the wall that he hadn’t heard two of his own men come into the room.

Koutarou observed the repairs, hands on his hips and looking like he actually had any business surveying the handiwork. “I mean, I could’ve done this. Why didn’t you let me do this? It would’ve looked ten times more amazing.”

Daichi pressed his fingers to his temples, gently massaging them as if to fight the inevitable oncoming headache.

“Hell, Kuroo probably could’ve done it,” Koutarou continued, swinging a thumb in said friend’s direction beside him, “and he only has one arm.”

Kuroo squinted at him. “I didn’t lose the other one.”

“Then why aren’t you usin’ it?”

“Are you serious?”

Koutarou belted out a loud laugh, which only died down when Daichi asked him if he’d actually gotten any real work done in the past few hours. Koutarou gasped, and Kuroo snickered.
Daichi was trying to figure out whether the gasp was one of offense or guilt.

“I did!” Koutarou bounced once on his toes. “Your ugly wall aside, the Corvus is in tip-top shape! And I’ve made sure everyone knows the schedule and their assigned duties for tomorrow’s departure.” He gave a proud nod, and Kuroo clapped his good hand against the one hanging out of the sling in a mocking applause.

Daichi watched Koutarou for a moment, then turned to Kuroo, who bobbed his head.

“It’s a decent schedule. I checked it,” the first mate said.

Koutarou gasped again, this time much louder. “Why don’t you trust me to make decisions on my own?!”

Daichi was going to respond to that, when the cabin door swung open again to more visitors.

This time, Noya stood at the entrance, a hand outstretched to keep the door open while he announced, “Visitor for Koutarou Bokuto!” He saluted, looking very serious for only a short moment before breaking into a grin.

Koutarou peered over the shorter man’s mess of spiky hair, trying to get a better view of this visitor. When he did, his lips curved into a grin of his own, and he bounded past Noya.

Keiji stumbled back a step when the boatswain got just a little too close to his face.

“You came back! I was starting to think that Kuroo lied to me!” The sailor clapped a hand down hard on Keiji’s shoulder.

“Well, yes, I was worried you’d come find me yourself if I didn’t. I’ve been stalked enough lately as it is.”

“I wasn’t stalking!”

“You can keep saying that.”

Koutarou pouted, and Kuroo gave the ugliest laugh from behind him.

“So, you already met with your friend? Are you staying here for a while? Won’t you need a ride back to Owl Roost at some point?”

Keiji wished these sailors didn’t always ask so many questions at once.

“I’m not going back to Owl Roost,” he said, choosing to let his eyes wander from Koutarou’s. They find themselves resting on the sight of the new wall instead. It certainly looked… better than the last time he saw it, at least. “My friend and I are going to be traveling for a bit. I just thought I’d stop by to say goodbye before we left Kingston.” He looked to Daichi then. “And to say thank you one last time. Even if you think it’s unnecessary.”

Daichi was once again spoken over before he could respond.

“Does this friend of yours have a ship?” Koutarou asked, golden eyes lighting up with something hopeful and snatching Keiji’s attention back to them. “Or are you going to need a ride again?”

“He’s working on that as we speak.”

“So you don’t actually have anything planned?”
“No, Koutarou, but I’ve already overstayed my welcome here. Besides, your weapons expert just met my friend, and he… isn’t very fond of him.” Or me, I’m pretty sure. “I’m fairly certain one would kill the other within a few days if stuck on the same vessel together.”

Kuroo coughed. “Why? What’s wrong with your friend? He a siren or something?”

Keiji’s expression remained passive, despite the fact that he was definitely holding his breath.

Noya cackled from where he was leaning against the door. “The guy talks to sea monsters, he would have a siren friend!”

Both Kuroo and Daichi joined him in his laughter, but that soon died down to an awkward silence.

Daichi watched Keiji carefully, attempting to analyze their usually unreadable guest. An uneasy smile was still stuck on his face when he asked, “He’s… not actually a siren, is he?”

The question was punctuated with an uncomfortable chuckle, and Keiji was at a loss for words.

Koutarou looked at the merman, jaw hanging open, then he turned to Daichi with a forced laugh of his own. “That’s silly! Keiji was meeting the guy in Kingston, so it’s not like he’s a fish or something for him to be on the island. Hajime and I saw a siren before, and it definitely had a tail, like Kenma.”

Daichi set a hand down on the desk beside him. A desk. Not his desk. That was still in an unfortunate pile elsewhere on the ship. Now he was making due with a cheap replacement in the meantime. “Keiji,” he said, abandoning the attempts at playing this off as some kind of joke, as much as he’d like to be that way. “I would have no objections to extending your stay with us, being how helpful you’ve been. Judging by your knowledge displayed so far, you’d be much more helpful in aiding Kenma than any of us. But, if it’s a matter of bringing another passenger on board, I have to ask… is this friend of yours a siren? Or any sort of magical threat, for that matter?”

“He’s not a threat,” Keiji said. Daichi continued to watch him, and the merman set his lips in a firm line before continuing. “And he’s not… a dangerous siren.”

Noya whispered a, “Holy shit,” and Daichi’s posture slumped just a little.

“Absolutely not.”

“He just helped save a friend of Hajime’s on the island. Your gunner doesn’t like my friend, but he was a witness to that.” Tooru was absolutely going to murder him for saying any of this, but Hajime already knew. Even if the sailor had agreed to keeping Keiji’s secrets, he surely wasn’t going to stay quiet about Tooru’s after what their crew had apparently gone through already. Trying to hide what he was now would only cause more problems down the road.

Daichi’s eyes narrowed on Keiji, who sighed.

“I understand if you’re still against the idea.” Keiji offered a small, respectful bow of the head. “Your crew seems to deal with enough as it is, and, as I said, I understand that I’ve overstayed my welcome, and Hajime and Tooru really might kill each other if left alone for too long.” He straightened, and briefly wondered if one of them had already murdered the other at the docks by now. “But my friend is an informant. Between all of that and what little knowledge I have to offer, I think we could be of more help to your crew in exchange for your hospitality.” He cast a sidelong glance Kuroo’s way. “And of more help to Kenma.”
Daichi set his lips in a firm line, something that didn’t go unnoticed by Keiji.

“It’s something to consider,” the merman offered.

“It’s just all a little fishy to me.”

Kuroo snorted, and Daichi brought a hand to his face.

“Stop. That wasn’t intentional.”

“That was pathetic, Captain. I could come up with better puns in my sleep.”

“Is now really the time, Kuroo?”

“Always,” Kuroo grinned, then turned to Keiji. “But you know, I’m sick of watching Kenma sulk in that damn barrel all day long. He’s going to take a while to grieve, and I get that, but someone who knows as much about the ocean as you somehow seem to could probably help him get over his homesickness better than me or Shouyou.” His grin went soft then, something of a sad smile. “Or someone from the ocean. Sirens sound risky, but it also sounds like something good to have on our side, considering the shit we run into. Don’t you think so, Captain?”

“I think I’m really tired of being talked into turning this place into a floating circus by you lot.”

“Suga would tell him to do it,” Noya snickered. He went stiff when Daichi shot him a cold look.

“I won’t disagree with Kuroo. Or Noya.” Daichi muttered the last part under his breath. “I’ve allowed your suspicious ‘running away from home’ story to slide, but I’m almost afraid to ask what a siren’s excuse is in all of this.”

“You could ask him yourself, but I would understand if you weren’t comfortable of being in his presence to begin with. Hajime had mentioned what happened with that serpent before. You all have good reason to be cautious.”

Koutarou waved a hand. “Daichi’s cautious of anything related to magic! You’d be on his list too if your weird snake-talk hadn’t saved our asses.”

“...Good to know.”

Daichi watched them all with a strained look. “If I can speak to both him and Hajime in the same room, then I might, might consider it. But that’s a big ‘might,’ so I wouldn’t get your hopes up. I want to hear more than one side to whatever took place on the island.” He paused to glance toward the door. “Where is Hajime, anyway?”

Keiji frowned. “He’s... with the siren, sir.”

Kenji Futakuchi was accustomed to the routine that Eita was dragging him through by now.

Every evening, he would swim out to Eventide Trench’s opening, and every evening, he was greeted with that same, low hum that always filled their waters. It was background noise to them,
usually. Kenji typically didn't even notice it until they got this close to their home's edge.

Gandril was resting now. The serpent's body of deep blues and purples stretched and coiled along the rocks and other formations surrounding eventide, it's scales shimmering just slightly in the faint light of the crystal lanterns Kenji and Eita each held in their hands.

Kenji pushed water out through his mouth in something like a sigh, then he spoke.

"Great Gandril," he said, words dripping from his mouth otherwise indistinguishable sounds, "We come to you with news of-- do I really need to keep up the formalities every single time we do this?"

Eita nudge him with his elbow.

"What?" Kenji hissed low, "I don't think he really cares."

The mass of scales before them shook, and another low noise rumbled through the water. Not the sounds of a sleeping body this time, but of laughter.

Purple and blue glistened and shifted until a pair of glowing, icy blue eyes moved into their line of vision.

"It was never a necessity to begin with, my child."

"Even the word 'great' in front of your name?"

"Well, now, I don't dislike that."

Kenji found himself smiling just a little as another rumble of laughter shook Gandril's body.

"So, my children. You have brought me news?"

"Yuuki's an idiot."

Eita gave a short snort, followed by a true laugh when Gandril responded:

"News that isn't decades old, young merman."

Kenji grinned this time, and the corners of the serpent's own toothy mouth curled upward as well.

"I jest, you understand. You should be kinder to your fellow children, Kenji. Yuuki is easily excited, but I believe it is one of his charms."

"I can jest too, you know." Kenji rolled his eyes, smile still present. "He's an idiot, but his recklessness pulled through, this time." He braced himself before he continued. He didn't want to ruin the nice atmosphere, but they came here to deliver a report, not to bond with their guardian. "He's managed to gain contact with Tooru Oikawa."

"I don't suppose the siren is any more willing to cooperate than before."

Eita nodded. "I think we made a mistake by having Wakatoshi's crew contact him initially."

The serpent offered a thoughtful "hmm."

Both mermen exchanged a look, unsure of who should deliver the next bit of news. In the end,
it was Kenji who reluctantly supplied,

"Keiji was with him, sir."

Everything fell silent at that, and the two men were sure that they felt the water around them go still.

Gandril's glowing eyes held something sad in them. Hurt. The very sight was painful for Kenji and Eita to watch, so they averted their own gazes.

"I see," the serpent finally managed, but the words were so filled with ache that Kenji flinched. "Is he well?"

"We... don't really know, sir." Kenji dared to look back at the serpent's eyes, but he too was unwilling to meet anyone's faces. "I don't think that Yuuji handled the situation in a way that would convince him to come back, though."

Eita bit his lip. "It wouldn't have mattered. Keiji wouldn't have left in the first place if his mind wasn't already made up. He doesn't act on impulses. That's why we're having to resort to such drastic measures in the first place."

Gandril met Kenji's gaze this time, already looking as though he'd regret asking, "What has Yuuji heard from him?"

"We still don't know if he plans to get in our way, or if he's simply avoiding us completely," Eita explained. "We just know that he and the siren were together in Kingston City, and that neither wish to side with us. We're limited to that knowledge at the moment."

The serpent lowered its colossal head in an acknowledging half-nod toward Eita. "Then, how do you plan to fetch him, now that you have this knowledge."

He continued to face Eita, though his eyes looked to Kenji, who responded with a guilty, "Geh."

"Perhaps it would be best, this time, to send one of our own to handle things."

"One of our own may not be enough. There was an outsider with them. Who knows how many others they've become involved with." Kenji drew water in through his gills and back out, deep like a held breath. "So, might I suggest an alternative?"

"My attention is yours."

Akira Kunimi was still wondering why he'd ever agreed to coming on land.

His skin felt dry, the sun was way too hot, his legs were sore, the ropes were practically cutting into his arms, and these pirates were going to drive him to the brink of insanity if he had to listen to their obnoxious bickering and singing for another second longer.

The group's singing was, thankfully, cut off by Morisuke, bless his soul. Not that the shorter pirate had been opposed to it, he'd been dragged into it, in fact. Rather, he silenced his crewmates to pester Akira for more directions.
Morisuke crossed his arms as he faced Akira, island leaves and twigs crunching and snapping beneath his worn boots. "You said we were close. I don't even hear any running water yet."

"This wouldn't be a trap, would it?" Takahiro's lips formed a sly grin, and he poked Akira's side with the end of a knife he'd taken from the tent.

Issei's grip on Akira's shoulders tightened from behind. "I'm sure he's not that dumb. You saw all those books he had, didn't you? 'Guy's gotta have at least somewhat of a brain in there." He leaned in a bit as Takahiro pressed the blade's tip closer. "He wouldn't mess with us after already being knocked out and tied up."

"Well, that makes him smarter than the captain already."

"Pure genius."

"A real scholarly type for ya."

"Would probably never get a ship sunk."

"Or lose a whale's weight in plunder."

"I GET IT." Lev spun around from the front of the group, only to slip on leaves and fall on his back.

"All in favor of making the hostage the new captain?" Issei asked with an arm raised.

Both Takahiro and Morisuke gave an agreeing "Aye," and lifted their own hands.

Kanji watched on like he was seriously debating the topic.

"This is mutiny!" Lev sputtered, sitting upright with his hair full of leaves.

"You say that at least once a week," Morisuke said, casting their captain a glance over his shoulder.

Akira spoke before he realized he was doing so. "How are any of you still alive?"

"Sheer determination," Kanji announced, maybe a little too proudly.

Takahiro gave Akira another light jab in the side. "Anyway, about those directions?"

Akira let out a silent huff through his nose. This group already had him tied up as it was, so did they really have to keep poking him with sharp objects, too?

"It's nearby. The lake is inside a cave," he said.

Issei lifted a lazy brow. "Failed to mention that part, didn't you?"

Kanji lifted a hand in the air, a completely unnecessary act, because he opened his mouth before anyone acknowledged the motion. "Caves on North Ironfall are infamous back home! They're supposed to be full of dangerous animals and mazes and stuff."

"The magical kind of dangerous, with our luck..." Morisuke muttered.

Lev apparently heard that comment, and he jumped back to his feet. He was beaming as he clamped his hands down on Kanji's shoulders. "Magical caves mean magical loot!"
Issei coughed. "Magical loot that we don't have a ship to store on."

Lev clenched his hands into fists with excitement. "We can buy a whole new ship with magical loot!"

"We're buying one?" Takahiro asked, "I thought we were stealing one."

"If we spend the loot on a ship, then we don't have anything to put on the ship."

Takahiro pointed to Kanji with his free hand and nodded in agreement.

"He makes a valid point," Issei said.

Akira hung his head low, staring at the ground in envy of the dead leaves that didn't have to listen to this endless prattling.

"Did you want that fresh water, or not?" he finally asked.

The pirates were quick to drop their conversation to shout a united, "Yes!"

"But there has to be some place to get it other than some forsaken cave, right?" Morisuke asked, watching Akira with skepticism.

Akira looked up from the leaves. "You asked me to tell you where I found water, and I'm telling you. If there's anywhere else, I haven't found it yet." When Morisuke didn't look any more convinced, Akira sighed. "Look, I would've warned you first if it was that dangerous. It would've saved me another trip over here."

"He's probably telling the truth. He looks pretty lazy," Issei observed. Akira gave a slow nod to confirm this.

Morisuke tapped a foot. "So where is this cave, then?"

Akira lifted his chin slightly to gesture past Morisuke. "Up ahead. There's some foliage covering the entrance, but it's just past these trees."

"A hidden cave on the deadly island. Definitely less suspicious." Issei gave Akira a little nudge, urging him forward in said direction.

The rest of the crew was just as wary, but they were also thirsty. And what was a little risk to a crew who had just survived a serpent attack, right? Hell, they'd survived much more than that before. Lev was a sucker for adventures, they all were deep down, so it wasn't like this would be the first possibly horrible idea they'd followed through with.

They found the entrance shortly, Lev being very much eager to hack away at the vines and oversized leaves that could have easily been simply brushed out of the way.

The cave's mouth seemed normal enough. Dark. Rocky. "Very cavey," according to Kanji. No signs of flesh-eating plants or dragons. Yet. They were off to a good start, considering their usual luck.

They wandered in with torches made from fallen branches outside the cave. Kanji had been assigned "torch backup duty," a very important role consisting of him carrying an armful of extra branches just in case. He looked proud of this new job, and he clung to the wood like his life depended on it. It probably did.
The cave didn't quite seem to be any sort of intricate maze, as Kanji’s collection of North Ironfall rumors suggested. There were only a few forks in their path here and there, of which Akira expertly guided them through.

A little too expertly.

"How did you even find this?" Takahiro asked, watching his step as they maneuvered around stalagmites.

"Too much exploring." And the help of some heightened senses, but Akira left that out.

Morisuke glanced up as a pair of bats flew past. "You've been camping out here for a long time, I'm guessing?"

"Too long."

"And you don't have a boat, huh?" Takahiro mused. "You seem a little too prepared for someone to be stranded."

Akira's response was a noncommittal, "Hm," and he continued to instruct group through the caverns.

They passed plenty of bats, snakes, bugs, the sort of things your expect to find in such an environment. The question was whether Kanji had been misinformed, or if there was something else waiting for them further in.

Morisuke kept leaning toward the latter, but Akira's calm state had him second guessing himself.

The hostage assured them the lake wasn't much further, though Kanji mentioned being thirsty enough to start licking the moisture off the stalagmites if they didn't find water soon. He wasn't the only one thinking along those lines, either.

Lev took it upon himself to distract from the thirst, filling the air with an off-key humming that echoed throughout the cavern.

Akira cringed, recognizing it as the same tune he thought he'd finally escaped from earlier.

"Through the seas we’ve traveled plenty, taking treasures far and wide," their captain began to sing, mostly to himself at first. It wasn't the most pleasant thing to Akira’s ears. Lev didn’t have much talent as a singer. "And of monsters, we’ve fought many..."

"...bouts so close we nearly died!" Kanji chimed in with a small hop, raising his voice in unison with Lev’s with a grin.

Morisuke mumbled something about their throats being "too dry for any more of this nonsense,” but the two continued nonetheless.

"But of ghosts and ghous and whirling pools, nothing chills bones quite like I..."

"...of the almighty Calamity..."

"...from us no wonders can hide!"

Issei and Takahiro had joined in, respectively, aiding more to Akira’s suffering. Lev and Kanji grinned wider, and the former swung his torch with enthusiasm as the two sang out an, “Aye aye!”
The atmosphere lightened even more as Morisuke finally accepted his fate and, once again, began to sing along despite his complaints. The others of the crew gained a slight bounce in their step, as if the ridiculous tune was enough to rub all of their worries away.

“One day Morrigan’s Coast will fear the most, our small band of us five, and Kingston’s crown we’ll have bow down, to the greatest crew alive!”

Lev shouted out a loud “Yo ho!” that sent a few bats overhead scattering. He parted his lips wide, ready to carry on the song, but the sudden loss of his footing brought that note to a literal screeching halt. The screeching coming from his mouth, specifically.

His feet slid across the slick rock he’d come across, but he managed to catch himself at the last moment, legs spread and arms out for balance in a very ungraceful stance. He stared at the ground between his feet, noting the small puddles, then looked ahead, squinting into the darkness ahead. He gave his torch another swing, this time slow and sweeping in front of him, revealing the edge of what looked like a body of water. His grin returned in no time, and he whipped around to the rest of the group.

“We’re here!”

“We’re here,” Akira echoed with much less enthusiasm.

Lev made to turn and make a run for the water, but Morisuke snatched the back of his shirt and pulled him back.

“Wait. I still don’t have a good feeling about this place. It could be… poison or something.”

“A poison lake?” Akira asked, and Morisuke shrugged.

“I’d believe it.”

“Then he can test it!” Lev straightened and waved the torch from Akira to the lake.

Issei gave Akira another nudge forward. “Sounds like a plan, Captain.”

They led Akira to the water’s edge, all of them watching intently as he assured them it was completely safe, that this was the same place he’d gotten the water of this they’d taken upon themselves to drink up until now.

Morisuke cupped a hand and filled it with water, challenging Akira to prove his claims. He observed their hostage carefully, making sure that he actually swallowed the liquid for fear that this was some sort of elaborate trap.

Lev didn’t waste any time when he saw that Akira had, in fact, swallowed the lake water just fine. He rushed to fill his hand with a drink, careful not to get his torch wet.

It was cold, much colder than the water that had been sitting around in the canteen had been, and it sent pleasant chills through his body as he gulped it down.

Morisuke was next, holding his own torch high to keep it dry as he filled his hand back up with water. He waded further out, embracing the chill of the water and cavern air against his skin. Anything to counter that breeze-less heat of the island outside was welcome at this point.

Lev was a bit more daring, moving out into the water until it was halfway past his knees. Considering his height, that was pretty far compared to where Morisuke stood, the water not even
reaching the shorter man’s own knees yet.

“Hey, don’t go too far! We don’t know if there’s anything in the deeper parts!” Morisuke warned, but Lev was already dunking his head under water. The first mate mumbled some sort of insult under his breath.

The other three had taken to rotating roles already, one going out to get his fill of water while the others kept the backup torches dry and the hostage from making an escape. Takahiro was pretty sure he’d memorized the path on the way in, but he wasn’t taking any chances of losing their guide.

Issei was the one out by the water now, having just switched with Kanji on branch-watch. He breathed out with a pleased sound once the first gulp of water washed down his throat. It felt like it could’ve been the best thing he’d ever tasted, but part of him realized he was probably just desperate at this point. He’d be saying the same thing the next time he’d get his hands on a beer, for sure.

“Give us some safe-to-eat fish in this thing, and some better lighting, and we’ll never have to leave this place again,” he joked before gulping down another handful.

“I can’t imagine that there aren’t any fish in here.” Morisuke chuckled as he bent down, dipping his hand into the dark water once again. If there were any fish, he couldn’t see well enough to tell. Nothing had brushed up against his legs yet, either, and that was probably for the best.

Takahiro gave Akira another bored poke with his blade. “Hey, Scholar-Guy, there any fish in here?”

But Akira stayed quiet, eyes set on the damp cavern floor. He didn’t look bored or annoyed as he had with the group up until now. Focused, rather.

Another poke. “Hey, don’t go deaf on us before we’re outta here.”

The hostage barely parted his lips, and the sound that came out served useless as a response to Takahiro’s question.

A sharp whistling cut through the air, and this time Takahiro gave him a shove with the side of his arm.

“The hell are you doing?”

Akira lifted his stare from the ground, but not to look at Takahiro. He stared out at the water. Intently. Eyes searching for something other than the men wading through it.

Another shove, this time harder. “Hey!”

Morisuke straightened, hand slipping out from the water, curled fingers lingering just over the surface as he looked back to the three still on land. He could see Takahiro trying to quiet Akira down, but the whistling was echoing through the cave now.

And the water was rippling in places where no one stood, where no stalactites hung overhead to drip from.

Then he felt something brush against his leg.

His attention shot back to the water and he yanked his arm away from the surface, but not
before something cold could wrap itself around his wrist.

Spindly fingers connected by thin webbing curled around Morisuke's skin and pulled at him, urging him closer to the water. The pirate reeled back, tugging his arm back toward himself, but then there were two, three hands gripping at his wrist, all of them a sickening pale green and covered in toad-like bumps. Their claws dug into his flesh, and he still couldn't see through the dark water well enough to tell what the grotesque limbs belonged to.

He could hear Lev's yelling from further ahead. He looked up to acknowledge it, to see what state he was in.

A mistake.

Lev's arms were in the air, fighting for balance while his legs were grabbed and clawed at from the water. Morisuke called out to him, a strangled and desperate yell that begged him to come back to safety.

Morisuke hated adventures just as much as he loved them.

Right now, he was leaning more toward the former emotion.

He lifted his free arm high to avoid another spindly hand from pulling it lower, then retrieved a knife from his side to cut at the ones already weighing him down. He sloppily sliced himself in the process, but it got him free. He'd worry over minor injuries later.

He stumbled back before another pair of hands had the chance to grab him, and then he saw it: a pale, impish, snarling face with jagged, sharp teeth splashed out from beneath the surface. Its head was covered in bumps like its arms, some of them more pointed and larger than others. It was small, its body hardly over two feet long, but menacing in the dark of the cave all the same.

He only had the time to register a few of these things, as the creature leaped out from the water at him. He batted it away, knife cutting through its face and gaining a pained screech in return.

The screeches of those that Lev was fighting off filled the room and blended with the yells of their comrades. Takahiro was shouting something at their hostage. There was a gunshot, likely from Issei. The sound of branches flattering against stone. Everything was echoing and chaotic, but all that Morisuke could focus on were the struggled sounds of Lev splashing through the water, punching and slicing at monsters as he tried to keep from being pulled under.

Morisuke continued to back away from the creatures crawling and swimming toward him, batting at them when he could, but trying his damndest to figure out how to get past them to make it to Lev.

They didn't go down with their ship. They fled and let it sink into an abyss.

But he was not about to let their captain go down, too.

He was not letting Lev go down.

He breathed in, the idea of batting aside what he could and diving into the water after their captain briefly crossing his mind. He'd be drowned, for sure, and yet, one foot was already moving forward.

Until a loud splash beside him brought him back to reality. Takahiro was on the ground,
cursing, and Akira was nowhere to be seen on land.

The creatures ditched Morisuke in favor of chasing after the source of the splash, and Morisuke took the opportunity to do what he knew was the stupid thing.

He dived.

He dived into the darkness, torch extinguished with a sizzle and discarded in the water behind him, making the room that much dimmer.

Some of the creatures had left Lev as they had with Morisuke, but there were still two lingering behind, one clinging to Lev's arm, refusing to let go even as he swung it wildly, and the other climbing its way up his leg, leaving bloody scratches in its wake.

Morisuke tore the one away from Lev’s leg, not paying any mind to the fresh bites his arm received in retaliation. The creature hissed and screamed, glaring its white eyes at Morisuke before he drove his knife through its neck and flung it out further into the water. The water, which was too cold now and not quite as welcome as it had been when he wasn’t running out of breath. Despite all that he just drank, his throat already felt painfully dry.

“What are these?!” Lev yelped just as he managed to fling the one on his arm out with its fallen comrade.

“Who cares!” Morisuke snatched Lev’s cut up wrist and tugged him toward the shore where he could still see a few torches flickering in the dark of the cave. “Hurry, before the rest come back-- Lev!”

“What color was the merman we were looking for, again?”

“Seriously? Now?!”

Morisuke tugged again, and Lev followed, but not without reaching down to turn the shorter man’s head toward the source of the earlier splashing.

Akira was there, the ropes that had been binding him now severed and floating a short ways off. The smallish, snarling creatures swam around him, but made no effort to attack as they had with the crew. Some had bits and strings of rope dangling from their toothy mouths.

Akira turned, met Morisuke’s and Lev’s stares, and gave one more, short whistle. The creatures scattered, some making their way toward the two while others zipped through the water and crawled to shore, webbed feet slapping against wet stone as they pounced for Kanji and Takahiro.

Another gunshot echoed through the cave, then a yell, and a splash. Another torch went out somewhere in the water, and Morisuke cursed as he drew his pathetic excuse for a weapon out in front of him.

Lev withdrew his own sword, it in one hand and his own light source in the other. When a hoard of the creatures came their way, he pulled Morisuke back by the shoulder, moving him out of their path and swiping his weapon in a horizontal slice across them all. A thick liquid oozed and spurted out from his targets. It looked silvery, but it was hard to tell with one measly flame left as their guide.

He was also sure that there were way more of these things coming out them now than before.
He continued to slice away, and Morisuke would have leaped at the ones gathering at Lev’s feet if not for the claws already digging at his own from behind. It felt like for every creature they cut down, another two came out of hiding from somewhere deeper in the lake.

Akira gave one more whistle, and then he dove beneath the surface, but what splashed up behind him wasn’t a pair of legs. Morisuke caught sight of something long and fish-like, but there was too little light to see. Too little time to process.

Too little time to process the amount of creatures that had gathered on the shore, to process Takahiro’s yelling or the sudden lack of Kanji’s or Issei’s voices.

Too little time to process the cold of the water pooling around his face as too many hands pulled him down, to process the strangled yell that Lev gave in the form of Morisuke’s name as he whipped around to reach for him, his image skewed by the violent rippling of the water.

Too little time before, for Morisuke, everything fell dark.

And soon, it was so for everyone, with the final torch going out with a splash and a stream of smoke.

Chapter End Notes

Catfish Calamity: The Musical™
Adventure Log

Chapter by ChosenOfKagami (kagapop), kagapop

Chapter Summary

Children's adventures should be kept to the backyard.

Chapter Notes

This one's a little short, sorry!

Also sort of different from previous chapters. I present to you, a series of journal entries written by A Certain Character.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Day 1

I’m going to start this off by saying that I’m not really sure what I’m doing. I’ve never kept a journal before! Mom gave me this neat one for my birthday that fits in my pocket. (I just turned 12. Dad says I’m practically a man now!) I think it’s going to be a good way to record my adventure!

I’ll just be gone for a day or two. I’ve got a bag of camping things from the basement, and I left a note for Mom and Dad, so they don’t have to worry! I don’t know if they’ll be mad or not, though. Mom always says I shouldn’t go in the woods alone, so I might get in trouble when I come home. I don’t usually get in trouble. It’s just for one day though!

I hope I get to see something neat, like a fox or a deer!

Day 2

I think I’m lost.

I couldn’t really figure out Dad’s tent last night, and there were a lot of strange noises. I don’t think they were deer. I haven’t seen the path since yesterday, and I can’t find anyone to ask for directions. I have a compass, but I don’t know what direction home is. I’m going to try to keep walking in the same direction and hope that works!

Day 3

I kept walking, but nothing looked familiar. Maybe I should just stay in one place? Mom and Dad will probably come looking for me.

Day 4

I’m writing in the morning because it’s too hard to see at night, and I don’t want to run out of matches. I saw some butterflies with these shiny blue wings by some flowers before it got dark
yesterday. Mom always complains that butterflies never come to the flowers she puts by the windows. I’m going to take some of these flowers home for her (and maybe she won’t be as mad at me then).

I should have brought more food.

Day 5

I heard a bunch of noise, so I left my spot today to see what it was. I wound up finding a path! There was a horse and wagon with a bunch of people. (I think Mom said they’re called caravans?) They wouldn’t tell me where home was or let me come with them, but I think I’m gonna stay here by the path and wait for someone to help.

Oh, and I got desperate and tried to eat a grasshopper. I don’t recommend it.

My stomach still hurts.

Day 6

A lot of scary people seem to come down this path. I’m afraid to ask some of them for help. I think they might be criminals. I keep thinking that I might just sneak into the next wagon that passes by. Maybe I can get help in another town, that way.

Day 8

There’s another caravan coming through. This one’s way bigger than the last. I’m going to try and follow them and sneak on when they stop.

Day 10

Good news: They didn’t find me.

Bad news: They weren’t going to Mooresville.

They’re delivering something, I think. They had a bunch of barrels in one of the wagons. Most of them looked really full, but I found one I could fit in, and no one knew it! I’m getting good at this stealthy thing.

But maybe if I was less stealthy, I wouldn’t have been put on a boat with the rest of the barrels….

I’m hiding in a closet on this ship now. I don’t know what to do. Mom and Dad definitely won’t find me if I’m not on Morrigan’s Coast.

If I ever find someone hiding in a barrel, I’m making them get out, ‘cause this was a bad idea.

Day 12

I’m not as stealthy as I thought.

I ran out of food again and tried to take something from the kitchen. They’re locking me in this small room and dropping me off at the next island. I don’t know where that is. This is better than being thrown overboard, though. I can’t blame them for being mad at me. I shouldn’t have stolen their food. I’m really hungry, but that doesn’t make it okay.

Day 14
Someone from the boat felt bad and gave me some apples when they let me off. I miss Mom’s roasted ham, but apples are still better than grasshoppers.

This place is called Kingston. I asked someone how far that was from Mooresville, but they just laughed at me.

Day 17

This couple is letting me wash dishes at their restaurant for table scraps. They say they don’t have room for me to sleep anywhere, though. I told them I don’t need a bed, I just don’t want to be on the street anymore. I don’t know why they won’t just let me sleep under a table or something.

Day 18

I keep asking people passing through town if they can take me to Mooresville, but no one seems to be heading that way. The people who are say I’d have to pay, but I don’t have any money. They won’t pay me anything but scraps at the restaurant.

Some people give me this sad look on the street, and some of them give me a piece of food or a few coins. Maybe I can save up enough to get home if I beg.

Day 19

Don’t beg people on the streets in a town where people never want to look you in the eye.

My side hurts. What was in that guy’s boot, an anchor?

Day 20

I miss my bathtub. I keep scrubbing myself with the soap from dish washing to stop from smelling when the restaurant owners aren’t looking.

I miss my bed, too.

I hope Mom and Dad aren’t too worried about me.

Day 22

My clothes are full of holes. I don’t want to buy new ones. I want to save my coins for a boat ride. I got a few more from helping people on the street, but no one wants to give me a ride for just four pieces.

My clothes are really loose, too. I don’t remember being this skinny before.

Day 26

I need a new sleeping spot. I tried one of the stables, but the owner said he’d send his dogs after me if he caught me there again.

Day 27

I’m sorry, Mom and Dad. I stole again.

He looked really rich, so I don’t think he’ll miss a few silver pieces. They were hanging in a really loose bag on his belt.
I know stealing is bad, but it’s just a little bit, so that means it’s just a little bit bad, right?

Day 30

I’ve got a lot more copper pieces, now. I’m just taking a couple coins from each person. I think that’s probably better than taking all of one person’s money. I think I can get enough for a boat ride if I keep this up.

Day 33

I met a weird kid today.

I was trying to go through this woman’s bag, but I had to run away so she wouldn’t see me. This kid saw it and said I’m a really bad thief. (He didn’t say “bad,” but Mom says I’m not supposed to say the word he used.)

He stole a necklace from right under her nose. He said he’d teach me some tricks if I share the “loot” with him.

Day 34

His name is Satori. He’s not from around here. He says he’s traveling with his family by ship. I’m surprised, because he doesn’t look much cleaner than me. My family would never let me walk around like this.

Stealing is a lot easier with two people. One of us can distract the person while the other does the hard part.

I don’t really like that he takes so much, though. I would have just taken a few coins, but he takes the whole bag if he can get away with it. I feel guilty, but it’s enough to get me out of Kingston, I think.

Day 35

Satori asked why I want to go on a boat so bad. I told him about how bad my adventure went, and he thought it was funny. I don’t think it’s funny.

He said if I went on his ship, I’d get to have a real adventure.

They aren’t going near Mooresville any time soon, but it wouldn’t be bad for my adventure to actually be fun for once before I go home, right? I don’t want this to have been a total waste of time.

They’re leaving port tonight. I’m not sure what to do.

Day 36

If I didn’t lose track already, it’s been 36 days since I left home. But now it feels like day 1 all over again, because I’m finally going to be able to go on a real adventure!

The ship is called The Specter. Satori’s family isn’t really his family, either. It’s not like my family, anyway. I don’t think he has a family like mine. He says the crew found him kind of like how he found me.

I’m going to be sharing a cabin with Satori and someone else. I can’t remember their name right now.
Day 37

I think… this might be a pirate ship.

They don’t seem that bad to me, though. They gave me new clothes and food. I think a lot of the stuff on the ship is stolen, but maybe they needed it like I did.

I probably shouldn’t tell Mom and Dad that I made friends with a pirate when I get home.

One of the adults made a hammock over Satori’s bed for me, since there are only two beds in the room. The other kid in the cabin is our age, but I still haven’t gotten to talk to him much.

Day 38

Satori said he’d teach me how to use a sword if I could steal the other kid’s raisin bread when he wasn’t looking.

The other kid’s name is Morisuke, apparently, and you wouldn’t think he could punch very hard by looking at him.

He can.

Day 40

They’re teaching me how to sword fight, even though Mori has caught me trying to take his food at every meal so far (Satori won’t stop laughing at me). I’m better with a sword than I thought I’d be, even if it’s just a wooden toy one. I need to practice more, though. Mori’s too good at defensive stuff, and Satori always seems to know where I’m going to move before I’ve even done it.

Day 50

I keep forgetting to write in this thing. I hope I’ve still got the days straight. I kind of liked keeping count.

I’m having way more fun here than I did in Kingston.

A lot of the crew likes to tell crazy stories. Satori even says he saw a merman once, but I don’t know if I believe him. Mori says he probably dreamt it.

I remember hearing crazy stories from visitors at the restaurant, but no one there actually believed any of them. It was more like… urban legends? Story telling? Satori says there’s a rumor that Kingston used to be run by merpeople, but that doesn’t make any sense. How would they walk on an island with fish tails and no legs?

Day 51

I knocked a sword out of Satori’s hand today. Mori made a big deal out of it. I’m kind of excited, actually.

I got to see a real treasure map for the first time today, too! The captain says we can come along because we can fit in small spaces better than the adults.

Day 53

We had to squeeze through this tight spot in a cave, but we found more gold than I’ve ever seen in my life! Satori kept joking about hearing dragons when we got there, but I never saw
They said we could each keep something we found. There was this gold pin shaped like a butterfly. I never got to bring those flowers to my mom, so I’m going to bring her this when I get back, instead. Maybe I’ll find something for Dad on the next trip.

Mori picked out a bracelet that’s way too big for his hand. Satori picked a knife, and he won’t stop playing with it. He says he’s going to name it.

Day 78

Forgot to write again. Dad’s getting this silver letter opener I found, by the way.

I still miss home, but I really like it here. I want to visit my parents, but if I do, then I probably won’t be able to come back....

Day 102

I need to keep this thing under my pillow or somewhere I’ll remember. What’s the point in an adventure log if I never write after my adventures?

So far I’ve seen whales, sharks, a whirlpool, too many storms to count, and some really pretty red bird with long feathers that looked like something out of a storybook (Satori says it’s a phoenix, but it’s probably just a peacock or something). We’ve found some buried treasure, and we’ve found a bunch of maps that led to nothing. Most of the stuff we steal aside from that is just supplies for the ship.

We raided a town, too. I didn’t hurt anyone, but some of the adults set some fires and did some other things that I tried not to look at. I actually did think of writing that day, but I was too shaky to do it. I don’t think I like those trips as much as the others.

Day 110

Satori’s been tossing and turning in his sleep a lot lately. Mori says it happens every once in awhile. Why did he seem fine until now?

Day 115

He screams in his sleep sometimes. We can never get him to stop.

Day 135

I turned 13 today. I feel bad that I couldn’t be home for it. Mom usually makes my favorite dinner and a cake this time of year. I wonder if she made it without me.

The captain gave me a really pretty knife. It’s not as pretty as Satori’s (which he finally decided to name “Shooting Star”), but it’s still neat. Mori and Satori tried to make me a cake after I mentioned Mom’s. It was terrible, but I ate it anyway.

Day 172

I still can’t stand the raids. I keep saying I’ll get used to it, but I just get scared every time. I don’t know how many we’ve done now, but it’s a lot. I don’t even know if I’ve got the dates right on this log anymore.

I don’t want to hurt people. I don’t like seeing the others hurt people.
Am I a bad person for staying here?

Day 200

It’s been months since I slept well. Mori and I always have trouble, ‘cause Satori is so loud in his sleep. We can’t try to stop him. He just scratches and hits if we do. Sometimes we sleep in the kitchen instead. Or on the deck, if it’s not raining. It’s easier to sleep with the stars than with Satori’s screaming.

I don’t know how to help him. I want to. He never remembers anything when he wakes up. No nightmares or anything. He rubs his head like he’s in pain a lot during the day, though.

Day 221

I feel sick and mad at myself every time I let something bad happen. There was a stowaway the other day. I don’t know all the details, but the crew had him thrown overboard. I was a stowaway once. Could that have been me?

I keep thinking about the coins I stole from people in Kingston. I never even used them for a boat ride like I planned. I stole from those people for nothing. I think I’m doing that now, too. We don’t need all of this.

I’m definitely a bad person.

Day 257

I don’t know if I like it here anymore.

Day 270

Mori’s easier to talk to than anyone else. I think he still likes being a pirate, but he’s more… normal? Maybe “calm” is a better word. He doesn’t seem to mind the stealing, but he looks like he understands when I talk about my worries anyway.

It’s hard to talk to Satori now. I think we’re still friends, but he’s distant. From everyone.

I think he’s still in pain. He says I can’t help. He won’t tell me why.

Day 296

I’m still not sure what I just saw.

We caught some fish today. I found Satori hiding in the broom closet with one. It was all torn up, and his hands were all bloody. He was running his hands through his hair.

It was gross. And creepy. I don’t think he knows I saw him.

Day 299

He was doing it again today. He saw me watching this time.

He said he’d claw my throat open if I told anyone. He didn’t sound like himself. He looked scared.

I’m scared.
Day 301

I haven’t told anyone. Mori keeps asking if I know anything, but I promised Satori I wouldn’t tell. Even the adults are calling him a monster now. They don’t know what he’s doing, but they know he’s... off.

Day 324

He seems calmer on the days after I catch him doing that gross blood thing.

He won’t tell me why he does it. He just says his head hurts if he doesn’t. I wish he’d let me tell someone. I think he needs a doctor. This isn’t normal. This is scary.

Day 333

The captain told Satori to stop screaming, and he bit him. He bit him and he was growling like an animal and clawing at him. Captain’s making him sleep in the brig tonight as punishment. I don’t think that’s going to fix anything.

Satori never looks angry when he does this stuff. He always looks afraid.

Day 358

We have a hostage now.

He doesn’t look much older than me. I heard he’s a deckhand on some merchant ship called The Red Concord. I think there’s something on that ship that the captain wants. I guess they want to trade this kid for it? I feel kind of bad for him.

Day 359

They’re feeding him scraps, ‘cause they don’t want him dead. I don’t know what made me do it, but I offered to take them to him today.

They’ve got him tied up in his cell. I don’t think they need to. The bars are enough.

I tried to feed him, but he didn’t want to eat. I don’t think he trusts me because I’m a pirate.

I don’t blame him.

Day 361

I got him to eat today. I could hear his stomach growling, so I refused to leave until he ate something. I told him my name, but he doesn’t seem like he wants to talk to me yet.

I’m not sure why, but I want him to.

Mori and Satori are my family, but I think I miss having normal friends, too.

Day 362

He ate without making things difficult, this time. He still didn’t say much, so I just talked, instead. I told him about home. I told him about Mom and Dad, and the popular artist who moved down the street with her daughter before I left, and how neat it was to have someone famous living so close.
I told him about the stray dog I used to feed scraps to on the street when my parents weren’t watching (I hope someone else is feeding him now). I told him how I wanted to go on an adventure.

I’ve told Mori and Satori a lot of this stuff, too. I never told them I wish my adventure was going differently, though. I told this kid.

**Day 363**

He said my name today. He also asked why I’m being so nice to him. I don’t know if he really trusts me or not yet, but he’s talking, so that’s a start.

We talked about dogs. I don’t know if that sounds dumb, but I liked it. His parents wouldn’t let him keep one, either.

**Day 365**

His name is Daichi.

He’s from Morrigan’s Coast, like me, but he’s not from Mooresville. His dad is friends with the captain of the ship he’s from, and he’s letting him sail with them for a while. His dad works with glass, like making vases and things, I think. Daichi says he loves the sea too much to stay at home and do that.

When he talks about sailing, he looks so excited. He gets this look in his eyes. I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t mind letting him ramble when he looks like that, though.

**Day 366**

I didn’t want to just give him scraps today. I didn’t eat much of my dinner, and I brought him that, instead. He doesn’t need to know I didn’t eat. He seems like he’d worry, even though he’s the one tied up on a pirate ship right now.

I wish I could at least loosen his restraints a little. It’s been a few days, he can’t be comfortable like that. He says he doesn’t notice it as much when we’re talking. He got all stuttery and weird after that. It was kind of... nice? “Nice” is the only not-embarrassing word I can think of.

He asked if they’re ever going to let him go. I told him they probably will when we find his ship. I hope I’m right.

**Day 367**

I think that Daichi’s a serious person, but I got him to laugh today. I want to make him do that more often.

He seemed surprised that I brought him a lot of food today, too. I think he’s catching on. He asked where it came from, but I changed the subject.

I told him about the inn back home, and how Mom always keeps it smelling like a bakery. He said he wants to visit it sometime if I’d let him. I don’t know why he’d think I wouldn’t.

Then he asked if I ever planned to go back. I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I’m still not sure.

I asked him if he wanted to stop sailing, ‘cause I thought that was the same thing, but he said
he’d go mad if he couldn’t still visit home every once in awhile. I asked if that made me mad for staying here for so long. He said I am, but only ’cause I keep giving up my dinners for a hostage. I told him I was okay with being crazy if it’s for something like that. That made him laugh, too.

Mori says I shouldn’t visit him so often. He thinks the captain will get suspicious.

Satori says I should stay away from him so it doesn’t “suck as much for you when they throw him overboard.” I don’t know if he’s trying to give me real advice or if he’s just being a jerk. I’m surprised he’s even talking to me.

Day 368

Satori’s still doing that creepy blood-in-the-hair thing. I think everyone’s so filthy and smelly on this ship that they don’t realize the dried stuff in his hair sometimes is blood, and not dirt. Or maybe they just don’t care…? Aside from that, it seems like he’s mostly been back to normal for now, so I’m not going to say anything.

He makes grossed-out faces at me when he sees me going to bring Daichi his food.

This morning, I told Daichi I’m not sure about this anymore. The whole pirate thing. I don’t like being a bad person.

He says that his dad always told him, “for every bad thing that happens, whether it’s something you did or something done to you, you should do three good deeds for someone else.” Or... something like that. I guess that doing something good is supposed to make you feel better, instead of focusing on the bad stuff? I think I get that.

Daichi says me being his company is worth way more than three good deeds. I told him that was the cheesiest thing I ever heard.

I might've cried a little anyway.

"It's hard to do a good deed when I'm locked up like this" is what he told me at dinner. He’s trying not to focus on how hopeless this is all starting to feel.

I said that what he told me before is probably worth ten good deeds.

Now I’m the cheesy one.

He says I should come on his ship if I really don’t like it here anymore.

I feel confused. About a lot of things.

Day 369

We’re going to be docking at West Ironfall in the morning. We got a tip that Daichi’s ship is going to be in the area.
I still don't know what it is the captain wants from them so badly. He wants me to go with him to talk to Daichi about it tonight.

I can't stop shaking.

I don't like it here anymore.

I want to go home.

Daichi knows something about what the captain wants. He won't talk. I wish he would've talked. Then the captain wouldn't have made me hurt him.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry Daichi. I'm sorry Mom and Dad. I'm a bad person.

I don’t know if three good deeds is enough to make up for this.

I feel sick again.

Day 370

The cut on Daichi's face has stopped bleeding, but it looks deep. I can't really look at him. He keeps saying it's not my fault. Even if the captain grabbed my hand and made me do it, it feels just as bad. I should have fought back harder. Captain says I need to “man up.” I don’t think this is what Dad said being a man is about.

I'm afraid he'll make me do it again.

I'm afraid Daichi will hate me.

We're almost at port now. I want this to be over with. I want him to be safe.

I want to go with him.

I feel like I should go see Mori and Satori, just in case. If I do leave, I don’t want to without saying goodbye. But, if I say bye, they might try to stop me.

But I want to go home. Daichi’s ship might bring me home.

We can’t find Satori anywhere.

Mori and I have looked all over the ship. I even checked all his usual hiding places.

I think I smell smoke.
Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: A Pirate's Life [Is Not] For Me
Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he could see home. He could almost feel the warmth, smell the overwhelming sweetness of his mother's favorite candles.

Sometimes he could see the vibrant colors of the gardens and parks he played in when he was young, tall trees and flowers creating the illusion of a jungle.

Sometimes he could see waves, crashing up against the side of a ship. Feel the sea breeze brush against his skin.

Sometimes he could see a knife coated in red, and the bloodied face of a thirteen year old boy with short, dark hair.

Sometimes he saw fire.

Fire, engulfing the walls of a ship’s cabin while a young boy with a bowl cut and wide, frightened eyes stood in the midst of it, gripping at his head like it would split open at any given moment.

Fire that caused wood to crackle and snap, that served as background noise for the yells and cries of the three boys in the room.

“What did you two do?!”

“We have to get out of here!”

“Stop talking! You’re too loud! That HURTS!”

The warmth of that memory was different from the warmth he felt when he thought of home. It was a hot, scorching feeling that made his back itch and ache.

Sometimes, when Koushi Sugawara closed his eyes, he saw every instance of poor decision making skills acted upon throughout his “adventure.”

Among those poor decisions, was that he hadn’t acted on the realization when he knew that Satori needed some kind of help. When it was clear that something within the boy was eating away at him more and more with each passing day.

What was not a poor decision, was trying to save Satori from the very fire that he started in his wild, blood-deprived state. Suga still thought this, to this day, despite the bloodlust he saw in the
other boy’s eyes as he threw chairs and candles across the room, as he cut and clawed at Morisuke and Suga in desperation to make the head pains stop.

Now, when Suga opened his eyes, he saw that boy, now older with the bowl cut long abandoned in favor of hair that spiked up like the very flames that nearly devoured them all that day. Satori no longer feared the world, from what Suga could tell. Rather, he had a feeling that he’d taken a liking to being feared, instead. And here he was, spinning that same stupid knife in his hand while Suga remained locked up and covered in bruises thanks to a once, dear friend.

But still, saving Satori Tendou back then was not a mistake.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked, causing Satori to cease the playful fiddling with the knife.

The pirate looked down at him, one boot pressed against Suga’s chest while the captive stared up at him through eyes that were, by now, both rimmed with bluish-purple blotches.

Satori was quiet for a moment, then he laughed and spun Shooting Star in one more circle around his fingers. “I’ve done it now, huh? I broke you so bad, you’re talking to yourself!”

“I’m asking you, Satori.”

“You’re definitely broke in the head if you’re worried about me right now.” He pressed his foot harder against Suga’s chest. “But, hey, since you’re so curious, that’d be a big, fat, nope!” He lightly tapped the edge of the knife against his head. “S’a lot easier to deal with when you’re not hiding it from your crew, y’know? Since I ain’t the only oddity on this ship.”

Suga coughed as Satori’s boot sunk far too uncomfortably against him. “Glad to hear it.”

“Sure sound glad.”

“I’d sound better with your foot off of me.”

So, of course, Satori twisted the iron toe of his boot in place, knowing full well that there were bruises and scrapes beneath the fabric of Suga’s shirt. It lasted long enough to wrangle a pained yell from the other, but then he stepped back, allowing Suga room to recover.

“You’re already convinced you have the lead you need,” Suga choked. “So isn’t pummeling me more a little overkill at this point?”

Satori rolled his eyes and leaned forward. “Koushi, please.” He grabbed a handful of Suga’s hair, yanking his head back to look at him directly. “Use whatever brain cells we haven’t killed already! I’m not going to bet everything on the acting that you may or may not pull through with. I need Captain Nose-Scar to be fully convinced you’re in enough danger to make this trade go smoothly.” When he released Suga’s head, it was with a flick of the wrist that made the man’s head smack against the wall he was chained to. “Well, my captain needs that, anyway. I’d have no problem ambushing your friends, but apparently we have other important shit to get done. This merman hunt is taking longer than planned.”

“You don’t have enough ‘oddities’ on your ship without a merman?”

“Never enough merfolk on one boat, in my opinion!” Satori straightened and ran a hand through his mess of hair. “So far, their blood does the trick best. Way more soothing than human blood, anyway.”

“...This is all a redcap thing, isn’t it? You’re going to tell me you kidnapped me so you could
get some new hair product.”

Satori’s shoulders shook when he laughed. “Hell, no! I wouldn’t need one specific merman for that! Not that I won’t pass up the chance when we get the guy, though.”

“You’re sick. I don’t suppose there was anything I could have done to prevent this.”

Another laugh, but the amusement wasn’t quite as genuine as Satori narrowed his eyes. He continued to smirk, but his gaze held something of a leer. “Back then? No, Koushi.” He clapped his hands together, then extended them out to his sides. “But, hey, appreciate the effort and all! Even though Mori’s corpse is probably rotting away somewhere underwater thanks to you ditching us at the last minute to save your boy toy. Reeeeeaaaal pal, you were.”


Part of him wanted to point out that no one would have needed saving if not for Satori’s outbursts back then, but the other part of him knew that said outbursts were outside of Satori’s control.

But, the first part of him wanted to point out that, even though he had left his crewmates to save Daichi, Satori still might have been burned alive if Suga hadn’t forcibly dragged him out of the burning room first.

“I ‘ditched’ two people with working arms and legs to save someone who was tied up in a cell.” He breathed in, bracing himself, should Satori decide to make use of his boots again. He didn’t, for the time being, at least. “Satori, I wanted to help everyone. I didn’t want to get separated from you two. I just…”

Can’t save everyone.

The exhale was shaky. Not quite defeated, but certainly exhausted. Maybe there was a bit of regret in that single breath.

Satori let his arms droop slightly. “Just had to make a choice. Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m not dead, so I ain’t holdin’ a grudge over it. S’just a shame, y’know? That you’re in the same position Scar-Nose was in back then, and that you’re dumb enough to get in our way, now.” He shrugged, and turned to the steps, hands now on his hips. “Let’s just hope your friends aren’t so stupid, or else….” He trailed off, staring up at the ceiling in contemplation for a brief moment, then turned to look over his shoulder at Suga once more.

“Say, Koushi, help me out here,” he said, squinting and smirking something devilish at his former crewmate. “What do you call a flock of crows?”

Hajime knew for a fact that Daichi was always a bit... wary of the magical. Not entirely against their kind, but cautious. Something to do with a ship fire and a redcap, among other unfortunate accounts.

And, so, Hajime was so sure that Daichi wouldn't hesitate to say ‘no’ to allowing a siren, the same damn siren that had him under his spell once upon a time, to board his ship.
But then, Daichi allowed people influenced by the magical like Noya and Asahi among their crew. Hell, the man was even closer to Asahi now than to most of the people that were near him on a daily basis. And, he'd given in and let a merman come with them. Technically two, but only one that the captain was aware of.

And, of fucking course, Noya had to make himself present when Daichi met Hajime and the singing tuna at the docks.

"If he was really dangerous, wouldn't you be under his spell right now?"

Thanks a ton for that one, Noya. Also, thanks a ton for every mention of, "Suga would say yes," because even without the innkeeper present, apparently his hypothetical words could still sway weak-for-the-innkeep Daichi Sawamura.

Or, at least those words could aid him in his decision. Maybe if Keiji hadn't saved their asses with his serpent-talk, and if the siren hasn't been such an incredible smooth-talker, Daichi would have been able to ignore the "Suga would" aspect of it all.

So, here was Hajime now, spending his morning sitting at the end of Koutarou's bed with his head in his hands, gripping at short tufts of hair in frustration while the siren and merman stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a small, circular wall mirror.

Meanwhile, Koutarou leaned against the wall not far from them, arms crossed and laughing in conversation, as if he hadn't been witness to the rest the crew acting like living corpses because of this damned fish.

Keiji and Tooru were observing themselves closely by their reflections, touching up what sections of scales needed a good reapplying of makeup. Hajime didn't know why Tooru had to, because the entire damn crew already knew what he was.

Regardless, he was doing it, occasionally giving Keiji a little shove so he could see better in the shared mirror, and Keiji giving the worst glare in response every time. Tooru would every so often turn to assist with the harder to reach spots of scales on the merman every now and then, and that almost made up for the annoying shoves. Almost.

"--and what are the odds, right? I mean, getting Hajime to agree to being in the same ship as a siren is one thing, but the same one we ran into before?"

Koutarou found it hilarious, though no one else seemed to when they had approached the Corvus and Tooru made the most horrified noise upon recognizing the ship.

Hajime shot Koutarou a look. "I didn't agree to shit."

"I can't say I'm happy about this turn of events, either." Tooru began with applying some makeup beneath his eyes, and Keiji paused in his own application, because he knew Tooru didn't have any scales to hide beneath his eyes in his human form. "To think I unknowingly agreed to climb on a vessel with the same brute who do ungratefully shot at me--"

"Coming from the asshole who sang the whole ship into a trance in the middle of serpent-infested waters--"

"--when I was trying to lure you idiots out of its path--"

"--in the middle of a goddamn storm--"
"Do you two need a moment to sort this out?" Keiji looked from one to the other through their reflections in the mirror. "Because it would be great to never have to listen to another word of this misunderstanding again."

"Is there a part of 'he shot at me' that you're not understanding, Jiji?"

"I'm understanding that your pride has taken a blow over the fact that someone, for once, had the sense to cover their ears when you opened your deathtrap of a mouth."

Tooru gaped, and Hajime actually snorted, so Keiji shot his gaze to him through the mirror, next.

"And I understand that you can't put aside your paranoia of a certain species aside for two seconds to consider their side of the story, either. You're both impossible."

"You're one to talk about paranoia, Mr. Hasn't-Shifted-In-Days," Tooru muttered. Koutarou agreed with an enthusiastic nod.

Keiji was back to shooting Tooru a pointed look. "And when did you last shift? Because I can't imagine what you'd be covering under your eyes, if not circles for lack of sleep."

Another affronted face from Tooru. Keiji said nothing more after that, and returned to covering a spot on his neck in the mirror.

"Is he always this cranky when he does the leg thing for too long?" Koutarou whispered, not-so-quietly.

Tooru responded with an also not-quiet, "Yes," that was practically a hiss.

Keiji's frown deepened, because he was right there and could obviously hear them. "Everyone in this room is being a cranky pain in the ass right now."

Koutarou shrugged. "I dunno. I'm feeling pretty great."

Keiji and Hajime both mumbled unenthused, "Great"s, and "Glad to hear it"s.

Tooru, on the other hand, laughed lightly and looked over at Koutarou. "I like you. You're the least annoying sailor here, so far."

"Thanks!"

Keiji sighed. "That was hardly a compliment."

Koutarou either didn't hear, or was flat out ignoring him. He'd take whatever compliments or almost-compliments he could get. "This all makes so much sense now, though! That you were just trying to help us the whole time? Because, when I think about it, things did get even more hectic when we tried to stop you and changed direction. Aside from how creepy everyone looked, it's not like anyone was actually getting hurt while you were singing!"

Tooru hummed, then stepped over to pat a hand on Koutarou's shoulder. "Least annoying, and smart!"

While Koutarou beamed under the praise, Hajime continued to scowl at Tooru.

They'd heard all of this already. Tooru had already crammed this defense down Daichi's throat the day before this one. Koutarou had already said his part on his willingness to believe the
siren’s side of the whole ordeal, and, to be fair, he had witnessed more of the song-spell than Hajime had, what with Hajime being below deck before realizing what was happening. Noya had made it clear that, while he immediately decided he didn’t like Tooru as a person once the siren started talking, he didn’t think he was any sort of magical threat. Because, apparently having a tiny amount of magic bestowed upon you and being linked to a bird-man made you an expert on these things.

*Whatever.*

Hajime was willing to take all of that into account. He was a more forgiving man than his outward distrust in certain beings led others to believe. He would *consider* giving Tooru a chance. If Daichi could, then so could he.

But stranded in the middle of the ocean with people he cared about at a potential risk and no escape was *not* the setting he wanted to try that in.

“I can see the steam coming out of Hajimean’s ears.”

And, even if the siren factor was out of the picture?

Tooru was still an annoyance on his own.

"It's a miracle they're even allowing you on this ship, Tooru. Play nice." Now satisfied that everything which wasn't concealed by clothing was properly disguised, Keiji stepped away from the mirror to sit himself on the bed, keeping a considerable amount of space between himself and Hajime.

"I *am* being nice, but he keeps giving me these looks." Tooru huffed and cast a quick look of his own at Hajime. Both sneered before Tooru turned away again.

"Oh, well, that's probably just Hajime's face! He always looks a little grumpy, but he's actually pretty nice!" Koutarou grinned. "Don't take it personally."

"No, no, by all means, let him take it personally."

"Mean." Tooru reached behind his neck and started with unclasping the several hooks that held the row of silver, bangle-like necklaces together. Once done, he set those aside, allowing them to clatter together on the small, side table that had previously been beside Koutarou's bed. Scales coated the sides of the siren's neck in stripes of off-white and reddish browns. There were patches where makeup had been and was now fading, and he got right to covering them back up.

"You know," Koutarou started, watching Tooru thoughtfully, but tilting his head toward Keiji to address him instead, "If everyone here knows that sirens can walk on land now, is there really any point in you having to hide anything anymore?"

"Jiji's the runaway, not me," Tooru chimed in.

"You are one now," Keiji corrected.

"But these Eventide people know you two are together. If they catch word that a siren’s with us, they'll know you're here, too," Hajime said.

"I sincerely hope that none of you are going to go bragging about harboring a siren on your ship."
Hajime said nothing, but everything about his face said, 'I sure as hell won't be.'

Koutarou threw his hands up. "That's the point, though! If we're not gonna rat on him, why would we on you?"

"Because," Keiji said, standing again and making his way over to help Tooru with the back of his neck, "getting anyone to agree to letting Tooru come along has been stressful enough as it is." Not to mention the other five hundred things causing him stress right now. "I'd rather not add whatever reaction might come out of, 'Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention that I'm also a merman,' to that."

"I don't think anyone would care at this point?"

Keiji arched a brow at the way Koutarou worded the statement as if it were a question. Yeah. Real convincing.

"I just want to lay as low as possible. I would have avoided coming back here to begin with if my options had been a little more..."

"Existent?" Tooru hummed, and Keiji nodded.

"Still sounds dumb." Koutarou bumped his head back against the wall. "The hell did you even do that your friends would have to chase both you and a siren down, anyway."

Hajime leaned forward at that, a hand clapping down on his knee for support. "A question I still haven't gotten a real answer to."

Tooru made an "Ugh" sound that had to be purposely as loud and dramatic as it was. He then whipped around, and Keiji stepped back with his hands up, makeup still coating a few fingers.

The siren then pointed a finger straight at Koutarou. "Do we need to kick him out for this? Can he be here? I'm getting this over with. Now."

"Well we can't kick him out now," Keiji nearly hissed.

"Jiji's 'friends' are in danger, and they’re looking for a certain object that they think will eliminate that danger, but obtaining it could possibly jeopardize the people of Kingston, in turn. Not that there’s any proof of that, but it’s a theory. Jiji didn’t approve of the risk, left, and now they’ve got their tails in a twist because he knows too much, and therefore poses a huge threat, and now we're here. The end. No more questions."

Tooru turned around again, facing the mirror with his nose up and eyes closed, waiting for Keiji to go return to tending to his neck.

Instead, the merman just stared at him with an unspoken, "Really?"

"That was hardly any less vague than any of the other explanations I’ve gotten from you two!"

Tooru opened one eye to watch the sailor from the mirror. "Do you humans want to get yourselves involved in all this?"

Hajime clenched his jaw.

"No, you don't. Take it from someone who's already more involved than he wants to be,"
Tooru said, then jumped when Keiji smacked the back of his neck. The makeup now done there, the merman moved away, and Tooru continued running his mouth. "Since 'they're after him because he knows too much,' is apparently lost on you, let me reiterate: The less you get your noses in this, the less at risk you are. Consider this us doing you a favor."

"I consider it you feeding me a load of bullshit. You're here. We're already at risk."

"If Eventide does find us, they'll be after us. Not you, as long as you're mostly clueless to the situation at hand. And, from what I hear, your ship already runs into more trouble of the magical sort than most would on a regular basis. What small risk there is of Eventide actually finding us while on the move, is greatly outweighed by the knowledge that Jiji and I combined have to offer you." Tooru set his hands on his hips, flipping some hair out of his face as he re-inspected his makeup job in the glass. "You won't be fending off ghost ships and krakens so easily on your own. I don't care how decent of a shot you are. You're better off with us here."

"You say they won't bother anyone but you, but Hana's grandmother--"

"Fell on her hip. Those toys were after me. They attacked me, and you wouldn't have been a target if you hadn't come barging in with your gun whipped out."

"And I'm certain that act was purely Yuuji's own doing," Keiji interjected. "I don't see anyone allowing him to carry out something like that again."

Hajime opened his mouth to retort, but Tooru spun around and clapped his hands together, interrupting him before he could even start. "Don't waste your time arguing over this. If you're really this ship's head of defense, then perhaps you should be saving your energy for the pirates, and not me, hm?" The siren narrowed his eyes, and his tone dropped just a bit lower. "If you wanted me gone that badly, you've had every chance now to do something about it. But, since my head's still on my shoulders and my body is bullet-free, I'm going to suggest you cut this threatened hostility act of yours."

The two exchanged looks that were, despite his words, the very definition of hostile. Keiji watched on, tired and helpless. Koutarou was still being uncharacteristically quiet, glancing from one speaker to the next with the face of a mildly startled animal.

After a moment of painfully tense silence, Tooru spun on his foot and snatched up the cluster of necklaces from the table. His voice popped back to cheerfully fake as he fastened them around his neck. "I'm going to my cabin, Jiji. The overwhelming ungratefullness in this room is starting to make my head spin."

Footsteps, the open and close of a door, and more silence. Strained, uncomfortable silence.

And then Koutarou spoke up.

"He doesn't seem so bad."

Hajime promptly fell into his back with the loudest thump the mattress could provide.

"I'm sorry," Keiji said, and there was an audible hint of guilt there.

Hajime glared up at the ceiling. "For which part, exactly?"

"All of this, Tooru's right, though. Eventide had no reason to come after any of you, as long as you remain bystanders that he and I happen to be tagging along with."
"Weren't those pirates looking for you, and not Kenma?"

"As long as there's a single merman on your ship, I can't imagine you being able to avoid much trouble like that, anyway."

"Of fucking course."

Keiji looked down, contemplative. ".If anything should happen while we're here, we'll abandon ship at the first sign to save you the trouble. Does that do anything to ease your nerves?"

Hajime's expression twisted slightly. That sounded like much too harsh of an alternative until he remembered, oh, right. Gills.

"...Sort of," he grumbled.

Keiji gave a small nod, leaving it at that for now. It was probably the closest thing to relief or reassurance the sailor had gotten in days.

He left the room after that, but didn't make it far before a hand was taking him by the wrist.

Keiji spoke before he even turned around. He already knew who it was. "Yes, Koutarou?"

Koutarou let the door close behind him, but didn't wander far from it. He kept his voice hush, or at least what Keiji supposed was hush for him. "You're not gonna have to jump overboard, you know. I wanna help if anything happens."

Keiji furrowed his brow. "I'm not going to endanger any of you by sticking around. I wasn't lying to Hajime just now." He didn't miss the way Koutarou pouted at him. "You don't owe me anything for the serpent thing, if that's what this is."

"It's not!"

"Then there's no reason for you to offer. Focus on your usual duties. Let Tooru and I handle ourselves." Keiji looked down, and his wrist was still in Koutarou's hand.

"But…"

"Could I have my arm back?" Keiji asked, and Koutarou quickly released him. The sailor's ears looked almost pink, but the merman dismissed it. "Maybe you should check on Hajime, instead of leaving him alone with his seething hatred for Tooru."

Keiji turned away, knowing full well that if he didn’t end the conversation himself, Koutarou would persist, just as he had with the whole lack-of-sleep ordeal.

He really hoped that these uncomfortable hallway conversations weren’t going to become a regular thing for them.

Morisuke was surprised to find that he could hear something that wasn't pure underwater sounds. He was even more surprised to find that what he was hearing was a conversation, unmuffled by air that he didn’t expect to find filling his lungs.
None of his crewmates were involved in said conversation. He was actually quite certain none of them were even conscious. They were there, or, at least he could tell that a few of them were. He was currently tied back-to-back with someone much, much taller than him. Which, realistically, could have been anyone, but his best guess was either Lev or Kanji. He could tell there were other bodies lying nearby, but how many or which ones was another story.

It was too dark to tell. The only source of light came from a pair of glowing, purple stones over where the voices were coming from, but it wasn't bright enough to get a good look at the speakers.

He couldn't see. He still felt numb from being submerged in that icy water. He was still trying to get over the panic of thinking he was drowning, for what was at least the third time in his life now. He was pretty fucking hungry, too, and he hoped his stomach wouldn't choose to announce that fact when he was trying to play dead, or at least unconscious, right now.

Well, at least he wasn't thirsty anymore.

"...didn't tell me he hired more than one crew..."

He could only make out bits and pieces of the conversation. He registered this voice as Akira's, though.

"...could stand to keep in touch..."

The other voice, he didn't recognize. Who the hell had even managed to find them in this place? They were still in the same cave, right?

And why hadn't he drowned? Why hadn't those creatures eaten them alive? Why the hell was he tied to his crewmates like a prisoner?

"...not the most impressive pirates..."

Wait, was he talking about them? He was definitely talking about them. Okay, wow, rude. Akira was already rude for dragging them into a cave and nearly feeding them to whatever those things were, but, wow. No need for insults.

As if they weren't rude for stealing from and tying Akira up in the first place.

Eh, details.

"...least you didn't kill them..."

Morisuke was straining to make out the exchange, but the two were too quiet and too far away.

And the longer he was awake, the less numb he felt, and more aware he became of the wet feeling on his arms and legs, which probably wasn't water.

He soon became aware of pain in those wet spots, and, yeah, that definitely wasn’t water. That was definitely blood. His blood. Fantastic.

He heard footsteps soon, and then one of the purple stones was coming closer. In the faint glow, he saw a figure taller than Akira, and the subtle glistening of something on their shirtless body that certainly wasn't human skin.
Morisuke closed his eyes, and the person snorted a laugh.

"We see in the dark better than you humans. I know at least one of you are awake."

Morisuke's eyes popped right back open, and no sooner did he hear a mumbled curse from one of the bodies lying beside him. Issei, he could tell.

"At least two," the stranger corrected.

Issei cursed again, and Morisuke shifted as best as he could in attempt at a better look at this unfamiliar speaker. He was closer now, hands on his hips and hovering over them with a look of curiosity. The shimmery bits of skin were now more apparent as scales, and his hair, parted mostly to one side, was dripping wet.

"Y'know," he said, both looking and sounding unimpressed, "I'm pretty sure Eita didn't hire you guys so you could agonize one of our own."

“Eita…?” Okay, so, even with the stranger’s voice now closer and clearer, apparently Morisuke’s mind still wasn’t working at regular speed. The whole nearly-drowning thing could do that to you, he’d learned by now.

Eita was… the guy who bribed them to find that merman. Right. The merman they lost their ship trying to catch. Which probably wasn’t even the right merman in the first place.

“It was you guys, right? You’re one of the crews he hired?”

**One of?**

How daring was someone to actually enlist the help of several bands of pirates? And with the amount of gold they were being promised, at that? Might as well outright ask for a war between ships.

But, then, Morisuke had a feeling that these guys didn’t exactly see their crew as much of a threat.

“You all match his description, anyway. He said there weren’t many of you.” The stranger kneeled down and pointed over his shoulder to Akira, still seated in the shallow lake water. “This guy’s with us. We’ve been out of touch for a while, so he didn’t realize we’d asked for help outside of the Black Swan. Hopefully the misunderstanding didn’t cause too many issues.”

“You talked the Black Swan’s captain into working with you?” Morisuke found that hard to believe, but this guy sure didn’t look like he was joking.

“Forget that,” Issei scoffed. “You’re asking us if there’s an issue here, when you have us tied up in the dark?”

“Ah. Yeah. Right. Sorry about that.” He didn’t sound sorry. “Like I said, we see better in this kind of lighting than you guys. The ocean ain’t exactly a big bowl of water and sunshine when you get a little deeper.”

“The… ocean,” Morisuke repeated. And this guy was standing here, dripping wet and covered in scales. And, from what he could tell, Akira was pretty content to stay in the water right now. “You’re from the ocean.”

“You guys are sharp,” the stranger teased.
“And waterlogged. Also, bleeding, thanks to your friend and those… what were those things?”

“Also, untie us?” Issei added, more annoyed than pleading.

The stranger frowned. “You gonna do something stupid if I do? ‘Cause, I mean, you’re all pretty much stuck in here if you do anything to us. Good luck finding your way out of here, with or without light.”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it.” Issei rolled his eyes. “We won’t go knocking anyone out again.”

Akira wasn’t close enough for them to hear him huff.

“Now both sides have been knocked out and tied up,” Morisuke offered. “We’re even, anyway.”

The scaly person laughed and straightened. "What do you think, Akira? They much of a threat?"

At the sound of Akira’s responding “Hardly,” Issei mumbled an offended, "Oh, come on."

Another laugh from the stranger, and he moved to cut Morisuke free of his restraints. "I'm Kenji, by the way. Friend of Eita's, obviously. Sorry about the whole grindylow thing."

"Grindylows!" Issei repeated with a hint of... excitement? A softer, "Knew it," followed.

Kenji snorted, then looked at Akira one more time. "Hey!" he called, "I shouldn't be the one apologizing here!"

"They held me captive first..." Akira said, mumbled words indistinguishable to the others. An unconvincing, "Sorry," came a little louder soon after.

Morisuke sat up, now free from his restraints. He winced at the pain in his leg, but it was hard to make out the damage in the dark even now. He could at least tell that the person he was tied to had, in fact, been Lev. Probably not bleeding any less than himself.

"Those things tried to eat us," he said.

"Hey, he could've let them eat you. Consider yourselves lucky. All you got were a few nibbles."

"Nibbles." Issei repeated, then bit back a yelp when Kenji moved to untie him, the ropes rubbing harshly across one of said 'nibbles.' "You should teach those things the difference between a nibble and a chomp. I'm pretty sure I'm missing more flesh than I should be."

"Oh, you're fine." Kenji shrugged and dropped the ropes to the ground. "You looked worse before I got here. It looks like most of the bleeding has stopped by now."

"That’s great. I still have huge bites of flesh missing, but, I mean, at least they aren’t bleeding as much as they were."

Kenji clicked his tongue at Issei. “You pirates are so fuckin’ ungrateful.” He watched Morisuke try to pull Lev over onto his back. “That guy’s fine, too. Actually, your injuries were worse than his, so, try not to panic too much.” He tossed a thumb toward Takahiro, who was currently propped back against an equally-unconscious Kanji. “That one’s got it worse. I don’t
know what the hell you used to cauterize the wound he already had, but you guys did a piss poor job of it.”

Ignoring the chewed-at spots on his own body that were apparently such a big deal a few seconds ago, Issei got to his feet and moved over to Takahiro in a rush, shoving Kenji out of the way as he did.

The other stumbled back and threw up his hands, palms lightly dotted with scales like the rest of him. “He’ll live, geez, calm down. What’re you gonna do to help him when you can barely see, anyway?”

“Have you considered giving us an actual light source instead of picking on our pathetic human eyes?” Morisuke said, casting Kenji an unimpressed look. “What are you, anyway? A nymph?”

Kenji furrowed his brows. “I…” he started, then looked back to Akira, who was petting one of those nasty grindylows over by the water. It was curled up to him, to the tail that made up his lower half, making strange purring and gurgling sounds that could just barely be heard from across the shore. “You didn’t…?” Kenji turned back to Morisuke, crossed his arms, and sighed. “Right. You can’t see him from here.”

“Just keep pointing it out. That’s alright,” he heard Issei say.

“Merfolk,” Kenji said, not wanting to waste more time with explanations. “We both are. So is Eita.”

Morisuke squinted through the darkness at him. “Why the hell would a bunch of mermen ask us to capture another merman for them? Wouldn’t that be easier for you to do?”

“We needed all the backup we could get, alright? Desperate times, or whatever.” He waved a hand. “Honestly, we were expecting the Black Swan to pull through for us. You guys were just sort of… backup.”

Morisuke’s squinting mixed with a newfound scowl.

“But, hey.” Kenji dropped himself to the floor in front of Morisuke and the sleeping Lev. “Since you guys still haven’t pulled through with our request, how about we give you a new job, instead?” He grinned something almost wicked. “Since you’re, y’know, stuck in here without our help, anyway.”

“We got that. Thanks.”

“So, there’s something we’re looking for on this island. We were going to have to look for more help if Akira found a lead, but if you guys are already here…”

Morisuke didn’t look to thrilled about this, but Kenji’s grin didn’t falter.

“Whatsoever loot Eita promised you, we can pay if you help us with this.” When Morisuke’s glare softened just slightly at that, Kenji clapped his hands together. “So! What do you say, Shorty? Wanna hear us out?”

“Don’t call me that again, and we might be open for discussion.”
Tooru was on his back, rested over the mattress that would be his for however long this trip of theirs lasted. He was fiddling with something cylindrical and metal, wrapped tight in a thick cloth, like a sword’s grip that had been separated from its blade. Not far off beside him, another just like it lay on the bed, but for now he only held one over him, turning it in his hands in the air a short space above his face.

He didn’t flinch when the door creaked open. Nor did he bother looking to see who the intruder was.

“I’m not apologizing.”

“I figured as much,” Keiji said, venturing inside and closing the door softly behind himself. “I wouldn’t waste my time trying to get you to. I know it’d be a lost cause.”

“Aaw, you just came to keep me company, then?”

“If that’s what you’d like to tell yourself,” Keiji deadpanned. “I did want to ask how you were holding up, though.”

“Not happy to be here, but I’m fine. Shouldn’t you be worried about yourself?”

“Mhm. You seem fine.”

“The sarcasm is unnecessary. I am fine.”

“Take it from me, Tooru, just saying that doesn’t make it truth.” He watched Tooru pout up at the grip in his hand. “So, does that earring actually have any calming effects, or is that just superstition?”

Tooru’s hand stilled over his head. “It’s just an earring, Jiji. I wear jewelry all the time.”

“You wear silvers and glassy things all the time. I’ve never seen you with a stone that wasn’t cut and overpriced.”

Annoyingly perceptive as ever.

“It is polished stone, you know,” Tooru said, lowering the sword-less grip just a little. “Have you ever seen unpolished moonstone? ‘Wouldn’t make the best accessory, let me tell you.’

“So does it work, or not?” Keiji asked, not intending on humoring Tooru’s avoidance of the topic for much longer. “Because I’m going to go out on a limb and say it’s been much longer since you last shifted than I, and I think you’d need a lot more moonstone than a single earring to soothe the side effects, if that’s the case.”

“Amazing,” Tooru said under his breath. “If you’re not being interrogated, you have to be doing it to someone else.”

“You keep pestering me about getting back in the water.” Keiji watched him for a moment, and the harshness of his expression soon softened. He stepped over to the bed, taking a seat beside Tooru on the edge, hands folded in his lap. “I’m only holding this form for this long to stay out of sight. The moment I feel safe in doing so, I’ll turn back and get some rest.”

“And when do you think you’ll feel safe, exactly?” Tooru let the grip fall onto the bed beside
The merman twiddled his thumbs. “Sooner than later, hopefully…”

“I’ll drag you out in the dead of night and shove you into the sea, if I have to.”

“And you?”

Tooru pouted up at the ceiling.

“I have an excuse. What’s yours?” Keiji persisted.

The siren turned onto his side with a pathetic whine.

Keiji rolled his eyes. “At least tell me how long.” He heard an annoyed puff of air from the other, and nothing more. “More than a week, no doubt.” Silence. “A fortnight?” Still nothing. Keiji stopped fiddling with his fingers and looked at the sad lump of a person next to him. “A month…?”

Still, no response came.

“*Tooru.*”

“It *hurts*, Jiji.”

“So change *back.*” Keiji didn’t raise his voice much, but there was an inflection there that didn’t go unheard by Tooru. “Why haven’t you? Because you’ve been in Kingston? You couldn’t have taken a boat to a safer location for a few days?”

Tooru continued to make pathetic grumbling noises.

“And you keep lecturing *me*. If you’re going to make me shift back, you’d better, too.”

“Ugh, *no.*” Tooru turned to look over his shoulder at Keiji. “*Shifting* hurts, Jiji.”

“I’m aware of that, but—”

“No!” The siren sat up this time and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He stretched them out in the air in front of him. “I’m telling *you* to shift back so that you don’t reach this point. Shifting hurts. It sucks. But if you do it often enough, you *can* get used to it, provided you *keep* doing it. Holding this form for too long, though? You *don’t* get used to that.”

“All the more reason for you to change back. I know you’re a stubborn ass and all, Tooru, but *why* would you go a month, knowing all of this?”

Tooru cringed at his legs and muttered something.

“Sorry?”

Another mumble, and Keiji leveled him with a flat stare.

Tooru turned his head away. “*Months. Plural.*”

Keiji inhaled, trying for the life of him to keep calm and not let his own fin-depraved exhaustion make this conversation any worse. “*Months, Tooru?*” he asked, regaining something closer to his usual calm air.
Tooru let his legs fall back against the bed with, surprise, another pathetic whine. “It’s not like I haven’t tried.”

“You shouldn’t have to try anything. After going that long, I’m amazed your body hasn’t just reverted on its own accord.”

“But it hasn’t. It won’t. I don’t even know if I can shift back.” It was quiet, but Keiji definitely heard something crack in Tooru’s voice on those last words. “I can form claws and fangs. Sometimes I can get my ears to change.” The siren reached to lightly touch the moonstone dangling at the side of his face. “I can’t get my legs to merge, though. I can sometimes start the process, but I can never get through the whole thing. I just wind up splitting back to legs, and then they hurt too much to walk for a while after. Hurt more than they usually do, anyway…”

Keiji reached to gently pry Tooru’s hand from the earring. “I take it this thing isn’t helping, then.”

Tooru snorted a very forced laugh. “Can’t make things worse.”

“You…” Keiji let go, watching carefully at the way the siren struggled to keep his face from cracking with his voice. “You referred to the pain I’m feeling as the ocean ‘calling me in whispers.’ There are times when I feel like my legs are being stabbed at, and I’ve already fainted before, and that’s after less than a week.” He searched for some sort of reaction, but only got a slight twisting of Tooru’s lips to work with. “...If those are whispers, what is it for you?”

“Screaming.” That time, his response was instantaneous, but he paused after, lips pursing as he thought it over. “Blaring? Confused, distorted yelling, right in my ear.” He shrugged. “Whatever it is, my singing’s got nothing on it.”

“You’re an idiot for letting it get this far.”

“Mean.” The word lacked its usual overdramatic offense. It was almost eerily void of any emotion at all. “Promise me you won’t let it get this bad for yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise me, Keiji.”

Keiji swallowed, and gave a slow, but firm nod.

“I promise.”

Kuroo stood in front of the door to a certain room, staring at the knob as if it might burn him, should he reach out for it. No sound came from the other side. No bickering to imply that someone was awake, and no obnoxious snoring to imply otherwise. Shouyou and Tobio were likely still stuffing their faces at dinner.

Alright. Good. That was good. A quiet environment was probably best, for now.

So, why was he standing there, bowl of soup in hand, staring at the door like it might bite him?
He felt like he was a child again, waiting in front of his teacher’s office or his parents bedroom, preparing for an oncoming scolding.

But Kenma wouldn’t be scolding him. He’d give him the silent treatment, but that wasn’t something that Kuroo needed to be taking personally.

And, he kept telling himself that, until he finally found himself opening the door, albeit with a bit of fumbling with one arm still in a sling and all, and stepping into the deckhands’ cabin.

The place didn’t look much different from usual. Stray articles of clothing lying around here and there. Two swords that he’d seen Tobio training with on occasion, sheathed and abandoned in a stand against the wall for the time being. And, of course, a large, out-of-place barrel off to the side, with a plate of food that had only been slightly picked at still remaining from lunch on the table beside it.

Kuroo frowned at the sight of the food. The fact that it had been picked at all was a step in the right direction, but Kenma needed to be eating more than that, dammit.

He put the old plate aside on the floor and replaced it with the fresh, warm bowl of soup. He glanced at the barrel, and caught a glimpse of weary, golden eyes staring back at him beneath the surface before they turned away, and the view was replaced with the back of the merman’s head.

“Sorry if I woke you,” Kuroo said, quietly, but he knew that Kenma could still hear him, even beneath the water. He’d learned a few things about merfolk since taking Kenma in, and the fact that they had pretty impressive hearing was one of them.

He pulled up a chair beside the barrel, spinning the furniture around on a leg and seating himself backwards in it, as usual, good arm hanging lazily over the backside. He wasn’t facing the container, though. He watched the door, instead, deciding it best not to put more attention on Kenma than necessary.

“So,” he said, after some silence. “We’ve got a siren now, apparently.”

Just as good a one-sided conversation starter as any.

"I don't know if that's a good idea or not, but we've got a lot of crazy stuff on this ship already as it is. And I thought... maybe he could help you? Somehow? When you're up to it, I mean."

Kuroo bit his lip when the silence persisted.

"You don't have to talk back or anything. I know Shorty's tried to get you to, but I get it. Just... if my rambling is annoying, just tell me to stop, and I'll leave. I won't make a big fuss over it if you pop out of there long enough to tell me to buzz off."

Either he was being ignored, or the lack of response was a sign that it was safe to keep talking. He went with the latter.

"We can move you somewhere more quiet, if the bicker-duo is too much for you, too. If you don't say otherwise, we're just gonna assume you're content like this, though."

Which would be at least somewhat of a relief. If he desired any form of company, that would be at least a small good sign as far as Kuroo was concerned.

"And, uh, I'm going to see how well the crates we're getting from this trader tonight hold water. They're a lot bigger than that dumb barrel, and I think you deserve an upgrade. Especially if
you're gonna keep refusing to come out and stretch."

He tried not to make that last statement sound too bitter or guilting, but he worried it came across that way regardless.

"Not that I expect you to come out and socialize or anything. I'm just. Y'know. Worried. But I also want to give you time. And I'm rambling again. Shit. Sorry."

*Slow down, idiot. You're starting to sound like Koutarou.*

"You do have people to talk to, if you wanted, though. A lot of us have lost things. People. You're not... alone or anything."

He was quickly learning that he was really bad at this whole consoling thing. Hell, Kenma hadn't even *asked* to be consoled.

But he hadn't told him to leave yet, either, so. There was that.

"But I guess Shorty's already assured you of that. Probably a hundred times by now, knowing him. Seriously, feel free to stop me any time."

"Breathe, Kuroo."

Kuroo froze at the sound of Kenma's voice. In all of his babbling, he hadn't even heard the slight sloshing of water as the merman lifted his head.

The sailor didn't look at him. Didn't want to scare him back into hiding by making eye contact.

He suddenly felt incredibly guilty, because here was the person who just lost his entire family, his home, a mere, what? Three? Four days ago? Telling him to breathe. "Sorry..." He managed, straining to keep his eyes fixed on the door.

Not that Kenma was facing him, anyway. The merman had his hands gripping the edge of the barrel and his back turned completely to Kuroo.

Silence.

Kuroo didn't realize he was holding his breath, doing the opposite of Kenma's words, until the merman spoke again.

"I... didn't mean stop talking."

God, the lifelessness in his voice was downright *painful* to listen to. Kenma wasn't all that expressive to begin with, but this was noticeable. And it *sucked.*

"Right," Kuroo said after a way-too-big exhale. "So, uh. We've got a siren. Wow, I already said that. He's friends with Keiji, or something. Keiji’s the guy who can talk to... sea creatures? Or just serpents? Anyway, I don't know how well merfolk and sirens get along, or what the key differences between the two are, really. He kinda seems like an ass, to be honest. Noya and Ryuu can't stand him, but Noya thinks he's harmless outside of the whole. Uh. Asshole thing."

The fact that Kenma even gave an acknowledging "hm" noise, depressing as it sounded, eased Kuroo's nerves somewhat.

Just somewhat.
"You're not telling me it's a bad idea or to push him off the ship, so I'm gonna guess that maybe sirens aren't as scary as we thought they were."

Another small sound, that might have been closer to a confirmation than simple acknowledgment. Okay. Cool. He'd run that by Hajime and his paranoid ass later.

"Good! I don't know how long those two are gonna be with us, though. They don't really seem to have a set plan on where they're going. Kinda sketchy, to be honest, but I can't really talk."

He tapped a finger on the back of the chair. Kenma bobbed his head in acknowledgement, a gesture that Kuroo barely registered from the corner of his eye.

"We haven't left port yet, so now wouldn't be a good time, but... if you're up to it, when we're out at sea, we could get you out on deck. Shorty thought some fresh air would be good for you, but then... the whole fish-person thing. I dunno how much a difference fresh air makes? It's an option, though."

This time, he did glance at Kenma, though he kept his head forward. The merman still had his back to him.

"You wouldn't have to converse or do anything. It just might be better to have a view outside of that barrel and this room for once."

He looked back to the door, then, unsure of what to say next. Keeping up a one-sided conversation wasn't as easy as Koutarou made it look. He didn't want to say anything that could potentially upset Kenma further, either. So, what? Talk about the weather? Talk about the traders he'd met with earlier that day? Talk about--

"Thanks."

Kuroo froze again. When he looked to the side, he could see Kenma sinking back into the water slightly, only his head still above the surface.

"...Yeah. Just. Y'know."

"When I'm ready."

"When you're ready..." Kuroo swallowed. It'd only been a few days. He couldn't expect instant recovery when it came to this. He'd gone through his own grieving periods plenty of times. The fact that he got anything out of Kenma today was a miracle, considering his disposition. "When you're ready," he repeated, with a hint of finality that allowed Kenma to sink completely back into the water.

Saeko was spitting out words faster than Daichi could process. Where this sudden energy came from, he had no idea. Sometimes she got antsy when the ship wasn't in motion, or when there was nothing fun to do on the island they were stationed at. They were at the city, though, so it wasn't like she was low on options it she wanted a break.

Maybe she'd been spending too much time with any one of the several hyperactive boys on board. Maybe she was just really excited about their next delivery. Probably not.
"I'm going to have to ask you to run that by me again," Daichi said, staring down at the map in front of him.

"Ironfall!" Noya supplied from the other end of the temporary replacement desk, and Saeko nodded with an air of pride.

Daichi, somewhat deflated, rested his hands on the desk in front of the map. He was quite sure that Noya had other responsibilities to be tending to. He’d mentioned it quite a few times, but he was still there, as if he was some sort of authoritative figure on this vessel. He wasn't. Daichi could easily scare him off with a firm enough command, and yet, there he was. "We have shipments for both Ironfall and Morrigan's Coast. We're closer to the latter now, so it makes more sense to hit that first, doesn't it?"

"But it's not closer by much, and the Ironfall shipment is worth three times more!" Saeko threw her hands up. "And with the luck we've had lately, I'd rather get that job out of the way sooner than later. Better than waiting for some whale-monster to eat all our supplies first."

Noya nodded so fast Daichi worried his head might fall off. This obviously seemed like a very sound argument to him.

Daichi hated the fact that it was probably true.

"Both jobs are important, you know," he said.

"No offense, Captain," Saeko said as she nudged a wooden chip on the map toward East Ironfall, "but I think you only want to hit Mooresville first because of you-know-who."

Fucking hell.

"All I said was that it was the more logical route. Not to mention, we still have supplies for the Dockside that never got delivered. It'd clear out some room on the ship."

Noya opened his mouth to retort, a smug look on his face, but Daichi quickly cut him off.

"We'd probably cross paths with Asahi sooner that way, too."

Noya closed his mouth.

Saeko gasped and pulled him close to her chest. "Don't turn him against me!"

"Did I do that?" Daichi asked, looking mildly amused himself.

"I'm right, though! Get Kuroo in here, he'll agree with me." She released Noya and placed her hands on her hips. "You're not gonna make a decision without your first mate, anyway."

"I mean," Daichi started, tipping his head to the side, "I think I have that authority, here."

The woman puffed her cheeks with an angry sound, and Daichi's short-lived amusement slipped away.

"I know, I know. We would be risking a lot more by saving Ironfall for later." He pulled back from the table with a sigh. "I hate that 'what if we run into sea monsters and lose our cargo' has to be an actual deciding factor, here."

Noya laughed, loud and carefree. "At least we'll know where the siren is if anyone starts pulling a zombie act on us!"
That did not lift Daichi’s spirits. "Please don't make me regret giving the okay on that more than I already do."

Noya waved a hand. "I think he's pretty harmless. A jerk, but a harmless jerk. I think."

"You think," Daichi repeated.

Noya shrugged. "Maybe not harmless. I do think he's serious about the trying to help thing, though. I mean, I could whip up a truth potion if you’re really haven't second thoughts--"

"No more potions on my ship."

Noya smacked his hands down on the desk. "Why not?!"

"The last one nearly set the Corvus on fire, Nishinoya."

Saeko whistled at the full surname treatment.

"Nearly! Didn't actually!"

"Only because Asahi was there and knew how to stop it."

Noya have a proud nod at that. "He's a good familiar."

"He's also not here right now, so definitely no experimenting from you."

"Shit, Daichi, I can't get better at it if you won't let me do it on the ship!"

"Have you considered doing it not on the ship?"

"Don't make me choose between two loves."

Daichi pinched the bridge of his nose. "Route. We were trying to decide on a route. Can we please stay on track?"

"We already decided on Ironfall," Saeko said, matter-of-factly.

Daichi briefly wondered how many cigars he had left, ‘cause, boy, he was starting to think he’d need one soon. “Of course we did.”

---

Eita didn't mind his job most days. Or, nights, in this case.

Being a messenger wasn't all that bad. He could handle making deliveries, whether it was by word or physical goods. The exercise wasn't unwelcome, even when he was traveling between merfolk communities.

What he did mind, was this bullshit.

Said bullshit being, more specifically, the pair of scaly legs now dangling from his torso instead of his usual tail.

Of course it would be right after he told Yuuji there was no way he'd be going back on land,
that Gandril would essentially say, "Hey, you know what you should do? That."

Maybe boarding a pirate ship wasn't the same as going on land. Technicalities aside, he still had to use a damn pair of legs.

He looked down to the crystal shard hanging off his neck. Its glow pulsated, illuminating the water it floated in with a faint, purplish light.

He looked up, then, to the underside of the massive ship at the surface. He clutched a round shell in his hand and swam up. There was a chill as night air and sea breeze brushed over him, but someone who lived deep down in an ocean trench was accustomed to the cold just fine.

The ship was one of the largest he’d seen yet, with dark wood and the carving of a large, elegant, and yet ominous swan at its front. Lanterns hung from the railings all around, flickering in the night.

He moved alongside the vessel until he spotted a head from over the edge, and then tossed the shell toward it with as much force as he could manage.

The shell didn't hit the head, thank goodness, because he knew the person it belonged to wasn't exactly the calmest out of the Black Swan's crew. Instead, the shell sailed past the pirate, landing with a few clunks over the deck.

Said pirate whipped around. He looked out and then down into the water, blonde hair cut close to the skin with two black stripes running around in bands now in clear view from the merman's perspective.

Eita waved, awkwardly, and the other just scowled down at him with dark-ringed eyes until someone's hand came and pushed his head to the side.

Another man with mousy hair poked up from behind him to look down at Eita, then he waved the shell in the air with the hand that wasn't still grabbing at the blonde's face.

The less-scowly one released his crew mate's head and disappeared from sight, returning shortly after with a roll of rope, of which he tossed over the side of the ship.

Eita didn't much care for this part, either. When he needed to reach a high spot back home, all he had to do was swim to it. He didn't need some rope to scale the side of a wall.

Physics. What a bitch.

Once he reached the top, Not-Scowly helped him over the railing, then tossed the smooth shell back to the merman.

Eita caught it and offered a small nod. "Thanks, Shigeru."

"You didn't miss this time." Shigeru set his hands on his hips. "Good going, unless you were aiming for Kentarou's head.” He pointed a thumb at the one with the dark eyes, who practically snarled at Eita in response.

Eita threw his hands up and took a small step back. “Definitely not. I just thought someone would notice easier if it landed close by.”

Despite that assurance, Kentarou continued to watch Eita with an unsettling glare, but after as many visits as the merman had made to the Black Swan, he’d figured that was just his default
expression by now.

Eita’s hands were still up in the air when two things were thrown at him. First, a large cloth. Second, a pair of pants. Both hit him in the side of the face with enough unnecessary force that he actually stumbled a step.

When he tugged them off to get a look at his offender, he was met with red hair and a lazy gaze that didn’t quite go with the accompanying smirk. Satori had both hands behind his back as he strolled over to the group, attention set on Eita, who was already drying off his lower half with the cloth.

“Messenger Boy Extraordinaire, Eita Semi has returned!” Satori withdrew his hands and waved them in Eita’s direction. “In the bare-naked flesh!”

Eita paused in stepping into the pants just long enough to shoot a glare at the loudmouth.

“No? How about flesh and scales?”

The merman tugged the drawstring once his pants were pulled up and over his waist. "If that’s supposed to distract me from the way you're eying my legs, it's not working."

"It's not my fault you still smell like blood right after you lose the tail."

Eita tossed the cloth back at Satori, who caught it and quickly turned it over, as if searching for something.

"Where's Wakatoshi?" Eita asked, choosing to direct the question at Shigeru rather than the two non-humans near him. "We have news on our targets."

Shigeru had already returned to whatever the hell he’d been doing before Eita showed up. "Plural?" he asked as he hoisted a large bag from the deck over his shoulder. "Your runaway, and who else?"

"The siren."

Shigeru opened his mouth in a silent, understanding, "Ah."

"Better tell him about the runaway first, if you don't want him getting sidetracked." Satori had the cloth close to his face one moment, inhaling, and on top of his head the next.

Eita looked mildly unsettled by the display. "There's none of my blood in that, you know. It got washed away by the giant mass of water you're floating on before I even made it here."

"And how long did that take ya? Eventide ain't exactly a short dip away from where we are." Despite the sickened look Eita continued to give him, Satori rubbed the cloth against his scalp.

"A few hours, by dragon back. And, between shifting and the severe whiplash from that thrilling ride, I could stand to sit and rest for a bit."

"You could stand to sit," Satori snorted, looking all too amused when Eita pulled the cloth down and over the pirate's face.

"The captain's in his cabin, as far as I know." Shigeru glanced over his shoulder as the bag moved, and Kentarou smacked it with his palm so that whatever was inside stopped.

Eita decided a long time ago that he'd rather not question the shady shit that went on regarding
this particular ship. Whatever thing they were smuggling now was no different.

"I don't know if he's busy with anything important in there or not," Shigeru continued, as if the contents of the bag were nothing to be concerned with, "but you know the drill. He'll probably put aside whatever it is for the news you've brought."

"Can't be bad news," Satori said, pulling the cloth off his face and snickering at the merman. "Considering how calm Eita seems. You really rushed here for this?"

"Eita's always pretty calm, though?" Shigeru worded it as more of a question than a statement. He and Kentarou watched with confusion, and Satori gave another snort, this one loud and pig-like before it turned into a near fit of laughter.

"Calm! Yeah, always!" There was something mocking in his tone, and Eita elbowed him in the ribs for it. Satori responded with an 'oomph,' and a, "Point made."

"His cabin, you said?" Eita stepped away from Satori, in the direction he knew their captain's quarters could be found. He pointed a finger that way. "I'll leave you to... whatever you're doing, then." He cast one uneasy glance at the bag, which had already started moving against Shigeru's back again, before making his way across the deck.

With another pair of footsteps not far behind him.

He sighed, but didn't bother to look over his shoulder to see who it was. He knew.

"I know my way around, Satori. I don't need an escort."

"Oh no, I know." Satori threw up his hands, smirking something devious and, while Eita couldn't see it, it was plenty clear in his voice. "I'm just tagging along in case you need to be held back."

At this, Eita came to a halt and turned around. Satori stumbled as not to crash into him.

"You're going to hold me back?" the merman asked. "From what?"

The pirate hummed.

"Satori."

"It's just, you know, you get a bit. Huffy."

"Huffy?"

"Huffy."

Eita then, of course, huffed, and Satori failed to contain yet another snort.

Eita turned away and started down the steps to the lower deck. "The redcap is worried that I might lose it. Amazing."

"Half-redcap, but, hey, details." Satori linked his hands behind his back as he followed alongside Eita. "I'll have you know I'm an excellent judge in character, despite whatever crazy image you've got of me. And, you, Eita Semi are a puffer fish."

"I'm sorry?"
"You're all cute, calm and collected until the wrong person shows. Then you puff up." Satori puffed his own cheeks for emphasis.

"First off, don't ever call me ‘cute’ again. It's creepy coming from someone with a fetish for merfolk blood."

"It's more of a necessary craving. I kinda need bloodshed to live, but, okay. Fair enough. Not really, but fair enough." As they approached the door, Satori hopped in front of Eita to block it. "But, like I was saying, when you're in the room with certain people, you get sort of... snippy."

"Or huffy. Puffy. Okay. I got it. And this is around people like, who, you?" Eita rolled his eyes, pulling Satori off to the side before he knocked the back of his hand at the door.

"Not me." Satori took a step back, hands up in defense while his face twisted in an entertained grin.

Eita opened the door to a room of dark wood and faded gold accents that shimmered in the light of flickering candles and the bluish glow from crystals like those found in Eventide.

I'm the midst of the room, a chandelier made of these crystals hung and illuminated a large, circular table beneath. Upon closer inspection, the table dipped inward, hardly even an inch deep. It looked much like a plate in appearance, the outer edge flat with just enough surface area to act as a bar top of sorts before it reached the dip.

Upon this edge, sat a figure with short, pale brown hair, of which was surrounded by tufts of soft, white feathers and seemed to shine in the varying lights of the room. His legs were drawn up where he sat, and his fingers gripped the inner edge, the tips of his nails just dipping into the thin layer of water that filled the center of the table.

He glanced over his shoulder, copper eyes peering beneath bangs cut at a harsh angle at the visitors.

And then he turned away, like no one was there.

Eita clenched a fist with a muttering of, "You could have warned me," just loud enough for Satori to hear.

"I was getting to it, Puffy," Satori snickered, then stepped around to Eita's front. "Wakaaatoshio! Looks like you're popular with the visitors today!"

Wakatoshi Ushijima, captain of The Black Swan, leader of one of the most infamous pirate crews to ever sail the seas, was standing across from the feathered figure, turning a small piece of a goldish metal, covered in flecks of pale green, over in his hand. He'd yet to look up, but he acknowledged his company with a short nod.

"Welcome back, Eita."

"You knew it was me?"

"The flower hasn't stopped glowing. I knew its sister was nearby."

Eita looked off to the far side of the room. There was an old bathtub, lined with the same aged gold as the rest of the room. Next to that sat a stand bearing a glass case and a crystal in the vague shape of a water lily. It have off the same purplish glow as Eita's necklace, and went from dim to bright and back in the same, steady rhythm.
"Right." Eita removed the one around his neck and tucked it down in his pocket. "Then, do you have a moment? It's about Keiji."

Wakatoshi's response was a brief, "hm." He stepped around the feathered guest, the small, pyramid-shaped metal now pinched between his fingers. "Satori thinks he knows where he is."

Eita looked at Satori, who grinned.

"We've got a lead."

"A lead, or a guess?"

"Same thing."

Eita arched a brow. "Yuuji found him with company on Kingston, of all places. What's your lead?"

"He's probably on a ship called The Corvus."

"Probably," Eita repeated, sounding incredulous, though he knew that, odds were, Satori was probably right.

"Last we heard, their ship was headed south of Owl Roost. In other wooooords--"

"Kingston. That doesn't mean he's still with the same ship, though. He could have boarded another vessel after."

"The thieves you hired," Wakatoshi spoke up again, and dropped the metal into the water near the inner edge of the table. "We caught them fleeing Mooresville when we were set to rendezvous there."

"Bastards supposedly snuck your runaway in a wine cellar and ran off when the innkeep caught on." Satori grinned and pointed both hands down at the floor. "The innkeep, we've got locked up right below us. He's a real softy. I'm sure he helped sneak our target out."

"Assuming they had the right target to begin with." The feathered one at the table's edge finally spoke up, eyes fixated on the metal piece that now danced across the water's surface. "The Black Swan aside, you haven't exactly had the most helpful allies. I'm not sure that the bartender or that messy Catfish Calamity lot really knew what they were looking for."

Eita folded his arms. "My instructions were perfectly clear, thank you, Kenjirou."

"Puf--"

Satori received an elbow to the ribs before Eita moved to snatch up an empty chair.

Kenjirou Shirabu continued to watch the water, never casting so much as a glance Eita's way even as he addressed him. "Maybe it's a matter of hiring incapable hands, then."

Eita dragged the chair to the table, stationing it across from Kenjirou and Wakatoshi. "Anyone hired outside this crew was just emergency backup, anyway." He sat himself down and rested his arms and chin over the dry edge of the table.

"It's a bit much just to track down one merman, isn't it?" Kenjirou turned himself over, now perched up on his knees and facing the center of the table. He leaned over the shallow water, watching carefully as the metal spun on one corner across the surface, floating over images of
islands that created a map on the tabletop beneath.

Wakatoshi moved around the furniture, following the trail of the metal. "Keiji was close with Eventide's guardian. He knows more about what's at stake than anyone." He set his hands on the edge and leaned over when the piece's path ended over a set of four, close together islands. "Should he decide to act against us, he would be the biggest threat."

Kenjirou gave a thoughtful hum. "I thought that the queen would pose a significantly larger threat than a rogue merman."

"In regards of power, sure. Not knowledge. That's unless Keiji is going out of his way to recruit allies. Which, considering the side that he siren has taken, wouldn't surprise me." Eita stretched his legs out beneath the table, eliciting loud, but welcome cracks as he twisted his ankles around. He only paused in his attempts to relax when he realized that Wakatoshi, and even Kenjirou, were now staring at him. "Right. That's the other thing I came to tell you."

"The siren said he was playing neutral."

"The siren's full of bullshit, Wakatoshi." Eita gave his legs another satisfying round of cracks. "And who knows how this 'Corvus' Satori mentioned is involved. We need Keiji out of the picture before this all becomes too much of an obstacle."

"The siren's hardly an issue," Kenjirou said, turning and hopping off the table. There was a light tapping sound as his bare feet touched the floor, but Eita as Satori could both see how tense he'd gotten already. "You seadwellers aren't affected by their songs in the first place."

"No, but the rest of this crew is, and I'm not all that crazy about a crocotta or redcap being under the enemy's control." Eita pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Satori. "He's barely in control of himself to begin with."

"That's untrue."

"Satori is very stable these days," Wakatoshi said with a bob of the head, and Satori grinned at Eita.

Eita straightened in his seat and pulled a leg up to massage it, still not quite satisfied with the cracking. "I can't imagine where you're getting enough blood to make that the case."

"Half-redcap! Half! It's not like I need a corpse's worth a day!"

"Did the siren say why he was choosing a side?" Wakatoshi asked, putting them back on track, and not paying any mind to Eita now squirming in his seat as Satori rubbed his hair against his face.

"No-!" Eita shoved the other away, a hand to Satori's face again. Both of them made displeased noises as one of Eita’s fingers found its way up Satori’s nose. "He didn't!" He yanked his hand away and wiped it on Satori's sleeve, tongue hanging out in disgust. He looked back to the captain while Satori covered his nose with a whine. "But I have a feeling that sending you guys to recruit him wasn't the best idea."

Wakatoshi frowned. "I don't recall doing anything to him."

"He could just not like you because you're, I don't know, pirates? And you all in particular sort of have a reputation going for you."
"My crew is exceptional," Wakatoshi declared. "If he wasn't going to stay neutral, he would have been wiser to come to us."

"But we don't need him." Kenjirou said, and Eita had to fight with everything not to make a 'ruffled feathers' comment. "As you said, your crew is exceptional enough with the help it already has. Not to mention, we have all the merfolk of Eventide backing us up."

Eita looked up from the foot he was currently kneading. "You guys are the ones backing us up, but, whatever."

"Well. We're really just trying to keep our beloved captain from dying. No offense to the rest of your fish friends." Satori propped an elbow over Eita's shoulder. "And I guess I'd be a little down if my favorite puffer fish croaked on me."

"Am I supposed to say 'thanks' to that?"

"You can."

Eita swatted a hand at Satori instead.

The pirate laughed and moved to set his hands over the dry edge of the table. "So. Kingston. But they probably left by now, right? We need to find out where we can beat 'em to next."

Wakatoshi turned to Kenjirou. He didn't need to say a word for the other to give an understanding nod.

"I'll have to wait for daybreak to fly, but I'll find you a stronger lead."

"Or we could have Eita swim there. He doesn't have to wait for the sun to transform." Satori grinned.

Eita looked up at him, making eye contact with a glare as his ankle made yet another pop. "Fuck you."

"Shifting would be less painful if you did it more often, Eita." Wakatoshi watched as the other merman switched to massaging the next leg.

"Land exhaustion is too much as it is. I'm not going to make it a daily thing, unlike some people."

"The exhaustion only occurs if you stay in your human state for too long. If you changed regularly, you wouldn't experience that." Wakatoshi looked back down to the table, where the metal was still spinning in place. "Escaping the pain that comes with retaining that form is impossible, but the discomfort of the act of shifting itself goes away with practice."

The use of the word 'discomfort' had Eita watching the captain with disbelief, as if he man were comparing to splitting a tail into legs with sleeping on a slightly lumpy mattress. "Practice, or an insane pain tolerance. Either way, I'm not crazy about doing this more than I have to. I'm also not capable of shifting twice in a row, and I'm not going anywhere near Kingston, so you'll have to wait until morning for your swan to do the scouting, unfortunately."

"A description of the ship would be useful," Kenjirou said, brushing hands along his arms to smooth out the white feathers trailing them. He glanced up at Satori, who shrugged.

"Shit, I don't know. Probably says 'The Corvus' on the side of it? I ain't actually seen the
thing, you know. Just heard of it.” He ran a finger across his nose. "But the captain has a big scar going across his face, I can tell ya that much.”

Eita snorted. “You want him to find a ship based on one person.”

“Searching by name will have to do,” Kenjirou said, casting a glance out the cloudy glass of the windows. “I’ll try to get an idea of where they’re headed for you, but I’d say set course toward Kingston in the meantime.”

Eita muttered something under his breath, a “No shit,” that only Satori heard.

“And while I’m at that, shouldn’t you people be doing something about the actual objective?” Kenjirou cast a sidelong glance at Eita as he stepped over to the window. “I don’t see what good chasing down your obstacles does if you aren’t even making for the actual goal that they’re blocking.”

Eita didn’t even bother trying to hold back a groan this time. Instead of arguing, he simply pointed a finger at Wakatoshi. The damn swan would listen to him better, and, hell, Eita just wanted to lay down in a bath or something.

“We’re working on that,” Wakatoshi said easily. “One of mine is in Kingston as we speak.”

“One of yours…?” Kenjirou asked. Not doubtful, but genuinely curious.

Eita was a little pissed at the difference in how he responded to the captain versus himself.

Wakatoshi nodded, then plucked the metal back from the water. “He’s managed to gain the trust of the queen’s family. Knighted.”

Kenjirou’s face scrunched up slightly in the foggy reflection. “One of your pirates got themselves knighted.”

Satori’s loud laugh filled the room. “The guy’s a con artist! He’s good. You didn’t notice that we’ve been short a guy for a while here?”

Kenjirou thought on it for a moment, then turned around. “The snake…?”

“The snake,” Wakatoshi confirmed. “If anyone can find what we need from that place, it would be him. I assure you, I have everything under control, Kenjirou.”

“I don’t doubt you, sir.”

“You just doubt any fishfolk that aren’t him,” Eita continued to mumble. He leaned back in his seat and kicked his feet up on the dry part of the table. He brought his voice back to a level intended for the others to hear when he spoke next, “And you can stop fiddling with the orichalcum, Wakatoshi. You’ve got eyes in Kingston, and we’ve got others on Ironfall.”

“This,” Wakatoshi said, pointing piece of metal, the orichalcum, to the table, “Points to places where danger is brewing. Places to avoid. If you have anyone of Eventide on Ironfall, you should make a point to get them out.”

Eita’s head tipped back until it was hanging over the edge of the chair. Satori whistled, which Eita took for an unspoken, “So much for not shifting any time soon.”

“Should’ve known I’d leave here with more problems than I came with.”
"He should have come to the Black Swan."
Morisuke had always been, and continued to be, mystified by Lev's never-ending sense of adventure and... "eagerness," was probably the nicest way to put it.

Morisuke wasn't about to accept any of Kenji's terms and conditions without a group consensus first, but Lev wasted no time in hopping aboard the offer once he was finally conscious. Nevermind the fact that these merfolk were responsible for a number of unwanted grindylow bites and cuts on every member of the former Catfish Calamity's crew.

Because, adventure awaited, so who cared?

Morisuke cared. Kanji didn't seem to, and both Takahiro and Issei were open to the whole deal because, one, Kenji was offering them almost double what Eita had for the first job (that they failed to complete), and two, Kenji mentioned something about some kind of healing plant that could potentially make everyone's lives a little less hellish. Partially because they'd all be bleeding a little less, and partially because Takahiro was going well out of his way to milk the whole, "by the way, I still have an untreated gunshot wound in my side," thing. (Issei kept pointing out that it had been treated, even if it was half-assed, and probably not safe as far anything long-term was concerned.)

And, well, yeah. The idea of a magical healing plant sounded good to Morisuke, too, but so did finding fresh water.

And that had gone so well.

They were back at the campsite now, Akira with his legs back, their scales once again concealed by a pair of worn pants. He was reapplying what makeup had come off from a spot just under his left ear in the lake, while the others sat around an unlit fire pit.

"So, this... compass? Hourglass? What exactly are you asking us to find, again?" Issei asked, tugging a bandage tight around a large bite mark on Takahiro's upper arm.

"Both," Kenji said, head rested in his palm with a look that said he was dead tired of trying to explain this already. "It's an hourglass that works like a compass. Or... a compass that looks like an hourglass."

Morisuke frowned. "Neither of those make sense."

Kanji was staring very intently at the scorched logs in the center of their little circle when he said, "A comp-glass."
To which Takahiro retorted, and not without a smirk, "An hour-ass."

Kenji’s hand slid from the side of his head to cover his face. Maybe he should've left this mess back in that cave, after all.

Morisuke tried to ignore it. Maybe because a small part of him actually found it funny, or maybe he was just over exhausted. "And you can't find this thing yourself because...?"

"Because our kind don't do well staying on land for extended periods of time. Some less than others. Me less than Akira. So, unfortunately, we need as much third-party help as we can get."

Issei scoffed. "Even if that third party help is pirates. How do we know you won't just leave us for dead once we find this hour-ass thing?"

"We're not calling it that," Kenji said, but all of the crew aside from Morisuke seemed to be highly amused by the idea, and that was only because Morisuke was making an effort to hide his amusement. "And how do we know a bunch of pirates won't try to pull a fast one on us?" Kenji folded his arms and gave his attention to Lev in particular, who seemed the most excited, and currently the most distracted from the conversation. Apparently the whole thing was only worth listening to when the rewards and adventure bits were involved. "And this thing we're asking for? It'd be completely useless to you guys, so don't even think about trying to keep it for yourselves."

"The gold we're promising in exchange would do you better," Akira said, now out of the tent and seating himself on a stump beside Kenji.

"So, what's the hour-ass point to?" Takahiro asked with a mocking tone that might as well have been begging Kenji to throw something at one of his several injuries. Or his face.

"Classified."

"That means it's really important!" Apparently, Lev had been listening, and now he was grinning with all the light the sun at Kenji. "Which means it's probably in a really important place! Full of booby traps and more treasure and--"

"Uncertain death?"

"Morisuke, we always face that. Surviving just gives us more to brag about!" Lev eagerly clenched his fists and turned to look at Kenji across from him. "So, where are we looking? Another labyrinth cave? Manticore-infested woods?"

Kanji raised a hand, and very loudly added, "The lava pits?"

"Lava pits?!" Lev sounded less horrified, and more awe-struck. "Are there really lava pits here? I've never seen one in person!"

Kenji slowly turned to Morisuke. "Did they hit their heads in that cave, or--"

"No, no. This is normal."

"And this guy is your captain? Not you?" the merman asked, a finger pointed at Lev as he kept eye contact with Morisuke, who just shrugged.

"The answer is yes, though," Akira piped up. "In regards to the lava pits. Yes, this island has them, and yes, that's probably where what we're looking for is going to be."
Kenji turned to him with furrowed brows, disbelieving and tinted with concern.

Akira's shoulders rose and fell in a lazy manner. "Assuming my research isn't completely mislead. That's where all the signs have pointed so far." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, to the tent. "Scrolls, stone carvings, rumors I picked up from those grindylows. A lot of stuff that sounds like folklore, but it's the only lead we've got."

Takahiro snorted. "I can't believe two mermen are sitting in front of us, talking about shit sounding like 'folklore.'"

"But it really is in a fire pit?" Lev asked, grin looking like it might crack his face in two of it grew any further. "We get to go in a volcano!"

"It's not in one," Akira said, then added, "I hope. I don't think the thing can even withstand that kind of temperature. We sure as hell can't."

Lev deflated at this letdown of news, but lit up again when Akira continued.

"There's a village settled around them, and I think the compass may still be in its possession. Hopefully it's not a long shot."

"A volcano village? With volcano people?"

Morisuke settled a blank gaze upon his captain. "Lev, what the hell is a 'volcano person'?"

Lev thought on that for a moment. "Someone that can live in lava...?"

Kanji jumped to his feet. "We're gonna fight some lava people!"

"Yeah!"

"We're gonna steal their treasure!"

"YEAH!"

Lev and Kanji exchanged a high five that honestly sounded a little painful in how loud it was.

Morisuke tipped his head toward the two when he looked at Kenji. "Should we be concerned about that?"

"I'm concerned about all of you if you've been a crew this long and only just now thought to ask that."

"Not them! I mean, yes, they are a concern, but I meant the prospect of 'lava people'."

A thoughtful sound came from the back of Kenji's throat, and he looked to Akira for confirmation.

"I haven't seen the village up close. Wasn't crazy about risking my tail getting near it. I think there's a chance they could be some kind of ogre or cherufes, though." When that didn't seem to register completely with Morisuke, Akira sighed and marched back on into his tent. When he returned, it was with an armful of scrolls and journals. He plopped them down on the grassy part of the ground.

"Cherufes are like, rock people, right?" Kenji asked, then raised his hands defensively when Akira sent a blank stare his way. "Don't give me that. You're the one up here collecting research. I
only know water-related shit."

"Rock people with abilities over fire." Akira unrolled a scroll with some old paintings of such a creature on it, and suddenly he was surrounded far too closely by curious pirates. "So, I don't think it'd be wise to send any of you barging in there looking for a fight, if that's the case. Unless you have something to combat fire."

When he looked up, the whole group was staring down at the painting with the most unhelpful faces.

He sighed. "Of course not. We'll need a less violent approach, considering you're all human, as far as I can tell."

Kanji puffed out his chest. "We just fought a ship and a sea serpent!"

"We just lost our ship to a sea serpent," Morisuke corrected.

Akira coughed into his hand, demanding attention that he didn't really want in the first place, but needed in order to get this shitty situation over and done with. "The point is," he said, releasing one end of the scroll so that it rolled shut with a slap, "Either we get someone to bargain with them, civilly, or we find a way to actually stand up to them without getting turned to ashes."

"The civil thing sounds boring," Issei mused. "I’m all for the other thing. Got any ideas on how to do that, Scholarly Type?"

Akira only assumed that was supposed to be him. "I do, but I’m not keen on it."

"The civil route would be better, but we’d have you guys as backup, because… well, we can fight, but we’re better under less dry circumstances." Kenji snatched the scroll from Akira’s hold and spun it in his hand. “And the lava pits are definitely not going to make the air conditions any more favorable for us. So, I won’t be sticking around for that.” He caught the scroll mid-spin and jabbed Akira’s shoulder with the end. "But you’ve been doing just fine out here, right?"

Akira hated the way that he asked that, because it was so obvious that he wasn’t doing fine, and it was also so obvious that Kenji had every intention of dumping the task of “Moronic Pirate Baby-Sitting Services” onto him and running back to the semi-safety of the ocean.

But all he gave in response was a dry, “No.”

Kenji bopped Akira’s arm with the scroll again. “Okay, well, I can’t stay. Gandril just wanted me to check in on you, and now that Keiji’s gone, he keeps tossing more and more of the village responsibilities onto me.” He tacked something onto the end of that, a muttered, “For some fucking reason, as he looked off to the side at nothing in particular. “Unless you wanna take my place.”

“How about I just go home?"

Another poke. “I’m not leaving these pirates up here to do our job without supervision.”

“So send another babysitter.”

“Can’t you just be happy you’ll have some extra hands around? Less work for you, geez.”

Akira went tight-lipped at that, but Morisuke could tell that he and himself were thinking something along the same lines. Babysitting was not “less work” by any means. He should have been ashamed for even knowing that’s what the merman was thinking, but he’d watched this
crew’s back for long enough. He could kind of relate. Even if he found it a little more rewarding than Akira would.

“So, that settles it!” Kenji dropped the scroll, which Akira caught with a bit of fumbling. “Yuuji might have a way to keep us in contact with you, so someone will come update you on that once it’s all figured out. Meanwhile…” He turned to the small band of pirates before offering a mock-apologetic look to Akira. “...Good luck.”

Tooru was quickly finding that the Corvus wasn't that bad of a last resort after all. Save for one annoying gunner.

Hajime's continued glares aside, most of the crew was entertaining enough. Saeko was fun to talk to (and flirt with). The chef, while Tooru couldn't get him to converse much, had skills that Tooru considered far too superior to be wasted on a merchant vessel, but at least he'd managed to pick up a few pointers from him because of it. The doctor was pleasant. Watching the other sailors bicker and run about with their duties was a show in itself. He kept trying to make bets with Keiji as far as which of the deckhands would fall on their face first when they got too rowdy with their chores. Keiji didn’t participate in said wagers, but Tooru always wound up guessing right, anyway.

Of course, he still received plenty of glares here and there, and not just from Hajime. The one with the shaved head kept giving him creepy, disapproving looks. The mohawk guy wasn't much better. Noya had attempted to have a pleasant conversation with him, but it lasted all of three minutes before he was fed up and giving him leers along with his friends.

Keiji would, every so often, say something regarding Tooru’s ‘disagreeable personality,’ a term that was apparently Tooru’s new, unofficial slogan.

A slogan which left him very limited on who he could actually converse with comfortably on this vessel.

Come dinner time, the ship was already a ways from Kingston. Tooru sat close with Keiji, practically glued to the other’s hip at the table. This meant sandwiching Keiji between himself and Koutarou, not because he or Keiji chose to do so, but because Koutarou caught them in the hall and made himself a part of their conversation on the way to the kitchen. He sat down at the table first, and Keiji followed suit, as if he had much of a choice. Tooru did, too, but immediately regretted doing so when he realized they’d be sitting across from guess who.

The table space in front of Hajime was covered in books and papers, some that were clearly years old and had seen better days. He was scribbling something in a journal of some sort, one hand pushed through his hair as he leaned on his elbow. The small bowl of chilli next to him was still two-thirds full, but he seemed to have been there for a while already.

Hajime looked up from his scribbling, met Tooru’s gaze, furrowed his brows, tugged a few papers closer to himself, and went back to the pages in front of him. Tooru contemplated grabbing a bowl and heading back to his room to eat alone.

But he didn't. He stayed put, and made a point to only speak to Koutarou and Keiji throughout most of the meal.

Most of it.
Koutarou was easily sidetracked, and in the midst of Tooru explaining how siren songs worked *again*, the sailor snatched up one of Hajime's papers to skim over.

The paper he'd grabbed was very wordy. Very boring. It had some interesting illustrations of sea serpents along the bottom, though.

Inaccurate illustrations, Tooru was quick to point out.

"Serpents don't have legs, that's obviously a dragon," he said, "Or, it would be, if it didn't have these wings on the side of its head." He was leaning over Keiji, pointing out spots on the drawings while Koutarou made little sounds of awe. "Someone made this up. Half of the facts on this sheet are made up. I hope this isn't being used for *actual* research," Tooru said with a sidelong look at Hajime.

Hajime snatched the paper from them. "I'm just comparing text with experience. 'Wasn't asking for your opinion."

"Maybe you shouldn't be using human-written material for comparison, then." Tooru brought a spoonful of chilli to his mouth, and his face lit up. He'd definitely be pestering the chef for this recipe, too.

"Right. I'll just go to the bookstore and ask for something written by an actual sea serpent. That'll go over real well."

"Serpents can't write," Tooru scoffed, and Hajime gave him another sour look.

Koutarou laughed a single, loud laugh, accompanied by a small amount of chilli flying out from his mouth. Keiji scooted away. Or, tried to, but Tooru was sitting too close for him to get very far.

Hajime turned his gaze back to his own notes. "If sirens and familiars can have human forms, I wouldn't be surprised if a serpent could, too."

"Well, they can't. There's another bit of research done for you. You're welcome."

They could actually see Hajime's grip on the pen tighten.

"The point is," he said, "It's not easy to learn about magic and shit when no one around you has reputable resources. Most people don't believe in the existence of things like you."

"*Things?*" Tooru coughed, then snatched up another pile of papers, despite Hajime's objections. "So ask someone who isn't human for help. You've got that small fry witch here, and..." He glanced at Koutarou, who didn't seem to take notice of his attention. "...a few seafolk. I guess the Petal Reef kid isn't of much help right now, though."

Hajime held up a finger. "One, Noya isn't a witch. And he can barely be trusted with potions even when his familiar *is* around. I'm not trusting him for fact checks." A second finger. "Two, Kenma just lost his entire home a matter of days ago, so I'm not gonna go pestering him for advice any time soon."

"Oh, so you *can* be sensitive to seafolk?"

"He's not a siren. I don't have a grudge against him."

"Like you could tell the difference between a merman and a siren."
Hajime's lips twisted downward, and he flipped back a couple pages in his journal until he reached an older entry. It was dated by a few months, and covered in scribbles of notes and crude drawings. "He doesn't look like any shifted one I’ve seen," he said, and held up the page to Tooru. He tapped at one drawing on particular, a poorly drawn face with fangs and cartoony, angry eyes.

“What is *that* supposed to be?”

Hajime’s lip twitched in a different way this time. A smirk. “That’s you.”

Tooru gasped, then tugged the journal away from Hajime. “That’s supposed to be *me*?! This is hideous!”

“For the record,” Hajime said, reaching to take his writings back, but Tooru yanked it to the side and out of his reach, “This was months ago, and I didn’t exactly have front row seats when you were trying to *hypnotize our ship*. Now give that back.”

“Why are there *hands* coming out of my head?!”

“They’re your fins! Or whatever those things you had on your head were!”

“You mean my *ears*?” Tooru snapped. “You have absolutely no skill when it comes to drawing,” he said, scowling at the doodle that was apparently a portrait of him. He held the book high over his head, tilting back as he flipped through a few pages. “Amazing. They all look equally like a four-year-old drew them.”

"I always thought they were cute," Koutarou said, and he received a rather unpleasant look from Hajime in return.

"I'd like to see you do better."

"Oh! Let me try!"

Koutarou reached for a paper, but Hajime defensively slid everything but the journal in Tooru's hands back toward himself.

The siren flipped back to the page with his less-than-flattering portrait. He cringed at the picture again, then began skimming the notes surrounding it.

Those weren't any more flattering.

"So, you've been keeping a log of different species you've run into so far," Keiji said, only glancing at the pages every so often as Tooru analyzed them. "That's probably smart. Tooru's right about the rest of your source material, though. They're mostly fairy tales and misconceptions."

"And gross stereotypes," Tooru added. "Your handwriting is almost as bad as your drawing. And your notes as just as rude as... well, you."

"If it's so hard for you to read, then *give it back.*"

"How many times do you need to use the word 'bastard' on one page, anyway?"

"Sorry, I'll make sure to switch things up more next time, Shithead."

"You've already used that one, too."

"You're actually *asking* him to come up with more insults," Keiji said. He scraped his spoon
against the edge of the bowl, desperately trying to collect every last drop of food. Koutarou watched, impressed at how quickly he ate it all in the first place.

"I'm sure I can handle the responsibility," Hajime said, this time actually managing to take the book back from Tooru and slam it shut. "Fish Breath."

"Brute."

"Asshole."

Koutarou looked from one to the other as the two continued to exchange insults, then nudged Keiji with his elbow.

"Hey," he said, almost, but not quite a whisper. "Wanna get seconds?"

Unlike Keiji, Koutarou still had a little food left in his bowl. A little. Keiji didn't question it, however, because he was willing to take any excuse to ignore Tooru and Hajime's bickering for a few minutes. Also because he was still really hungry.

The others were so heavily engaged in their insult war that they didn't even notice when Keiji and Koutarou left them alone at the table.

"Idiot."

"Atistically-challenged."

"Bastard."

Tooru laughed, high and mocking. "Back to square one, are we?"

Hajime glowered at him, then collected the mess of papers and books into one, manageable stack. Tooru smirked, looking very much like he'd just won something, but Hajime didn't waste his breath telling him to wipe the smile off his face. He got to his feet and gathered the pile into his arms, then started for the double doors that led to the hallway.

"That's right, go back to your poorly-informed readings. Come see me and Jiji when you want some actual facts."

Back already turned to Tooru, Hajime paused mid-step. It was a short-lived pause, and then he was quickly making his way out from the kitchen after that, mumbling another yet another recycled insult that was no doubt meant for the siren.

"You have such a terrible demeanor," was the first thing he heard when Keiji sat back down beside him, a refilled bowl of chilli.

"You're always so blunt, Jiji."

Keiji shrugged, then jumped when Koutarou put his own bowl next to him with a needlessly forceful slam.

"He'll warm up to ya, I'm sure!" Koutarou flashed a grin at Tooru, who turned his nose up defiantly.

"I don't need that brute's approval."

Keiji sucked his spoon clean, already having dug in again, and looked at Koutarou. He
pointed the utensil at Tooru. "That's why neither of them are going to warm up to each other. A fighter with a grudge and a stuck-up know-it-all aren't a good combination."

"You hurt me, Jiji," Tooru said, dramatically throwing his head back with a hand to his chest.

"No, you do that all on your own," Keiji muttered. Tooru jabbed him with his elbow. Hard.

Koutarou frowned, mouth full and sauce dripping down his chin. When he swallowed, he leaned over the table for a better look at Tooru. "Do sirens get all the aches and nightmares and stuff when they're on land for too long, too?"

Keiji turned to Tooru as well, and when the siren didn't answer, asked, "Are you going to tell him, or should I?"

"We... do," Tooru admitted, eyes fixed on his half-empty bowl. "We're not that different from merfolk."

"You're just merfolk with pointy teeth that can sing, right?"

Tooru scoffed. "We're more different than that."

"How?"

"We're superior, for one th-- Ow, Jiji!"

Keiji said nothing, even after returning Tooru's earlier elbow to the ribs. He continued eating in silence, impressively already almost through his second helping.

Tooru rubbed at his side. "Our senses are more heightened. We can see better in deeper waters, for example." He looked proud, despite clearly being in mild pain thanks to the 'inferior' fish-man next to him.

"Most can see better. You can't read signs from across the street, though."

"I can if the words are big enough!" Tooru spat. "And I can still make out shapes better in darker conditions than you. So sue me if small words are a little blurry from far away."

"Their true forms are less 'human,' too," Keiji added. "If Tooru were fully shifted, he'd have big fishy eyes and scales all over his face. Hajime’s drawing wasn’t far off."

"You make it sound gross. Don't listen to him, Koukou."

"Koukou?" Keiji repeated.

"Like cocoa. I thought it was cute." Tooru grinned from Keiji to Koutarou, the latter of whom gave a small pout.

"Could you at least come up with one that's a little manlier?"

"If I have to deal with 'Jiji,' then you can deal with that."

Tooru hummed and have his head a small tilt. "I'll try to think of a better one."

"When do I get a better one?"

Keiji was ignored, as Tooru went back to the prior subject. "In any case, no, we're not just
'singing merfolk.' We're our own species. We just get lumped in with their kind because of the similarities." Tooru stirred at his food. It had already lost a great deal of warmth. Pity. "But even our own kind use it as sort of a collective term sometimes. Merfolk, seafolk, fishfolk. Oh, but there are nymphs and things that can be lumped in with those last two."

Koutarou made an amazed, "Oooh," sound at all of this information. "Hajime shouldn't have left. He could use that in his notes."

Keiji stifled what could have been a laugh when he saw Tooru’s nose scrunch up. He found it amazing, really, how well the siren could cover being in constant pain from not shifting, but he couldn’t stop himself from making disgusted faces at every mention of Hajime.

“What else is considered fishfolk? What kind of water-people are there besides nymphs and merpeople?”

“When did dinner time become class time?” A fourth voice chimed in from behind, and the three turned to see Kuroo standing there, a bowl of his own in hand and a too-amused smirk on his face.

“Kenma duty?” Koutarou asked, eyeing the bowl.

Kuroo’s smirk gave way to a more confused look, until he followed Koutarou’s gaze. “Oh. No. Shorty’s already on that. This is mine.”

"Oh, well, you should join class time. It's fun!"

Kuroo raised a brow, because when the hell had Koutarou ever called learning fun?

"It's public-lecture time, and I'm answering any and all questions!” Tooru announced, leaning back from the table with a closed-eyed smile that was clearly anticipating attention.

"So, what are you traveling for, exactly?”

"Next question!"

Kuroo expected that much, so the next one came without missing a beat. "Do sirens have dicks?"

Tooru whipped his head around with a pouty glare, and it just made Kuroo's grin stretch wider.

Keiji mumbled something like, "I don't know what you were expecting."

"No, no, really," Kuroo insisted, stepping around the end of the table to place his bowl down across from them. "Kenma-- well, he's not a siren, but there's no indication of any sort of..." He waved a hand, trying to formulate a decent sentence, but gave up. "...fin-dick. Or fin-gina or whatever kind of whatever down there. I only have a vague idea of how fish genitals work, but if there's nothing there on the fin, then what about when you have legs...?"

Tooru continued to look appalled, while Keiji just seemed mildly unimpressed with the subject. Koutarou was laughing. Loudly.

"Didn't you already try to ask Kenma that?" he said between loud bursts of laughter.

"Tora did, and Kenma just glared at him for it. Have you ever seen Kenma glare? It's
unsettling as shit." Kuroo lifted his good arm in a defensive gesture. "I wasn't gonna go there."

"But you'll ask the siren that half the crew is paranoid over about it?" Koutarou was grinning with flecks of food stuck in his teeth.

"Meh, not half the crew. Maybe like..." Kuroo looked down and literally began counting on his fingers. "Three people? Four? Possibly five, but I can't tell if Daichi's actually warmed up or not yet. But he let the guy on board, so, I don't think he counts as much."

"Hajime counts for like, three people," Koutarou said, shoving another spoonful in his mouth.

"At minimum, yeah."

"I am right here," Tooru said, waving a hand at the two. Both looked at him in acknowledgement, but didn't offer much more than that. "And for the record, I don't think the black-haired deckhand brat counts. I've seen him. I'm convinced that grouchy look is just his default expression."

"Tobio?" Koutarou cocked his head. "Well, yeah, pretty much. But he's like, a different kind of grouchy when you're around."

"Anyway," Kuroo said, drawing circles in the air with his spoon, "the point is, Kenma's intense stares are ten times more threatening than any siren song."

"You say this like you've personally witnessed some kind of horror story with Kenma," Keiji pointed out.

Koutarou's mouth was still full when he asked, "Yeahf, Kuroo. What'f you doof to 'im?"

"Cheated at cards. And maybe chess," he admitted easily, "You think the guy's distracted, but he doesn't miss a damn thing."

Another impressed noise from Koutarou. "Are all merpeople super smart?"

If Kuroo wasn't sitting right there, Keiji would have mentioned that he knew plenty of ones who weren't back in Eventide.

Tooru seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he sent Keiji the most amused look.

Kuroo had another reason for arguing the question. "If they were, then maybe someone could've explained dick-fins to me by now."

"Is your friend going to need 'dick-fins' information for his journal, too?" Tooru raised a brow.

"Who? Hajime?" Kuroo raised his good shoulder in a half-shrug. "I'll add it in there if I get an explanation. I'm always writing in that thing when he's not looking, anyway."

Koutarou leaned over the table, closer to Kuroo. "Wait seriously?" He tried to hold back another laugh, but it still slipped past his lips in an ugly 'pffft' noise. "And he hasn't shot you for it yet?"

"To be fair, half of it is actually useful. There's a whole page on nagas in there that he wouldn't have if it weren't for me."

"You've seen one before?" Keiji asked, bowl empty again and pushed aside. He was leaning on one elbow, raising a curious brow at Kuroo.
"Don't wanna talk about it."

"Oooooh," Tooru nearly sang, and thank goodness there was no one around to shoot him a dirty look for it this time. He leaned forward as well, lacing his fingers together as he eyed the messy-haired sailor in front of them. "But that just makes me more curious. Have you spent more time with the magical than the rest of your crew...? Sorry, I don't recall your name."

"Tetsu. Everyone here just calls me by my surname, though, so, Kuroo's fine."

Koutarou snorted. "It was just 'Tetsu' for short for a while, 'til Ryuu said it sounded dumb."

"Ryuu's dumb."

"I'd rather be called Tetsu than Koukou, if that makes you feel better...?"

"Who the hell is calling you that? Also, I don't have a problem with either of my names. You guys are the assholes."

"You'll have a problem with it once Tooru butchers it," Keiji said, casting a glance at the siren, who was already grinning a grin that read, 'I absolutely will.' Keiji knew that Tooru took pride in a lot of things, but he wondered just how much he took in ruining every decent name he came across.

"I don't think it could be much worse than 'Hajimean,' to be honest." Kuroo sucked another spoonful clean. "But should I add the uncreative nickname habit to his siren entries?"

"You can rip up his siren entries. I saw those pages. They're awful."

"Oho?" Kuroo's grin was lopsided. "Not as flattering as you hoped? His masterpiece artwork didn't do you justice?"

"I can get over the atrocious drawings, but not the stuff he wrote about me."

"I'm sure that it would be just as bad if you wrote a journal on sailors," Keiji said, dully.

Tooru turned his nose upward. "Anyway," he said, closing one eye while keeping the other trained on Kuroo. "You ignored my question, Tetsu."

Kuroo pursed his lips, trying to recall what the topic even was before all of this nickname nonsense. "The magic thing? Sort of? I used to know a guy who was a lot more involved with it than me."

"He and Kuroo used to make and sell fake magic shit on the streets!"

Kuroo shot Koutarou an unimpressed look. "Thanks, Koukou. Glad you have no problems displaying my personal criminal history to the public."

Koutarou set his hands on the table and tossed his head back with another laugh. "Everyone on the ship already knows!"

"Wait, wait." Tooru waved a hand that demanded attention. "You're telling me that the whole crew knows their first mate is an ex-con man, but somehow I'm still suspicious."

"Hey, I never tried to control a ship with my singing."

"I was trying to help!"
“Do you even know how to steer a ship?” Kuroo asked, then snorted when Tooru made a face reminiscent of someone who’d just bit into a lemon. “But, hey, if that was really the intent? Super appreciate it. Y’know what I’d appreciate even more? Getting as much info as we can outta you two so we can keep this ship safe.”

“Ooooh, starting to sound like Daichi, there,” Koutarou snickered.

“You mean like a responsible adult? I’m capable.” Kuroo pushed his bowl off to the side and leaned his good arm over the table. “But I don’t know how long you guys plan on sticking around, so I’d love to milk as much outta you as possible while you’re here. Not to mention…” He pointed a thumb at the kitchen’s exit. “...if anything’s going to get Hajime to warm up to you, it’s gonna be bonding over that journal of his. I’m sure you’ve figured out on your own that he’s obsessed with protecting this floating circus of ours.”

"Who says I want him to warm up to me?"

Keiji set a cold gaze on Tooru. "I wouldn't mind having one less pair of suspicious eyes on us while we're here, to be honest."

"Then move your 'class time' session somewhere where he's present. Sooner than later, because hell knows when the next disaster could strike. It’d be nice if someone capable was at least a little prepared before then. For once."

"Tooru just sent him off in a fit," Keiji said, "So I don't think now's the best time."

Kuroo's grin returned, and he pushed himself to his feet. "Don't you worry about that. I'll convince him to cooperate."

The three raised brows as Kuroo turned to leave the kitchen, all of them left wondering if whatever he was about to do was for better or worse.

“Mr. Merman?”

Akira still didn’t know how to respond to that. He still didn’t know why a grown-ass adult, a pirate captain, was calling him such a childish name. Especially when he knew they all knew his name by now.

He made a soft grunt in acknowledgement as he pushed a large, leafy plant out of their path.

“I thought we were looking for the hour-ass.”

And then there was that nickname, too.

“I already told you, we can’t just barge into that village. We’ll be roasted alive.” Assuming his leads were right. He could only estimate how old a lot of the cave paintings and scrolls and things he’d found were, but they all implied that the villages around the lava pits of North Ironfall were not inhabited by simple humans. Or any form of humans.

And even if his source material was outdated, there was definitely something living in that place. He’d been near enough to see the shelters, still held together strongly and void of any wear
that could imply being abandoned. He’d smelled food cooking from there.

He just hadn’t found the energy to explore the place up close himself.

Also, he wasn’t a moron.

He wasn’t sure he could say the same for these pirates, though.

“But how are we going to get the hour-ass if we’re walking away from the lava pits?”

The thing about when Lev used the word “hour-ass” was that he was completely serious, as if that was its official title. Whereas Takahiro and Issei very purposely said it for the sake of making Akira’s otherwise blank expression show some form of annoyance.

“The compass won’t do us much good if we’re set on fire before we can find it. There might be something we can use as a means of defense on this island, so we’re taking a detour for that, first.”

Morisuke stepped up to the lead of their party, alongside Akira. “If you’re going to ask for our help, could you at least be a little less vague with your explanations?”

Akira wasn’t even trying to be vague. He just didn’t feel like explaining a bunch of ideas that he’d been spending days trying to figure out for himself. He especially didn’t feel like delivering all of that information to the people who just had him tied to a tree not long ago.

“What would you fight fire with?” Maybe if he made them think for themselves, he’d have to do less talking.

“Water,” Morisuke said, simply.

“So, we need someone or something that can control that element.” The ‘someone’ was out of the question. Merfolk didn’t have that sort of potential, and if he could get that kind of third party help, he wouldn’t need these guys. He reached into the sack hanging over his shoulder, fishing around for something in particular. He withdrew a handful of scrolls and sifted through them until he found the right one, of which he handed over to Morisuke. “It’s a stone that apparently contains some sort of water magic.”

“And you think it’s the real deal? And it’s here, on this island?” Morisuke looked doubtful. He rolled the scroll open, and in the same painterly style as the cherufe one Akira had shown them before, a glassy, blue and green stone was shown. “Isn’t that a little… convenient?”

Akira nodded. “I found all of these in the same place. A hollowed-out tree that someone must have been taking shelter in years ago. It sounds like this stone was brought here specifically to fend off or protect against the cherufe, then it was sealed away in the temple ruins.”

Morisuke lowered the scroll to watch him, carefully. “Things get sealed away because they’re a problem. What went wrong?”

A noncommittal sound was all he got from Akira as they emerged from the jungle foliage into grassy, open land and rolled off into deep slopes ahead. Far out, there were remnants of stone walls and columns.

“Is that it?” Lev asked, interrupting whatever conversation he’d been having with Kanji toward the rear and bounding up ahead of Morisuke and Akira. “That has to be it! How many ruins can be on one island?”
“Three, actually.”

Lev spun around, eyes sparkling at the idea of getting to raid three ancient ruins. But they weren’t there to raid three. They were there to raid one for a single, specific item.

**Boring.**

“So, you know your way around these things like you did that cave, right?” Issei was close behind Akira before he knew it. Too close.

The merman took a step to the side. “I haven’t been inside yet.” He noted the way Issei’s lips curved downward, and he wondered if these people realized that he could only explore so many places at once. He hadn’t been here *that* long, and they expected him to know the entire island like the back of his hand?

Well, he did know where to find this place, so maybe he couldn’t really blame them.

Takahiro clicked his tongue. “So, we’re going in totally unprepared, and we don’t even know if this stone is inside. Or if the compass we need it for is even in that village.”

Akira started down the hill. “Would you rather wait outside?”

“Well no. I just wanna know if we still get paid if your plan goes to shit.”

Akira stared on ahead as he walked, not really sure of the answer to that, himself. That was more Kenji’s call than his own.

Not knowing the answer was fine, though, because Lev was running up ahead. The captain spun on his heel so that he was facing the others, walking backwards down the hill. Morisuke kept leaning over to check that he wasn’t ready to trip over or walk into something.

“But we can still take whatever else we find in these ruins!” Lev declared, and he threw his hands up high in the air. “As long as we’re not taking that water stone or hour-ass?”

Akira would really rather them not steal anything from precious, ancient temple ruins, but he also realized that he wouldn’t have much of a say in the matter. If the pirates didn’t take what Eventide needed for themselves, he could probably consider himself lucky.

So, he nodded, and Lev made a celebratory sound when he spun back around to walk like a normal person again. Morisuke sighed with relief.

Another question for the list: *Did a pirate really just ask my permission to steal something?*

He certainly did. Akira was beginning to think that the term ‘babysitting’ wasn’t as much of a joke as he meant it to be. The crew’s captain was… childish. Kanji was, too, and maybe all of them were in their own different ways. That seemed even more so the case when they made it down to the ruins, and Lev was practically pouncing from pillar to pillar, as if he might find a pile of gold just sitting at the base of one.

The pillars were tall, as was the grass surrounding them, abandoned by caring hands, but still thriving in the light of the sun. All around them were walls, void of any roofing, once white stone now gray from age and wear

They wondered if those dilapidated walls once served as a fence of some kind, or if those pillars ever supported something more than the fallen remnants of beams on the overgrown
The temple itself still stood in the midst of it all, underwhelming in its small size. But still, grand and intricate swirling designs were engraved and embossed along its proud walls. Proud walls that were cracked and discolored, but still proud.

"Those scrolls say anything about what kind of temple this was?" Issei asked, stopping to brush the dust and leaves from a stone pedestal near the entrance. The lettering engraved onto its surface was unfamiliar to him. "Temples are built for worship. What was being worshipped here?"

"A snake god?" Morisuke said, glancing over the scroll one last time before handing it over to Akira. "A different one for each of the three temples?"

"Oh!" Kanji elicited a few startled jumps from the others with his outburst. "There's a Serpent Trio that's known throughout the Ironfall islands. We had temples on West, too." He looked over the old walls. "But they're smaller. And less dead."

"Are there actually serpent gods, though?" Lev asked, something hopeful in his voice.

"It's an old religion," Kanji said. "Most people just laugh at the followers."

"This was the water serpent's temple," Akira provided, already feeling up the walls around the heavy doors in search of a method of opening them. There was no way that anyone of normal size could pry them open as they were.

"Water serpent. Water stone. Makes enough sense." Morisuke backed up to the wall and pushed all of his weight against it, despite knowing by its appearance that it probably wouldn't budge.

Lev made a comment about Morisuke being too small to move it even if it weren't stuck, and received a kick to the leg shortly after.

Akira continued to search for a more logical way of entry.

Too bad that didn't seem to exist.

The temple itself, unlike the walls they'd seen leading up to it, had a roof. It had no noticeable holes or cracks large enough for even the smallest of their party to squeeze through. Despite the wear over the years, none of the walls seemed like they're be willing to be broken through, either.

"It looks so... small." Morisuke leaned against the immovable stone doors once he'd circled the building.

Kanji shrugged. "The rest could be underground?" Another shrug when Morisuke arched a brow at him. "I've never been inside the ones back home. Not really sure what to expect."

"Would they really have sealed something so important inside of something so puny, though?" Takahiro kicked at a small crack in the wall.

Issei sat himself down on a broken down stump of a pillar. "Well, we can't get in, so I guess it wasn't that bad of an idea if they did."

"We'll get in!" Lev said, sprinting around to the backside of the tiny temple another time. There was silence among the others as they awaited his return, as if anyone were expecting a real breakthrough. As if the doors would swing open to them with the accompaniment of singing angels
because Lev maybe tripped over some magical tree root or something.

As he came back around, head and high in a very forced air of confidence, he did trip. Not over a magic root, but over a dip in the ground. And he fell, face first into the double doors with all the grace of a drunken gazelle.

A pause, and then he went sliding completely to the ground, a streak of red lingering behind in his face's path.

Issei and Takahiro actually snorted, because it was honestly pretty comical to look at despite the fact that fair captain was. Y’know. Bleeding from the face.

Lev sat up straight and crossed his legs, glaring up at the doors while blood trickled from his nose in a light stream.

"Find anything?" Morisuke asked after a brief silence. He was smirking. Just a little. 'Besides the doors?' he'd been tempted to add.

But then, something shook from within the temple, and they all felt it in the ground.

Then it subsided just as quickly, and there was a voice. Soft. Soothing. Feminine. Not quite what they’d expected after a mini-earthquake.

But it spoke in a language most of them couldn't understand, in sounds that dripped from the cracks of the walls and poured into their ears, incomprehensible.

Except to Akira.

The merman stiffened at first, then took a step back from the stone. All eyes were on him when the mysterious voice fell to silence.

"Did Lev's nosebleed just trigger some sort of demon summoning?" Takahiro asked, and Akira slowly shook his head.

"It... may have triggered a way in, though." Akira drew in a breath, then straightened his posture as he faced the sealed doors. The next words that left his mouth weren't human, and were not unlike the ones that came from the building.

Not unlike the ones used to speak among serpents.

Takahiro had another comment for that, this time a quiet, "What the fuck?" that gained an agreeing nod of the head from Issei.

"Fish talk!" Lev and Kanji announced in equally amazed unison.

Akira didn't correct them, and exchanged a few words with the... wall? Before turning to face the pirates.

"It says I can't go in."

Morisuke crossed his arms. He was not crazy about this fish guy dumping them in some strange place alone twice in a row. "Come again?"

Akira tipped his head. "It's an ancient spirit that's bound to these doors. They say they've been forbidden from letting people from where I’m from inside." He sounded suspicious, and maybe a little bitter.
"But you can speak the same language as it. Why would it not let you?"

"They won't tell me. They say they can allow you humans in, though. Since there technically aren't any rules against that, and one of you already offered your blood to them, apparently."

"I what?!" Lev was holding his hands over his nose, as if that'd actually stop the bleeding on its own.

Issei snickered. "Hey, thanks, Captain."

Morisuke tugged Lev back to his feet, eyes still fixed on the doors. "Is it going to do something with Lev's blood...?"

There was more strange serpent talk as Akira exchanged a few words with the doors. Or spirit. Or whatever. "They say it's just an entry fee. He should be fine."

Kanji pouted. "What's the point in a fee if it's not gonna use it for anything?"

"It should totally summon a demon with it," Issei agreed.

"Don't give it ideas!" Lev shouted, wiping his now-bloody hands on his pants. "But it can open the doors for us now, right?"

More serpent talk, then a moment of silence, and then a lot of loud creaking that shook the ground yet again. It also gave everyone the feeling that the entire building was about the crumble, but thankfully that didn't happen.

"Don't waste time in there," Akira said, expression hard as he sat himself down on the grass. "Focus on your task so we can move on and get out of here."

"He won't even ask us nicely," Issei sighed. Takahiro offered an amused nudge of the elbow, and soon the five of them were disappearing behind closing doors, and Akira was really wishing he'd had the foresight to bring a book along or something besides the dusty old scrolls in his bag.

Hajime really needed to start keeping track of how many times ‘How did it come to this?’ entered his train of thought.

His books and journals were scattered about, again, but this time not on the surface of a kitchen table. Rather, they were all over the floors and bed of Keiji’s tiny cabin room. Keiji’s room, which had a distinct lack of Keiji, and a very unwanted siren sitting in the middle of the floor. Hajime was sitting in the bed among all the papers, arms crossed and very much displeased with his current situation. As if that wasn’t a regular thing lately.

They were in Keiji’s room because... hell if Hajime was going to let a siren in his own room. He’d actually come prepared with earmuffs and everything, not caring how stupid he looked in doing so, but Tooru had yanked them off, and he didn’t even know where they were at this point. Which was amazing, because, there weren’t a lot of places to hide things in the small space, unless they were just buried under the piles of notes.

“Kuroo said he and Keiji were going to be here for this,” he grumbled, watching as Tooru
continued scattering things around the floor in some sort of organized mess.

Tooru sat up on his knees and scanned over the clutter. “Kuroo was never actually coming. Keiji wanted to check on your other finned guest. It’s not my fault you showed up before he got back.”

“If I was going to be stuck with a one-on-one lesson, I’d rather it have been with him.”

Tooru waved his hand in a shooing motion, not that he actually expected or wanted Hajime to leave. Well, no, he wanted him to leave to an extent, because he was so frustrating, but he also wanted to correct all of his dumb misguided ‘knowledge’ that he’d apparently been collecting over the years.

“You don’t have to voice your prejudice every ten seconds, you know. I’m well aware that we both hate each other.”

“Glad that’s been cleared up,” Hajime said, not without a bit of bite in his tone.

Tooru responded with a defiant “Hmph,” then bent over again to start moving more papers around, making the mess a little more uniform. Eventually he had books and papers separated in three piles on the floor. He nodded with an air of satisfaction once that was done.

“I’m learning so much,” Hajime grumbled, and Tooru shot him another scrunch-nosed look.

“This,” Tooru said, pointing to the pile on the left, “Is the Bullshit Pile. I’m naming them in ways that are easiest for your sailor-talk mind to comprehend.”

Hajime was definitely going to make a retort to that, but Tooru didn’t let him.

“The middle one is the Semi-Reputable Pile. Most of the stuff you’ve got there should honestly be in the bullshit pile, but there are a few pages among them that are actually useful. I’ll bookmark them later.” He pointed to the pile at the right next. “And that’s your Reliable Pile.” He repositioned himself so that he wasn’t on his knees because, yeah, maybe putting more strain on his legs in his current state was a dumb idea. Not that putting more weight on his ass was great either, but he’d settle.

“As you can see,” he continued, “The Reliable Pile has a grand total of two books.”

“And I’m supposed to take your word on what’s reliable and not, am I?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

Tooru grinned at him, because he knew he had a point, that someone had gotten Hajime to cave at least a little for him to even come here and consider what information Tooru was willing to give. Even if... that was mostly because Kuroo had him convinced that Keiji would be the teacher, but. Details.

“...So, how do you know for sure which ones are bullshit? You barely even looked at them."

“I’m familiar with most of these titles, and I recognize the authors of others. Kingston’s city isn’t exactly short on libraries, you know.” Tooru plucked up a book from the Semi-Reputable Pile and began flipping through. “The guy who wrote this one spent a lot of time exploring North Ironfall. He’s written some journals on cherufes, and they were mostly accurate. I think there’s an article in one of these about grindylows, too.”
He turned to a page with detailed drawings of some kind of plant that looked like what could only be described as a leafy squid monster. “But he also fell victim to poisoning from this plant he calls Tenta-Vine - not its real name, by the way. It’s called Cephalovitis. It also causes hallucinations, and eventually killed the guy, and you can tell where in his findings things start getting cloudy.”

“I thought he said the plant wasn’t poisonous.”

“The plant doesn’t want him to think it’s poisonous, obviously.”

“The plant… is alive?”

“I mean, all plants are.”

*This fucking smartass.*

Hajime ran a hand over his face. “Just let me see the damn book.” He held out that hand, and Tooru passed it along to him. “You say it’s obvious which parts are and aren’t factual, but isn’t that just because you already know a ton about this stuff in the first place?” He carefully looked over the illustrations. The plant certainly looked dangerous and threatening, unlike the article’s claims. “How would you know, anyway? Information broker or not, I can’t imagine a lot of people passing through bars in Kingston to tell you about plants and cherufes.”

“I haven’t just been sitting around in Kingston all this time, you know. I’ve been around the islands and seen plenty first hand.”

“Keiji, too?”

“No, Keiji’s just a good student. And he knows a lot from living in Eventide, but he hasn’t traveled land quiet as extensively as I have.” Tooru plucked another book up from the middle pile. “But even he would know that most of these are laughable, at best. This ship would’ve been serpent chow if Keiji hadn’t been with you before.”

“So enough with plants and cherufes. Tell me what I can do to keep the Corvus safe against actual, relevant threats. Serpents, giant squids, leviathans.” He coughed on the next word. “Sirens.”

“You’d actually trust a siren to tell you how to fend off their own kind?”

“No, I was just listing another threat.”

Tooru rolled his eyes. “Just give me that ugly journal of yours. We can focus on correcting your god-awful notes first, and go from there.”

“Why is my journal ugly?”

“Please, I’ve seen your drawings.”

"I could be a professional, and I still would have drawn you the same," Hajime bit back, handing his 'ugly journal' over to Tooru.

With a sneer, Tooru took the book and flipped past the siren section - he’d tackle that problem later. He stopped on the page with the crudely-drawn serpent that they’d seen around Petal Reef, and began intently skimming over Hajime’s notes.

"Why did you write ‘orichalcum' with a bunch of question marks here?” Tooru turned the open
"Because I read somewhere that weapons forged with it can strike down a sea serpent," Hajime said, and he looked mildly unsettled by the way Tooru continued to stare at him in silence. "...I’m guessing that thought goes in the bullshit pile, huh?"

Tooru made a throwing motion with his hands, and the metaphorical manifestation of Hajime’s stupid statement was then one with the bullshit pile.

"Orichalcum isn’t even real, is it?"

"Of course it’s real," Tooru said, as if it were common knowledge among all species, sea dwelling or not. "But I don’t know where you humans got the idea that it’s indestructible or whatever." He waved a hand on the ‘whatever.’ "Orichalcum is a weak metal. It’s barely any stronger than copper. You’d be flirting with death if you tried to kill that serpent with it."

"Then what do I kill a serpent with? Or am I just supposed to keep Keiji around to invite it for tea the next time we run into it?"

"Have you considered avoiding the Petal Reef area in the first place?"

"Tell me how to fight a goddamn serpent, asshole."

"You don’t."

Tooru held the journal high over his head as he pushed some loose papers on the floor around with his free hand. "Well, no, you could, but it would likely demolish your ship before you got the chance. Especially since it has a grudge against you now. Keiji said you guys took out one of its eyes. Good job."

"If a cannon could take out an eye, then couldn’t it do further damage?"

"Sure, if you can keep blasting the same spot over and over again. You think it’s going to sit still long enough to let you do that, though?" He set the journal down in favor of searching through the papers with both hands. "Not to mention, your aim is terrible."

"What?"

"You had a pretty clear shot of me when the rest of your ship was under my influence." He lifted a small, unopened ink pot from beneath a pile, and searched around with a pouty, hopeless look.

Without thinking, Hajime kicked the ink pen off from the bed. "It was storming."

The pen rolled toward Tooru, and he snatched it up. "Would you shoot better if I got you an umbrella?"

"Missing a target once doesn’t make me a shit shot!"

"The Corvus’s master gunner, the ship’s main source of defense. Number one weakness? Thunder and drizzling."

"Look--"

Where Tooru looked was to the door, because Koutarou’s booming voice was ringing through the hall now. It was hard to ignore, even with a fuming Hajime on the bed.

The door swung open a moment later, but it was Keiji who came inside and swiftly closed the
barrier behind him. He was pressed up against it, arms out as if to keep a horrible monster from breaking its way through.

He received a raised brow from each Tooru and Hajime, and he released a long breath of his own.

“He doesn’t stop, does he?”

“Talking?” Hajime asked. He still sounded ticked, which had Keiji raising a brow this time, even though the tone was definitely still aimed at Tooru. “No, he doesn’t. I thought you’d be used to it by now.”

Tooru looked back down, journal in hand again and his back to Keiji as he dipped the pen in the ink. “I thought you were visiting the barrel-dweller.”

“Kenma was asleep, and Koutarou cornered me in the hall.” The merman slipped away from the door. He started for the bed, but paused to stare down at the separated piles of books. “Class isn’t going so well, is it?”

“Watch your step. Wouldn’t want to tarnish the massive reliable pile.” Tooru was crossing out notes, *Hajime’s notes*, in the journal, starting with the orichalcum nonsense.

Hajime then lunged for him, spouting something about damaging of personal property, and Tooru lifted the book and pen high as he fell onto his back. Keiji scooped up the ink before any further disasters could take place.

The journal flopped onto the floor, a big smear of ink where Tooru had tried to simply cross out a single word.

“I’m only scratching out the stuff that’s wrong!”

“Then have the decency to ask my permission first!”

“You gave me the pen!”

“And now I’m taking it back!”

Keiji sat himself down on the edge of the bed. He popped the top back onto the ink pot and set it aside, then leaned back against the wall and watched, patiently waiting for their squabble to die out. Maybe he should start timing them, or keeping count.

“You two sure are big on physical contact,” he said, dryly.

Tooru squawked and kicked Hajime away, but not before receiving an unwelcomed smack to the head with one of the semi-reputable books. “He’s attacking me, Jiji!”

“I can’t say that I blame him.”

Hajime, journal reclaimed, huffed and sat himself next to Keiji. He frowned down at the mess of the serpent pages. One of them had somehow gotten torn, along with all the smears. He’d have to redo the whole section.

“So,” Keiji said after some time of silent, immature glaring went on between the two. “Class one is going to be on serpents, I take it?”
The inside of the temple would have been pitch black if not for the few cracks of light that shone through the walls and ceiling. Still, it was hard to see, even if there was more light than there had been in the cave. So of course it wasn't long before people were cursing and bumping into each other.

And then there was the sound of someone tumbling down what was probably a set of stairs.

The darkness lasted a short moment longer after that, but then something flickered along the walls, offering a much needed source of light.

Crystals were fixed to the walls like sconces, all of them glowing a bright blue, and all of them trailing down the path created by the stairs.

The whole outside building seemed to be nothing but an entrance to said stairs, which explained why something that was apparently such a big deal was so tiny on the outside.

They started down the flight, eventually catching up to Kanji at the bottom, who had a very sore rear from his fall.

"So, where's this water rock?" Takahiro asked as he tugged at one of the wall crystals. He'd hoped they could be removed, partly as a portable light source, and partly because they had an entire sunken ship worth of treasure to make up for.

"It's not like the scrolls came with a map." Morisuke tried to recall all the details of the ones Akira had shown him. "Should've made him ask that spirit thing before we charged in."

"Where's the fun in that?" Lev asked, now lending Takahiro his strength. The crystal still wouldn't budge. "We've found stuff without maps before!"

"We've gotten lost with them before, too!"

Morisuke didn't know if Kanji was saying that in hopes of giving them some sort of confidence boost, or what his point was, exactly. He sure didn't feel any better, though. Especially not with his crewmates wasting their time yanking at a piece of stone in some spirit-possessed temple that was kind of starting to give him the creeps already.

He ushered them onward, down some hallway that only had about half as many crystals to light their way as the stairs had. Because that was reassuring.

At least the scrolls had given them an idea of what this magical water stone looked like, so he could easily shoot down every attempt at stealing one of the glowing wall crystals that someone made with the excuse of, "But what if it's the water one?!"

This place had at least one spirit watching over it, even if it may only have been tied to the entrance, and it surely didn't want them destroying the temple on top of the theft they already had in mind. Granted, it probably didn’t want them going through with that theft, either, but if something was physically attached to the temple, Morisuke was leaving it alone.

Not that this meant he was against snatching up a few shiny loose things here and there. His pockets were already jingling a little with pieces of gold and coins. They might have been pieces of the old walls at some point. Maybe offerings to the dragon god. Maybe just junk that other travelers lost along the way.
Whatever the case, they were just laying around, unattached and not doing any gods or spirits any good as far as he could tell.

Cautious and overbearing at times or not, if he wasn't willing to take some amount of risk, he wouldn't have been following Lev around the islands to begin with.

“The fish didn’t mention anything about the spirit saying we can’t take anything,” Issei had said at one point, tossing and catching some kind of coin he’d found among a pile of debris as they moved forward.

Morisuke, briefly, had the sarcastic thought of, ‘Because we always follow rules in the first place,’ but the idea that there might be spirits listening to their every move still made him uneasy. Some comments were maybe better left for when they got out of this place.

So, he kept quiet and pushed onward. There were a lot of guessing games going on as far as which hallways to turn down and which doors to open. When Morisuke had envisioned a temple, he imagined wide, open spaces. Maybe some halls, but still open and filled with tall pillars and statues and altars and things.

Instead, there were hallways and dead ends. Stairs that led even further below the ground. Doors that opened to solid walls or empty rooms.

And, predictably, booby traps.

The first was a loose tile in the flooring. They'd come across plenty of those, so Issei thought nothing of it until a pile of smooth, spherical stones dropped from overhead. No casualties on that one, though Morisuke did trip over one stone when it rolled by.

The second, a trap door, of which Lev miraculously managed to catch himself by its ledge before he could fall down to whatever was waiting at the bottom of that dark pit. Thank goodness for long arms.

There were a few traps involving arrows, many of which were delayed in their firing from the walls due to aged mechanisms. A few more trap doors, a wall that flipped whoever leaned against it into a dark room (they found Kanji again at some point), and a hall full of animal skeletons that probably once belonged to some sort of guard… dog… things….

"Is this even a temple?” Issei grumbled as he sidled along the wall of the next hallway. The floor in the center was a slightly different shade of gray than the rest, and it sounded hollow when he tested a toe against it. He wasn't about to fall for another ridiculous trap door. "Because I've been having my doubts ever since the rocks nearly dropping on my head."

Takahiro was close behind him, and he froze when he thought he heard the floor make a clicking noise. "You weren't already having doubts when we got down the stairs?" He waited another moment with anticipation, but the floor didn't do anything unusual, so he moved forward.

Kanji was ahead of them, pressed up against the wall more than necessary as he moved along it. He ducked as he passed another wall crystal. "I wanna know why they have all these lights in here if they want to keep people out so bad!"

"Maybe this is all a test!” Lev, at the lead, stretched a leg out toward the center of the floor and gave it a test tap.

Morisuke smacked his arm.
Lev quickly drew his leg back with a pout. The floor here was hollow, too. Was the entire hallway just one big trap door? "Maybe they just want to make sure that whoever finds the water stone is worthy!"

"Okay, but," Issei groaned, "Was the temple originally made for the stone, or worship? Why would they design a place of worship like this?"

"They were hiding something else?" Morisuke eyed the floor with unease as he shuffled along.

Somewhere down the line, Lev gave the floor another test, then proceeded to bravely (or stupidly) hop out into the center, arms raised high in victory. The floor didn't give beneath him, so they took that as a good enough sign that they're cleared one danger zone for the time being.

The others stepped away from the wall, but the second Takahiro moved from his place, the floor behind him swung open with a loud slam that shook the place. He froze for a moment, then dared to look over at the gaping hole just a few inches behind him. The entire floor, save for about a foot's worth of space along the walls, was completely open, and the gap stretched so far down the hallway that they couldn't even see where it ended.

"Who took the time to build this?" Issei asked, taking a chance in leaning over the edge. Unlike the past traps they'd come across, where it was impossible to make out anything but darkness, this opening clearly led to jagged stone spikes. And bones, if he was seeing what he thought he was, scattered among the bottom of them.

Lev pouted. "I was hoping for a pit of snakes."

"What do you mean you were hoping?!" Morisuke spat.

As they went back and forth, Kanji stared out at the endless gap in the floor. He kept a contemplative look for a long moment before he finally asked, "How are we going to get back?"

That was a question no one knew the answer to, because the floor didn't look like it was going to close back up any time soon. They could only hope that it would eventually, but that was an issue they'd have to deal with later.

If they could ever find this stupid stone first.

Moving on, the same hall seemed to go on forever, but at least the rest of the floor appeared to be stable for the most part.

In fact, the place was suddenly void of any traps, as far as they could tell. What with the last hour or so being nothing but one trick after another, the calmness was almost more unsettling than any of that.

So, of course, the suspicious adventurers continued to treat everything as a potential threat. Every slightly off-colored tile or piece of wall was avoided, and they'd ceased going after gold wall decor long ago, after one snake-shaped wall ornament nearly got Takahiro's hand chopped off.

"I don't think that's still necessary," Morisuke said when he saw that Kanji had returned to sidling up against the wall.

"I'm not taking any more chances!"

Everyone jumped when Lev yelled at nothing in particular.
"Do you see what this place is doing to us?!" He spun around to face the others behind him. "Our sense of adventure is dying out every minute we spend in here!"

Morisuke, of all people, was smirking. "Are you suggesting we ditch the treasure and leave, Captain?"

Lev straightened and clenched his fists at his sides. "Never!"

"I mean, eventually would be nice," Issei said, raising a hand like a half-assed student. "I don't want to take up permanent shelter in this madhouse, thanks."

"I'm not giving up, but I think you're all being a bunch of cowards right now!"

Issei put his hand back down. "We've almost died at least seven times since we've come in here."

Lev waved a hand. "Seven is a lucky number."

"I don't feel lucky." Issei leaned and turned his head toward Takahiro. "How 'bout you?"

"The bullet wound hasn't re-opened yet, so, I guess."

Lev grinned, believing this was a completely honest agreement on Takahiro's part. It was not.

Morisuke eyed the bandages through the rips in Takahiro's shirt. "Shouldn't that thing have opened by now, though? You haven't exactly been taking it easy." And they'd done such a shoddy job at tending to it in the first place.

With a finger pointed at Morisuke, Takahiro then turned to face Lev, expression flat as he said, "Your first mate just told me he wants me dead."

"That is not what I said."

“That’s what I heard,” Issei added, if not simply to make Morisuke more irate.

“Uh, guys?"

Kanji’s voice was distant. He’d gone up ahead, still pressed up against the wall, mind you. He’d gotten pretty far, but ‘pretty far’ in this case meant ‘as far as one could possibly go.’

It was a dead end. All that remained at the end of the hall was a wall with a simplistic, faded painting of three serpentine creatures weaving and coiling around each other in a knot.

No one said anything at first, but disappointment hung heavy in the air around them.

No magical stone in sight. Not even a pebble. Not even a sign that said “Nice try, suckers.”

And no way of turning back.

Takahiro was the first to break the short-lived silence. “This adventure is bullshit.”

No one argued with that, not even Lev.

The only arguing being done at that point was regarding how the hell they were going to get out of this place.
“What are we going to do, scream until either someone finds a way in to save us, or we collapse from starvation?” “Don’t think I won’t try to eat one of you if it comes down to it.” “There’s still a foot of floor against the walls where the floor dropped open, maybe we can shuffle along that?” “I’m fishing you out for dinner if you fall in.” “What good is eating us if you’re stuck in here?!”

Kanji wasn’t taking part in the argument. He wasn’t paying much attention to who was saying what, or to any of the conversation at all, for that matter. He’d finally stepped away from the wall, again, and kept kicking his foot against the one with the three snake-things on it.

“Look, we’re all fucking hungry, okay?” “Hungry, thirsty, and I’ve had to take a leak since we got in this place.” “Go piss in the spike pit, then!”

“Kanji!” Morisuke whipped around from all the bickering. “Whatever the hell you’re doing, cut it out!”

Kanji gave the snake wall one last startled kick before looking over his shoulder. “It sounds funny.”

“That’s great!”

“No, no! I mean.” Kanji raised a finger to his lips, urging everyone to quiet down, and then he kicked the wall again. Then the other. His toes were beginning to ache. Maybe he should’ve just tried knocking like a normal person. “They sound different, right?”

Lev cocked his head. “Sounds... hollow?”

“Like a door.” Takahiro muttered, then yelled out, “Like a door!” This time, he pointed at the wall. “Lev, do the nose thing again.”

“I’m not giving myself a nosebleed on purpose!”

“It may be the only way out, Captain.”

Lev covered his nose with both hands, then made a high pitched yelp when Issei swiped a knife across his arm. The cut wasn’t big or deep, but it was enough for Issei to get a small amount of blood that he could flick at the wall in front of them.

“Why does it have to be my blood?!”

“Your blood got us in here,” Morisuke said, “It’s only right if it gets us back out.”

‘Out’ may have been a bit too hopeful, but it did get them somewhere. The painted snakes began to, by some sort of magic, uncoil and slither down the height of the wall until they formed a single, straight line down the center. There was then a loud crack, and the ground shook much like it did from the outside entrance.

The wall parted from the line of the painting, giving way to a circular room filled with more glowing crystals than any of the other rooms or halls they’d come across had. It was bright, and in its center stood a single, marble stand with a single, blueish-green, glassy stone resting upon it.

“That’s it…” Morisuke sounded as if the breath had been stolen from him. It was nothing extravagant. The room had some more simplistic paintings along its walls. The stone was small enough to fit in the palm of a child’s hand, and yet it gave off such a feeling of magic and importance that he was awestruck. Of course, that could have been because of the nonsense they
just went through to find it. “That’s it!” He rushed inside, and noticed very quickly that the room was cold. Even more so the closer he got to the stone.

“You think it’s a trap?” Lev asked, and yet he was reaching out to touch the thing anyway.

Morisuke slapped his arm away. “Were you hoping to find out firsthand?!”

“You think this’ll give us an idea of how to handle it without… dying?” Issei was looking at the paintings that filled the walls from top to bottom. The pictures were broken up in layers, each of them portraying different scenes and creatures.

Lev said that it looked like a storybook, and he wasn’t far off.

At the highest point of the wall, there were depictions of a large snake, solid black with little detail given, but it rose above squarish trees and mountains like a great god.

And then there were other gods. Birds and boars and monkeys, all of them large and imposing like the snake.

Below that row, each of the others were shown meeting brutal ends by the snake. Constricted. Bitten in two. For a colorful and blocky, almost childish painting, each and every death was rather… gory. Unsettling. Maybe the fact that they were shown in such a childish manner is what made it that way, though.

From the blocks of blood that came from the other gods, or whatever these beings were supposed to be, there was something that looked like a jewel. It rested in puddles of red, or flew out from them as they were torn in two, but for every god that was slain, there was a small, heart-shaped gem to come out of them.

Further down the wall, the snake wore the gems around its neck (“Bastard doesn’t even have shoulders or anything. Wouldn’t those just fall off?” Issei had asked, with a snort from Takahiro). The snake approached another giant animal, a deer, but this one didn’t meet a gruesome end as the others had. The entire row of paintings showed them together. Some only showed them watching over mountains and rivers. Others portrayed the deer bowing before villages of people much smaller than itself, offering things like flowers and vegetables.

The snake, through all of this, looked perplexed, which was impressive, considering there was only so much emotion one could give a painting of what was essentially a black noodle with a pair of white eyes.

With the next row, the deer was bowing before the snake, offering the same things it had to the people, except that among the flowers and food, was a small, heart-shaped jewel. The snake accepted it, and another heart was added to those around its neck.

The pictures that followed left everyone feeling like they’d come across a cliffhanger, or as if there were pages missing from the storybook… er… wall. The deer was suddenly left out from the bottom two rows, and in the second to last, the snake was shown growing another two heads. Or, at least that was what it looked like, until they looked down and saw three separate snakes, each residing in a different location. One beneath the sea, one within the mountains, and another in the clouds.

“What happened to the deer?!” Lev, honestly, sounded offended to see the animal missing from the rest of the story. “It gave it the heart-thing and then what? Ran away? Did the snake eat it?! Did the deer rip the snake into three pieces or something?!”
“Doesn’t look like they put much thought into that ending.” Issei glanced over at Kanji. “This has to do with this religious thing, right?”

Kanji shrugged. “I don’t really know any of the stories. Maybe there’s another room we missed?”

“Like fuck I’m going to search this place for another room to find out what happens to some goddamn deer.”

“The water stone isn’t shown in any of these.” Morisuke was leaning in close to the wall, searching the images of the deer’s offerings and the heart-shaped gems. Still, there was no sign of the object resting in the center of the room. “Why wouldn’t it be included if the room is dedicated to it in the first place?”

Kanji gasped. “The deer is the stone!”

“Even if that made sense,” Morisuke continued, “it still would have been shown in the painting somewhere, right? So, what? Was this room originally meant for something else and they just… stuck the water stone here for safekeeping?”

Takahiro eyed the stone. “Can’t say it was a bad hiding spot. It wasn’t exactly easy to get here.”

“Akira said they sealed it away. It was probably really dangerous, and they needed a quick place to hide it, so they went here!” Lev was hovering over the stand now, hands gripping the edges while he stared down at the smooth stone with the same sparkle in his eyes he always had when they were about to get away with some great steal. “But if the story doesn’t say anything about what to do with it, then we don’t have much of a choice but to just grab it and run, right?”

“Run where, exactly? Across the foot of wall-padding surrounding the spiky pit of death?”

“Well did you wanna just sit here and stare at the treasure ‘til we die?”

Lev gave Morisuke no more time to argue. He slipped a hand from the edge of the stand, and snatched the stone into his grasp.

Cold was an understatement. It was like grabbing pure ice, so cold that it almost burned. He wanted to drop it, but his fingers were frozen in place, clenched around what looked like a harmless piece of rock.

And then, predictably, and unfortunately, the shaking of the ground was back. Unlike with the doors and traps, it didn’t come to a stop after a few short seconds, either.

Bits of stone and dust were beginning to fall from the ceiling, and Morisuke’s panicked “RUN!” was all it took for the group to go sprinting out the room.

“They wouldn’t actually set the place up to cave in, right?! Wouldn’t that be a waste?!” Takahiro was having a bit of trouble keeping up with them already, because, well, if wandering around an island and being attacked by grindylows hadn’t opened his more serious wound, then running for his life down a life-threatening temple hall might just do the trick.

He’d have to find and club that Corvus gunner for this one of these days.

“Not crazy about sticking around to find out!” Kanji was pretty fast to begin with, but he’d probably never run as fast in his life as he was then.
Lev had already caught up and taken the lead, gripping tight at his now-frozen hand as he ran toward the floor of spikes up ahead. They didn’t have a plan for this. The spike pit went so far down the hallway that he couldn’t see the end, so jumping wasn’t an option. Not a smart one, anyway. Shuffling along the edge would be three times more risky now that the center of the floor was wide open. Maybe ten times more, because the temple was reacting to their theft.

He skidded to a halt before they could actually reach the dead end, one hand behind him and one in front as he tried to keep from losing balance. The one in front of him held the stone, and either the burn was beginning to subside already, or he was getting used to it. Or he was too worried about the potential death leaning over their shoulders to notice it as much.

At least, he didn’t notice it so much until he felt a cold breeze leave from his palm. The chill focused somewhere over the pit, until something glossy and translucent had formed in front of them.

He gaped with his crew at the plate of ice that had just appeared, growing off the edge of the floor and over the gap like the beginnings of a bridge.

Lev went from terrified to child-opening-their-first-ever-present-excited in a matter of seconds.

He stepped forward, hand held outward, and the bridge continued to form out across the lack-of-floor.

Not really what he’d expected from a water stone, but he’d take it.

He just hoped the ice wasn’t as thin as it looked.

Well, it wasn’t like Keiji had actually expected to get any sleep tonight, anyway.

He’d been in bed, room otherwise empty, long given up on the first attempts at Serpent Defense 101, and a comfortably full stomach being about the only good thing partially distracting him from his aching legs and revived head pains. At least the room hadn’t been spinning. Yet.

He had only just managed to stop staring at the ceiling, to finally close his eyes, when the creaking of an opening door snapped them back open.

And now, he was up on deck, each arm in the tight grip of the people on either side of him.

Tooru and Koutarou had literally dragged him out of his cabin, and now they had him looking over the edge of the ship. He could see the small lifeboat pulled up against the railing. A few lanterns had been brought out, though he and Tooru could see just fine with only the moonlight guiding them.

"I-I only suggested bringing you out. I didn't think they would be so forceful about it."

Dr. Takeda stood not far behind the three, voice a near-whisper and bowing his head apologetically.

"It's the middle of the night," Keiji murmured, not for the first time since being dragged away
from the almost-comfort of his bed.

"Would you rather go fish-tail during the day, when you'll definitely be seen?" Tooru gave Keiji a light pull toward the lifeboat. "Better now than never. You could at least make this easier on us and cooperate before I shove you in myself."

"The splash would definitely draw attention."

"Then be quiet about it," Koutarou said, grinning as he stepped behind Keiji and gave him a more forceful shove forward.

Keiji stumbled a few steps, then whipped his head around to harden his gaze at the sailor. The doctor continued to offer apologetic and helpless looks from behind him, and that probably persuaded Keiji better than any of the violent pushing and shoving did.

With a defeated breath, he stepped into the boat, Tooru following after. The process of lowering them down to the water could have been more quiet, and Keiji cringed at the creaking and squeaking from the pulleys. Someone was definitely going to come out here, and he was definitely going I strangle Koutarou and Tooru for it.

"If anyone comes out, we tell them I needed a swim. They already know what I am," Tooru assured him. "It's dark enough that you can shift beneath the surface without them catching on."

"So, what, we tell them you pushed me in?"

"Works for me."

Their boat landed with a light splash, and Keiji reached over to swirl his hand through the water. The sensation of saltwater engulfing his hand was more than welcomed, moreso now without the threat of an angry serpent weighing him with worry.

"Wasting time," Tooru sang, giving Keiji yet another nudge.

Keiji frowned, but soon straightened and discarded his shirt. His pants soon followed, and he realized that they'd be admitting to skinny dipping of anyone did happen to come out and see any of this. He also realized that Koutarou and Dr. Takeda might have been watching him from above, but he didn't look up to confirm it.

Instead, he slid over the edge with Tooru's help, and the soft splash made by that was thankfully much more quiet than the one the boat created.

The water was, unsurprisingly, cold, but it sent a warm, relaxing feeling through his body. A feeling that lasted all of five seconds, because his legs were still there and stinging as a reminder of their current state.

The next part was less relaxing.

He dived lower, careful not to stray too far from the ship, but also not to remain too close to the surface.

With slight hesitation, Keiji brought his legs together, staring down at them with anticipation before he closed his eyes as tight possible.

The scent of blood flooded his senses again, and the shifting hadn't even begun yet.
That was fine. He was used to this. He did it all of the time on Owl Roost.

It'd just been a little longer since the last time than he'd preferred.

First, it was a simple tingling that overtook the stinging, and he wished that the entire shift would feel like that, but he knew better.

What air remained in his lungs escaped with a burst of bubbles from his mouth, a pained yell accompanying them as the skin of his legs melted together and his bones cracked and snapped into new positions. He covered his mouth with his hand, eyes still pressed shut with refusal to look at the disgusting transformation taking place.

It was quick. Quick, and painful. He often wondered if the process would be less agonizing of the transformations happened slower, or if that would only drag out the pain.

Well, it couldn't be helped.

He peeked one eye open. No more legs, and instead a long, flowing, black and white tail.

There was blood now, but that was to be expected with how bad he'd been pushing himself lately. At least it wasn't as much as when he'd first learned to do this.

He waited for the pain to subside-- well, partially subside. He gave his tail a few flicks, re-acquainting himself with the feeling of his not-legs.

It was strange. A week didn’t seem so long, but here he was, feeling mildly unsettled by the singular appendage curling below him. Maybe that was just because the feeling of pin-pricked legs still lingered, but in the past, that would usually go away within a few minutes. He hoped it wouldn’t be any different this time around.

When he came back to the surface, he only raised his head above the water, nothing else. Tooru was leaning over the lifeboat, shirt and shoes already discarded, watching the spot where Keiji emerged like he was bored already.

“You coming in?” Keiji asked, gaze flicking back to the ship where the doctor was still nosily looking over the edge. Koutarou was nowhere in sight, presumably (hopefully) back at the wheel.

“I figured I’d give you some privacy, first,” Tooru said, bringing Keiji’s attention back to him as he slid himself from the boat with another light sploosh.

Keiji dipped his head back below the waves, and Tooru followed. He was still wearing his pants, and Keiji couldn’t blame him. Human anatomy was weird, after all.

“Feeling better?” Tooru asked, voice teasing and warped by the sea.

The look that Keiji offered was far from amused, and the siren chuckled in response.

“I doubt you’ll feel recovered without going a few days like this, but a few hours will maybe get you some sleep, at the very least.”

“And how’s your sleep schedule been, Tooru?”

“This isn’t about me,” Tooru said, shoving Keiji by his shoulders. “And you smell like blood. Gross.”

“Here’s hoping I don’t attract something.”
“Eventide won’t be thrilled when a couple sharks beat them to their target.”

Keiji sighed, gills flaring at his neck. “I’m trying to relax. For once. Can we avoid that topic?”

“Oh, this is you trying to relax? Because, you still look as tense as you have since you came to Kingston.”

“I was tense because I was in Kingston.”

“And you’re tense now because you think some sailor is going to look over the edge of that ship and somehow see your fin through this water in the middle of the night.” Tooru rolled his eyes, then swam to where he’d shoved Keiji, setting his hands more gently on his shoulders. “Breathe. Loosen up. Enjoy the sea while it’s void of whispers.”


“And nightmares. I’m sure you’ve been having plenty of those.”

“I don’t think this subject is any better than the last.”

“Then be in silence for a bit.”

“Can you do that?”

Tooru stuck his tongue out before pulling away from him. When he sucked his tongue back in, he kept his lips pressed in a tight line, as if to prove a point.

Keiji actually chuckled.

And then, Keiji inhaled, salt filtering through him, and boy was it a good feeling. A much more pleasant feeling than anything he’d dealt with since boarding the Corvus. A feeling that, even after such a short amount of time, he’d almost taken for granted up until this moment.

He closed his eyes. He focused on the sounds, the lack of bustling and conversation, and only the rocking of the ship and how that simple, singular noise echoed through the wide expanse of ocean. Lingering tingling of phantom legs or not, this was peaceful.

And the longer he floated there, in his own little bubble of peace and salt and homeyness, the less he wanted to get back on that ship.

Maybe he didn’t have to, after all. Maybe he could dive deeper and deeper and hide himself away in a small cave for the rest of his life. No more sailors or pirates, no more serpents or Eventide. Just him, maybe some eels or crabs or whatever he might find in there, and… well, insanity, eventually, at some point. At least he wouldn’t have to deal with legs and whatever mental disruptions those would continue to cause him, though.

And he realized this was a stupid train of thought.

He also realized that Eventide would have much less trouble tracking him beneath the waves, and that if he wasn’t out there on land trying to stop them, he might as well go back to their village in the end. Would Gandril welcome him back as a son as he once had? Would Kenji and Eita accept him as a brother, or have the whole of Eventide treat him as a traitor still?

Another stupid, ridiculous, dangerous train of thought.
“You’re not very good at this relaxing thing, you know.”

Keiji opened one eye. He only saw ocean, but he could feel Tooru stirring up the waters not far behind him.

“You’re not very good at this staying quiet thing,” Keiji said, short hair curling and uncurling through the water when he turned his head.

Tooru was floating on his back, arms linked behind his head like one might do above the waves, except for the fact that he was floating at an angle that wouldn’t quite be possible up there. “If I give you too much thinking time, I won’t be held responsible for whatever stupid decisions you make.”

“I’m just… tired.”

“That’s news,” Tooru snorted, a few small bubbles pushing out his nose.

“Not just from the legs.” Keiji looked down to his tail. It was dark, but he was pretty sure there were still flecks of red left between his otherwise black and white scales from the shift. He brushed his fingers over them, hoping to clear the remnants of blood away. “From all of this. I never meant to take such an active role in this mess. I just thought I’d run away, and if I found some sort of neutral solution to Eventide and Kingston’s problems, then all the better.”

“But you started to feel guilty. I don’t think anyone would blame you for not wanting to sit around and let one side die because of the other, Jiji.”

“No, but avoiding the problem altogether was so much easier.”

“Can’t argue with that one.” Tooru looked off into the darkness, thoughtful and almost somber.

Keiji wondered if he found it rude of him, complaining about his involvement against Eventide, when Tooru hadn’t even been a part of any side to begin with. But then, he figured the siren should have expected some sort of drama when his job was to sell information on people like it was nothing more than fresh produce. Actually, Tooru was pretty rude in general, so maybe Keiji didn’t have to feel too bad.

Then he realized that Tooru had abandoned his lounging position, and was now hovering just before the merman, hands reaching out to take Keiji’s face. “Didn’t you just say you didn’t want to focus on this topic right now?” he asked, somber air discarded somewhere in the abyss behind him in favor of something too perky to really help Keiji relax. “That’s a few minutes wasted on what you’re already bothering yourself with up there, during the day.” His hands slipped down from his face, fingers brushing the skin and scales there before resting upon bare shoulders. Gentle, soothing. Too bad the siren was favoring that annoying fake tone instead of something that matched those actions. “Breathe. The sky won’t be lit for another few hours.”

“I want to sleep.”

“Do you think you can?”

Keiji looked down. Not to avert his eyes, but simply contemplating the fact that he’d wind up very far from the Corvus if he decided to become unconscious now.

“Are you asking if it’s physically possible, or if it’s a good idea?”
“Don’t worry about floating off or getting your throat slit in your sleep. I’ll take care of you.”
Tooru winked. Keiji cringed.

“Who’s going to slit my throat, exactly?”

“No one, because I’ll be here!”

“They’re definitely not letting you back on that ship if you come back with my dead throat-sliced body.”

A pout, and then Tooru was releasing him and pushing back to give him some space. “I get enough sass up there with those sailors. Just try to get some rest for once while you’re in a sort-of-comfortable place, hm?”

Of course, that was easier said than done. No matter how many times he asked to change the subject or tried to focus on nothing but the ocean sounds, stupid Eventide and their stupid plans and stupid Yuuji with his creepy doll messages and stupid everything kept coming back to him and pounding at the back of his mind.

But with time, the stressful thoughts died off. It might have been an hour, hopefully not more, and Tooru had to give him a little tug every now and then to keep them from straying far from the ship.

Sleep like this felt foreign. Sleep while he had a tail, while he was submerged like this, was something he couldn’t recall doing in months. Even on Owl Roost, when the pain was minimal and he was shifting on a regular basis, he was still sleeping in a human bed in his human home on land. It wasn’t the same.

It wasn’t as nice.

So, when he was stirred from his finally peaceful slumber a whopping four hours later, he was a different kind of grouchy.

Having to split his tail back in two only made him more so.

They climbed back into the lifeboat. There was a dry cloth waiting there for them, but only one, because Tooru hadn’t planned on getting in the water when they first got out there. He grumbled something about how they surely could have thrown him another during all that time, meanwhile Keiji began to dry himself off. He kept checking for blood, but thankfully it all appeared to have washed off before they climbed in.

When he looked up, the doctor was leaning over the edge, head rested on folded arms and very obviously asleep. That was not reassuring in the slightest.

But then, he saw that head of spiked black and white peek over the edge, and Koutarou was soon grinning and waving at them.

And Keiji still wasn’t wearing any pants.

The voice he heard from the deck wasn’t Koutarou’s or Dr. Takeda’s, though, and he felt the sudden urge to jump back into the water and never come back.
“Aren’t you supposed to be at the helm, Koukou?”

Kuroo. Okay. That… could be worse. Probably. Hajime would have been better, though. Would have saved them an explanation.

“And what the hell is the doctor sleeping out here for?”

There was some mumbling of conversation after which Keiji couldn’t properly make out, and then there was yelling again.

“The hell’re you naked down there for?”

Keiji wasn’t naked, he’d just pulled his pants up over his waist when Kuroo decided to look, but he guessed it was obvious he was doing so. He hoped the scales on his body were less obvious. It was still pretty dark out, after all.

“Just going for a swim!” Tooru called back, flashing the brightest of smiles before he tugged his shirt back over his head. His head of wet hair and his still-soaked body. Now his clothes were sticking to him, and Keiji caught the way his face cringed at the feeling. “Did you want to join us, Tetsu?”

Kuroo leaned over the edge, arm propping his head while he grinned down at them. “Sure I wouldn’t be interrupting something? Because, no offense, but I don’t peg Keiji as the type for skinny dipping, or even agreeing to go for a swim in the middle of the night.”

He had a knowing look to him, but whatever he was thinking had both Keiji and Tooru looking absolutely disgusted.

“What are you implying?” Keiji said, not quite snapping, though there was definitely some cold in his voice.

“I dunno. Why would someone be stark naked in the ocean with a siren where no one can see them?”

Tooru’s brows pulled downward and he rolled his tongue out his mouth. “The doctor was out here!”

“I’m out here!” Koutarou punched Kuroo in the good shoulder, resulting in an ‘Oof’ that the fishfolk couldn’t hear, but could tell was made anyway.

“I dunno, you do have a weird mermaid obsession. Maybe you wanted to watch.” Kuroo was grinning, then laughing when Koutarou punched him again. It was a loud, obnoxious laugh that was bound to wake up and draw more people out there. Perfect. “Not really a good view with this lighting though, is it?”

“Just pull us back up!” Tooru whined out loud.

Koutarou did so, after nudging Kuroo out of the way. The doctor was awake again by the time they made it up, albeit sleepily blinking at everyone with a lost look about him.

Kuroo set a hand on his hip and looked the two up and down. They were dripping onto the deck, Tooru more than Keiji, what with his sopping pants and all. “So, seriously, what the hell?”

“I’m from the ocean, Tetsu. I need a dip every now and then, and I’m not big on barrels like some people.” Tooru leaned an arm on Keiji’s shoulder. “But it’s boring swimming by yourself, so
I made Jiji come with me.”

“Naked.”

“Wet clothes are awful.”

Kuroo looked down at Tooru’s legs, and the siren tugged at the soaked pants in return, peeling the fabric from his legs. The sound that made was just as gross as they felt.

Keiji knew that this needed an explanation as well, and Tooru, for once, looked to be at a loss. Or he was probably just too busy thinking about how he couldn’t wait to get back into some dry clothes.

Regardless, they needed an excuse, so Keiji said, deadpan as could be, “I pushed him in.”

A pause, and then Kuroo’s roaring laughter was back, and Tooru was just pouting down at his clothes. Koutarou offered a thumbs up from behind Kuroo, and Keiji might have smacked his hands down if he were close enough to.

“Please try not to wake the whole ship,” Dr. Takeda pleaded, punctuating his words with a long yawn. He wobbled when he took a step forward. Keiji didn’t know how long he’d been asleep on deck, but he knew he’d fallen asleep standing up. Somehow. He actually found it a little impressive.

“Right, then, we’d better head off before a bunch of grumpy-tired sailors come to yell at us!” Tooru smacked his still-wet hands to Keiji’s back and steered him back toward their rooms. Koutarou had tried to follow, but Kuroo had tugged him back, going on about some kind of work-related thing. Whatever it was, the sound of their conversing grew fainter and fainter, and soon they were going down the steps and through the halls below deck.

“That went well,” Tooru hummed.

Keiji was quiet until they got to their rooms. He would have loved for that to last longer, and he was dreading the return of that pin-prick feeling in his legs. But he got some sleep. Finally. Even if it was short-lived.

He was in front of his own cabin when Tooru moved away from him, starting for his own just one door down. Keiji breathed in, then turned to the informant. Or former-informant. What he was doing with his life now was another conversation for another time. “...Thank you.”

Tooru looked up from the door handle, as if Keiji had said anything particularly strange. “You’ll want to thank Koukou for that, too.” He tilted his head, wet bangs falling in his face. “And the doctor, I suppose.”

“How are you holding up?”

Tooru watched him in silence for a short moment, then turned the handle and pushed the barrier open. “This isn’t--”

“About you? You don’t need to keep up the act around me, Tooru. You’re better at masking your problems than I am, but you don’t have to keep the mask on when it’s just us.”

The smile didn’t falter as Tooru stepped through the doorway. “You have enough problems weighing you without mine involved, Keiji.”
i didn't try to drown yaku this chapter i hope you guys are proud of me
Chapter Summary

One of these days, someone's going to have something go their way. Today is not one of those days.

Chapter Notes

I am SO sorry for how long it's taken for this to update!! I put this project on pause for a while to write my entry for HQ Magic Fest, and then I wound up rewriting a lot of scenes once I got back to it, and work is busy this time of the year, so... y'know... me making excuses. Heh.

Anyway, I'm not dead, and neither is BitW! I hope you guys enjoy this chapter!

Kenji preferred Eventide's stables at night. They were quiet, devoid of all of the hissing and growling of rowdy dragons. The creatures were asleep now, save for the one beside him. The only sounds were the occasional sleepy grunt or snore.

The dragon next to him huffed bubbles out her snout and nudged his back with it. She was a deep forest green, with splashes of white coating horns and claws and the end of her tail. In the dim crystal lighting of the stable, she would have just looked like a dark blob to human eyes, but she was stunning with scales that always shined like new. And she was hungry.

"Alright, alright." Kenji sighed and gently pushed her nose away. "I know. That was a long trip. Gimme a second, here."

He unfastened her harness and secured it to the wall near the stall's entrance, and the dragon sat herself down on the ocean floor with forced patience. She watched his every move as he put aside the riding equipment, and when he left and returned with a net full of fish, she thwapped her tail against the seafloor like a weird underwater dog. A weird underwater dog with scales, and even worse breath.

Kenji released the net, and the weights tied to it allowed it to sink to the floor. Jade wasted no time in speeding over and nuzzling the thing open. She chomped onto any dead fish that began to float out, determined not to let any out of her sight.

Kenji smiled into a yawn as he rubbed between the horns on her head. He mumbled a 'good job,' before leaving and closing the stall behind him.

Her chowing could be heard from the stable hall. She wasn't the most quiet of eaters, not by a longshot.
He was in the middle of another yawn when he saw a flash of black and white down the hall, near the entrance. He was about to say something when those colors- or lack of colors- came rushing toward him, arching through the water and coming back up to grab Kenji by the shoulders.

"Fucking finally," Eita said, maybe too close to Kenji's face. His voice was quiet enough as not to disturb the dragons, but it still felt like he was being scolded.

"You're panicked. What did Yuuji do?"

Eita let go of him, allowing for a bit of space between them. "Nothing. Yet. Haruki said he left the village a while ago. Probably to get more of those…" He waved a hand and looked off at nothing in particular. “…paper-spell-things."

"About time."

"And then Haruki said that you hadn't come back yet, and I thought I was gonna have to go all the way to Ironfall."

"Why?" Kenji asked, then swam around Eita and toward the exit himself. He didn't want to disturb a bunch of grouchy dragons in the middle of the night. "What's the emergency? Gandril better not be sending me somewhere else already."

"Akira's still there, right? Alone?"

Kenji glanced over his shoulder. Eita was following him, and he looked somewhat distraught.

"It's Wakatoshi's weird fortune table… thing." Eita ignored the raised brow Kenji gave him, because he knew the other had some idea of what he was referring to. "It's pointing to Ironfall as a danger zone."

"North Ironfall is always a danger zone."

"Apparently now more than ever. So, he's still alone, isn't he?"

Kenji stopped when they were out in the open, just before the underwater 'streets,' with a few crystal street lamps illuminating the two in blue.

He twisted his lips. "Define alone."

"That is not comforting."

"Okay, well, he's not alone. He's with the shitty help that you hired."

Eita still looked lost, and Kenji could see his eyes rolling back slightly as he tried to figure out what 'help' that could possibly be. Certainly not the Black Swan or that useless bartender from Mooresville. Aside from whatever stranger might have picked up a wanted poster somewhere, all that really left was…

"You fucking didnt."

“Well they were there, and they clearly weren’t getting the job you gave them done, so I gave them an alternative!"

“You left Akira with a group of shitty pirates?"

“You knew they were shitty, and you still hired them?”
“As a backup!” Eita tossed his arms up. “And I’m getting sick of repeating that. At least I knew they were a last resort and didn’t leave one of our own with them!”

“Look,” Kenji turned and started down the street that led back home, “Akira found some clues on Ironfall. Leaving him there to gather information is one thing, but sending him after a bunch of sacred artifacts is another. I figured he could use a bodyguard. Or five.”

“But the pirates.”

“And,” he continued, with emphasis, “I didn’t want to leave those guys to go hunting for the stuff we’re after by themselves, either. Akira gets some backup, and they get a babysitter. It seemed like a good plan, alright?”

Eita followed alongside him. “I’m telling Gandril you left our information hunter with a bunch of pirates.”

Kenji shot him an unimpressed, sidelong glance. “Didn’t you just get back from visiting, who was it, again? Pirate Captain Wakatoshi?”

“Doesn’t count. We grew up with Wakatoshi.” Eita swam up ahead and made a point to block Kenji’s path. “Which brings me back to the whole ‘danger zone’ thing. I don’t care if Akira’s got pirate bodyguards or a almighty god watching over him. Wakatoshi seemed dead serious about steering clear of Ironfall.”

“He’s dead serious about everything,” Kenji mumbled, then moved to swim around Eita.

The other snatched him by the tail. “The captain of the most feared ship among the islands is telling us that something is a huge threat. The guy shares a living space with a crocotta, a naga, and a fucking redcap. If he says it’s bad news, I’m gonna believe him.”

“I just got back from Ironfall,” Kenji groaned, but Eita could already feel him giving in, even as he yanked his tail out of his hold.

“So send Yuuji to drag him back here! Shit, Kenji, aren’t you supposed to be the boss now?”

“Only because Keiji turned down the offer.” There might have been the slightest bit of resentment in his voice. “And Yuuji left to get more of those paper slips. Hell knows when he’ll be back. We don’t have anyone else who’s got enough of a handle on shifting to go to the island.”

“Guess that means you’re making a roundtrip, then.”

“We’re making a trip.”

Eita frowned.

Kenji shrugged, palms up and out to either side while he shook his head. “If it’s going to be so dangerous, then I shouldn’t be wandering around the island alone, either, should I?” He couldn’t help but smirk a little when he saw the pissy look Eita gave him in return.

“I hate this.”

“Me too, buddy.”
The Corvus's crew was already making a ruckus by the time the sun rose, but Keiji had, miraculously, managed to sleep through a few hours of it. The thin mattress in his cabin had never been so welcoming, and he sincerely hoped that it would last a few more nights like this.

His legs still felt prickly even now as he made his way to the deck, but he'd take the prickling over the feeling of knives lodged in his feet any day.

He pushed the door to the stairwell open and squinted at the sunlight that so rudely assaulted his face. He was already thinking about heading back to attempt a few more hours of rest, but, he was awake now, and everyone was so damn loud up here.

Especially Koutarou, shouting orders every which way and occasionally glancing down at a clipboard or tugging at a rope to check its secureness. He actually looked dependable like that, but Keiji figured that Daichi must have given him an important position for some reason.

"Keiji!!" he lowered the clipboard so fast at the sight of him that Keiji thought he'd drop the thing.

_Easily distracted._

Now Keiji was back to questioning Daichi's judgement. His list of reasons for doing so was becoming pretty extensive at this point.

The merman raised a hand in a half-wave as Koutarou came bounding up to him.

"How'd you sleep? Did you sleep? Your eyes still look like shit."

"Thanks."

"But! They look less like shit than before! So I guess you did sleep some? On the ship, I mean. I know you did in the water, but--"

"Yes, Koutarou," Keiji said, holding a hand out to gently press the sailor away for some breathing room, "I slept. Thank you."

Koutarou was grinning at him and, for some reason, Keiji felt the need to look away.

"And I guess I should also thank you for dragging me out in the first place."

"Well," he laughed, "you should've let me forever ago!"

Keiji nodded, choosing to watch Ryuu mess with some complicated rope mechanism near the mast. "But I would have been separated from the ship if Tooru wasn't there."

Koutarou crossed his arms, the clipboard dangling from his fingers as he muttered something in agreement.

"You really shouldn't let me distract you from your work."

As if he'd just been scolded by Daichi himself, Koutarou jumped and spun on his heel, clipboard held out in front of him. As he started back over toward Ryuu, the boatswain cast another grin and a wave over his shoulder at Keiji. He then tripped over a pile of ropes, and Ryuu was soon laughing and calling him unflattering things.
"That was cute," came Tooru's voice from behind Keiji. He was wearing that knowing look of his, to which Keiji only raised a brow.

"Come again?"

"Nothing. Keep pretending to be oblivious. It's fine."

Keiji didn't want to spend even a second thinking on those words. "How long have you been up?" he asked, hoping for a quick change in subject and noting the way Tooru's lips pressed into a line. "Or, I suppose I should just assume you never slept."

"You need to drop that, Jiji. I'm a lost cause," Tooru hummed, bright and cheery, like it was honestly a joke. "But you're doing better, and that's what's important!"

"I don't see why I'm the only one worth fretting over."

"Because you're just my fragile Jiji," Tooru said, flinging his arms around Keiji and earning a grunt in return.

"There's a knife in my boot, and I know how to use them."

"'Them'? Is it 'a' knife, or ten?"

"The knife," Keiji said, and stepped down on the other's toes, but not too hard, "and the boot."

Tooru yelped and stumbled away. He lifted his foot up, clumsily balancing on one leg as he rubbed it through his shoe.

Keiji paid no mind to the pathetic whines and stepped over to the railing. "I didn't even use any force."

Tooru didn't mention that his legs were already in pain, because that would mean admitting to Keiji that he really was worth worrying over. He didn't doubt this was planned. So, instead, he just mumbled a "mean" that didn't hold an ounce of real malice, and followed him to the edge of the ship.

They were both quiet at first, just staring down at the water, as if it were going to be the one to come up with a less touchy subject.

"I can't do that every night," Keiji said after some time. "Even with you there. Someone will catch on."

"To be fair, I think Tetsu already has."

And then Keiji was looking at the water as if it had personally offended him. Given the shit he'd been feeling up until now, maybe it had. "You think so, too?"

Another thoughtful hum. "I think someone with a criminal history involving magic and nagas would be able to figure it out. He might even be onto your stalker."

Keiji looked over his shoulder, first scanning to be sure no one was within earshot, then focusing on Koutarou. He looked frustrated, arguing something with Taketora, but Keiji was paying more attention to his hair than anything.

"You sense it."
Keiji turned back to the water, hands clasped as he leaned over the railing. "If he's anything like us, he isn't aware of it. I kept shrugging off the feeling, because he doesn't show any signs of land exhaustion, but..."

"Take it from someone with better senses--"

"And shit eyesight."

Tooru pouted, but continued, "He isn't human. Not completely, anyway."

Keiji only offered a small sound that might've been one of agreement, and continued to stare down at the waves. The oh-so-inviting waves.

No sooner did he look down did a white bird land itself in the water.

He squinted at it, because it didn't resemble a seagull, or a pelican, or any sort of bird he'd actually expect, in the slightest.

But then, he recalled seeing a crow with Noya, so maybe it wasn't as peculiar as he thought. "What do you make of...?" he began to ask, but Tooru was already missing from his side.

He heard a frantic "borrowing this!" from the siren, then some retorts from Ryuu, and Tooru was racing back to the railing with a pistol in hand.

An unloaded pistol, which upon failure to fire, he tossed with frightening force at the bird in the water.

The swan squawked, and barely managed to avoid the projectile.

It flapped its wings, preparing for flight, and Tooru opened his mouth. The beginnings of what might have been a melody were quickly silenced by a hand, however.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Arf youf kidding meef?!” Tooru muffle-yelled into Hajime's palm. By the time he pulled himself free, the swan was already far out of reach, or at least far enough for Tooru's song to be useless.

The siren spun around and fixed the sailor with a hard stare. "Are you following me or something? I could've just been yawning, you know!"

"This crew seems to have a knack for following people around," Keiji mumbled, casting another glance at a certain someone across the deck.

"Daichi says I can't gag you, so I'm stuck keeping close watch, instead." Hajime peered over the edge before giving Tooru another questioning look. "Did you throw Ryu'u's gun off the ship?"

"I'm sure you have backups." Tooru huffed, snatched Keiji's wrist, and dragged him away from the scene. He waved a dismissive hand and an uninterested comment when Ryuu ran up to him with clenched fists and unkind words.

They were making their way back to Tooru's room soon enough, and Keiji had to physically pull back on the hand still attached to his wrist to get Tooru to slow down and give him an explanation.
"This isn't good," Tooru whispered, eyes darting on search of eavesdroppers.

"I gathered that much. Are you going to tell me why?"

Tooru worried his lip, and Keiji sighed. This time he was grabbing Tooru's wrist and doing the dragging.

"Is this at all connected to the reason we're here?"

He took Tooru's silence as enough of an answer. Once they were in the siren's cabin, Keiji stood with his back to the door, arms folded and waiting.

Tooru breathed in, and was too quiet for too long of a moment after that. Keiji said nothing, only waited, until Tooru finally met his gaze.

“I've… seen that swan, before,” he admitted.

Keiji lowered his head in a silent, 'Go on.'

“I've seen it among pirates, Keiji.” And now it had seen them, their hiding place, and it was out of their grasp. “Pirates who are about to know a lot more than we'd like.”

The swan wasn't the only out-of-place bird to visit the Corvus that day. Though, maybe the second to visit would only be considered out of place to any other vessel.

Crows were much less of an oddity to this one.

It was mere hours after the swan’s departure that Asahi made his clumsy arrival.

Ryuuk ducked as the bird came diving down to the ship. In a burst of smoke and feathers, the crow was replaced with a full-grown man, and the transition had Asahi stumbling for a few steps as he ran toward Daichi's quarters.

Noya jumped in front of him, arms outstretched, more to block his path than to welcome him. He opened his mouth, no doubt to reprimand the familiar for, once again, not stopping to greet him first, but Asahi cut him off.

"I'm sorry, Noya!" he said, breath heavy as he darted past the tiny sailor.

Daichi was leaning over his desk, more maps and letters and lists strewn about when Asahi swung the door open. There was a loud smack of the doorknob hitting the wall, and it made Daichi jump and drop the unlit match meant for the cigar between his lips.

Noya followed close behind, but Asahi barely registered the sailor’s "The hell's gotten into you?" as he held out the tiny, rolled up paper he'd been carrying around as a bird for days.

"You've received word from Hitoka," Asahi said between gasps for air.

Daichi stared, and the cigar hung slightly from his mouth as he regarded the feathered man and the small scroll.
The fact that Asahi seemed so exhausted was not a good sign.

"From Hitoka?" he echoed, worry far from masked, as if to ask, 'And not from Suga?'

Asahi stiffened just a little, lips set in a fine line before he repeated. "From Hitoka."

Daichi stood, and when he made his way around the temporary desk, his movements were slow. Too slow. He’d been waiting for Asahi to return with news for days. He should have been running up and snatching the note from the man without hesitation.

But the presentation of this news wasn't what he'd wanted. He didn't know if he was bracing himself, or too afraid for the worst to move properly, but that tiny letter was the most intimidating thing he’d ever laid eyes on.

Noya stepped back, worry marking his own features, and Daichi took the note into his hands.

They watched as he read, and the more he read, the shakier his hands became.

"Pirates?" The word came out dark, almost unrecognizable as Daichi’s voice.

Asahi braced himself. "It's a rumor, Daichi. We can't know for sure."

"But he's missing."

Asahi winced at the snap in his tone.

"She didn't write anything about which ship it was."

"She didn't say, either,” Asahi nearly whispered.

"But it's just a rumor, isn't it?" Noya chimed in, "And the only reason any pirates would go after Suga is if he knew something about Kenma, right? Since we found him at the Dockside?"

Noya folded his arms and huffed out his nose. "But the pirates who were after him got wrecked by that serpent! Suga probably just...."

Asahi frowned as Noya seemed to strain himself over thinking this through.

"Just...?"

"...went on a vacation?"

"Without telling anyone, Noya?"

"Even if you don't know which ship..." Daichi's voice was shaking with his body now, but with fear or anger, Asahi wasn't too sure. "...what about a time? When did they leave port? Which direction? What size was the ship? Anything?"

Asahi watched him with a face that pleaded forgiveness. "Daichi, I'm Sorry, I don't know."

"You said there were rumors! Someone has to have known something!" Daichi slammed the note down on the desk, but the forcefulness of it all felt dimmed by how much he was clearly trembling.

Fear, Asahi decided.

The familiar raised his hands before him. "I scouted the town after Hitoka gave me the note,
but I couldn't find anything useful. Some said they saw the ship headed west, others east. I tried, Daichi, I really did." He inhaled an unsteady breath. "I want him to be safe, too."

"Then you didn't try enough! Did you take on a human form there? Did you even ask anyone--"

"Daichi!"

The captain froze, and Noya was standing between him and Asahi now, arms out as if defending the latter from the other's words. Words that sounded nothing like Daichi's to begin with.

"He's been flying for days!" Noya said, and maybe not as calmly as someone trying to stop a fight should have. "He's been straining himself for you and Suga, so don't take this out on him!"

"Noya, it's fine, he--"

"No, it's not." Noya glanced at Asahi once before whipping his head around to Daichi again. Guilt was already setting in the captain's features. "Making you or anyone else feel like shit ain't gonna solve anything!"

Asahi began to reply, but stopped as he watched Daichi slowly lower himself back into his seat.

"...I'm sorry," he said, after some time. "It's just... I don't..." The unused cigar was between his fingers now, and he brought his other hand up and over his face. "There has to be something."

Asahi had never seen hope drain from a man so quickly as now. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen Daichi look so hopeless period.

"I could..." the familiar began, "...try to search around a little more for information outside of Mooresville." He swallowed, and just getting out the next suggestion had Asahi shivering. "I-If it's pirates, then maybe someone from Eagle--"

"No," Noya said, with a warning fire in his eyes as he stared up at Asahi. "You are not going there."

"Noya, this isn't up to you--"

"You're my familiar!"

"W-When have you ever used that against me?"

"It's dangerous!"

"Noya's right," Daichi said, hand still touching his forehead as he watched no spot in particular on the map in front of him. "Eagle Head Isles are out of the question. Even if someone there knows, it's too much of a risk. You're important to me, too, Asahi." His brows furrowed as he continued to stare at the map, and at some point he actually started paying attention to the images on it. Specifically, the small cluster of islands they were already headed for.

"Ironfall has a ton of suspicious shit," Noya said, as if reading Daichi’s thoughts. "Even if we aren't headed for the northern island, there's gotta be some weirdos lingering around that we can get something outta."
“Ironfall is a ways from Morrigan’s Coast. I’m not sure how likely it is that anyone there would have news…” Asahi caught the way Daichi’s expression fell, something he didn't think was possible with how dark it already was. “But, it’s a better plan than none! I still think it would be best if I headed back out. Tried to scout out some more leads.”

Noya stomped his foot on the floor so abruptly that Asahi actually jumped.

“You’re staying here!” he ordered. “What good is going back out there going to do? By the time you find another lead, there might not even be enough time to get the news back to us. You’ve been gone for days, Asahi.”

“You running into pirates isn’t in anyone’s best interest, either…. Daichi trailed off, and a short silence that felt longer than it truly was followed as everyone tried to think up an alternative plan of action. He’d wished he’d ignored Noya and Saeko and just set course for Morrigan’s Coast to begin with. But, even if they had, he wasn’t sure how much good it’d do when the pirates were undoubtedly already long gone. They’d just be wasting time grasping after limited information that Asahi already had, anyway.

As much as he hated it, without a real lead, continuing as planned was just as good an option.

Daichi slammed his hands down on the map, the resulting vibration knocking over several pegs and wooden chips that had been placed upon it.

“We have an informant.” His eyes were wide with the realization. “We have a library of leads right here.”

Noya made an “ooooh” sound that sounded almost like a squawk. Something that Asahi was not going to comment on.

“The siren!” Noya was grinning now, and Asahi just looked confused as could be.

“What siren?” he asked, looking more horrified than usual.

“Oh boy,” Noya turned his grin up at him. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

If there was ever a time to be proud of his ability to hide behind a mask, now was one of them.

Tooru was leaning against the doorway to his room, as casually as if Daichi had just caught him getting ready for a walk, and certainly not as if he was in the midst of panicking over some goddamned swan sighting.

He tapped his fingers along the silver bangles lining his upper arm, and he didn’t miss the uncomfortable look on Daichi’s face when a small, airy hum accompanied the act. It wasn’t as bad as Hajime’s flat-out scowls, though.

“You think your friend was taken by pirates?”

“It’s a rumor, but not one I’m willing to rule out.”

“Because of what happened with the sea dweller you’ve got stashed with your deckhands?”
And because Suga has a history.

“Someone wanted Kenma,” Daichi said, expression dark. Tooru didn’t correct him, didn’t tell him who the Catfish Calamity’s crew had really been after. “It was enough for an attack on my ship. I wouldn’t put it past someone involved in this to kidnap an innocent innkeeper.” Well, as innocent as Suga could be, which maybe wasn’t as much as outsiders seemed to think. “Do you know anything? Any clue as to who it could be? Where they could be taking him?”

Tooru would have much rather spent time contemplating the amusing, complete mess of misunderstandings taking place on this ship than have this discussion.

“There are a number of ships that would love to get their hands on a merman, Captain.” Not a lie. That stupid swan kept popping into his train of thought, though. “You’re invested in the world of trade and magic--”

“The magic part is unintentional.”

“--so you should know just what sort of shady business goes down. Just ask your first mate.”

Daichi made a face. A face that said his crew probably needed to stop sharing their criminal histories with strangers.

“But, let’s say your friend was captured because of the merman. Let’s say it was by some rough bunch of pirates.” Tooru tipped his head, and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. “Don’t you think they would have gotten some information out of him by now? They could be headed our way, for all we know.”

Daichi’s shoulders lifted with an inhale. “The sooner they find us, the better.”

Tooru’s eyes went wide, something he didn’t try to mask, this time, as he watched the Corvus’s captain before him. Based on first impressions, and everything he’d heard from Keiji and the rest of the crew so far, begging for a pirate attack should have been the last thing this man had on his mind.

“Is this innkeeper of yours really just a friend, Captain?” he asked, that look of surprise still lingering.

Daichi’s eyes remained settled on Tooru, but his expression was almost distant. Contemplative.

“I would appreciate it...” he eventually got out, “…if you could do a bit of information hunting on Ironfall, if you think there’s a chance in finding more leads there. If we don’t cross paths with them before then, that is.”

Tooru remained in the doorway even as Daichi disappeared down the hall. The surprise in his face shifted to something darker.

*If they didn’t cross paths before then, huh?*

Daichi Sawamura was soon either going to be a very lucky, or very unlucky man.
'At least they aren't starving me,' was a thought that crossed Suga's mind a few too many times recently.

"I'd enjoy the meal more with less bruises," was another thought, and this time he said it out loud when a plated fish was set on the floor in front of him.

His visitor wasn't Satori or the awkward crocotta this time (thank goodness), but instead a girl with long platinum hair that fell in waves against her back. It wasn't her first visit. She'd brought him his meals on more than one occasion already, and he was always grateful when it was her.

She straightened with a light and airy giggle. "I'm sure you would! But if it makes matters any better, the captain did ask them to tone down the violence. It isn't quite necessary when you look awful enough as it is."

Suga stared down at the plate. He couldn't even identify what kind of fish it was. Given what Satori had said about their ship having plenty of 'oddities,' he briefly wondered if it was some sort of rare or magic species. Or if it was really edible. "I think I have mixed feelings about that statement."

Her smile softened. "I'm sorry. They've gone overboard. I would tend to your injuries, but we really do need your help, and Satori really thinks this will work out in our favor."

"Your crew is honestly frightening of you believe anything about the phrase 'Satori thinks,' is a good idea."

Another giggle, a hand to her mouth and all. She honestly seemed too innocent and nonthreatening to be a pirate, let alone one associated with the Black Swan. "He's really not all bad, you know."

A reluctant sigh. "I know."

"None of us are."

"I can believe that, but you are pirates, and I am covered in bruises. Which I will keep bringing up until I at least get a five star meal as an apology."

She sat herself down not far across from him. "The fish is the best you'll be getting for the moment, I'm afraid," she said as she smoothed out the ends of her dress over her knees. "I had some for lunch, myself. It's actually quite good!" She clapped her hands together with a smile, and Suga almost felt relaxed by her warm presence.

But then he remembered being the one bringing meals to a prisoner himself, and he suddenly felt a little less relaxed.

"Oh, here," she started, mistaking his look of discomfort for something else. She adjusted the shackles around his hands, and soon they were linked down in front of him instead of hanging high above his head from the wall. He was still bound, still chained to the wall, but at least he could feed himself.

Suga pushed his arms out in front of him, stretching as best as he could with them still chained together. Sore was an understatement.

He picked up the baked fish with his hands. It was still warm- a pleasant surprise. "Thank you," he said, sounding much too cheerful for someone with a black eye.
"You're surprisingly... um... for a prisoner..."

"Well behaefed?" Suga asked, mouth full with his first bite. At least he was confident it was edible, now.

She nodded.

Suga swallowed. "I tried the whole 'throwing a fit and sulking' thing, the first day, but it didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. Which, I kind of expected."

"Well, rest assured, as long as your friends hand over the merman, we'll give you back to them safe and sound!" She sounded genuine, and he felt like a could trust her, even if he knew that was a bad idea because... well, pirates.

But then, he had called himself one once.

But he was also thirteen when he had.

"You're very pleasant, you know, all things considered." Suga took and swallowed another bite. "So, they treat you well...? Being that you're the only..."

She tilted her head, confused, but then she seemed to catch on, and she laughed. "The only woman?"

"Are you?"

"I am, and the answer is yes. I'm treated like an equal among them."

That was both a relief and concerning. Surely she had some sort of terrifying, dangerous side then, right?

"You're too friendly. Are you trying to trick me into something? What'd they put you up to?"

"You're awfully friendly for an ex-pirate yourself, Koushi."

Okay. So that news was out in the open. He thought again, 'I was thirteen.'

"And 'ex' is the key there." He smiled, still charming as ever despite bruises and bits of fish stuck in his teeth. "But I guess that's fair. I was nice to prisoners back then, too." He looked up, thoughtful. "I helped one escape, once. If we're that similar, then you'll let me go too, right?"

When he looked back at her, she shook her head, still smiling, even if a bit apologetic. "I'm afraid that's out of the question."

Suga made a regretful "hm," and continued with his meal. Once finished, the woman fixed his restraints back to their previous position with a small, "Sorry."

"So, you know my name. Do I get yours?" he asked, and he tried not to sound like his mouth was still full.

She giggled. "I do hope you aren't flirting with me."

He shook his head. He reserved that sort of behavior for just one person.

"Alisa," she said as she scooped up his finished plate. "My name is Alisa."
"Pretty," he said, simply. She left shortly after, and Suga fiddled with a tiny piece of fish bone still pressed to the inside of his cheek. Whatever breed of fish, if it was even really fish, they fed him, its bones were thicker than what he was used to eating. Stronger.

He wondered if it was strong enough to pick a lock.

Shouyou and Tobio's shared room was small to begin with. They had their hammocks set up one above another, as close to the wall as possible, for a reason. There was enough extra space for a certain merman and his barrel, and a couple of chairs, but they typically kept the small space cleared out as much as possible for morning exercises, being that neither of them were very good at keeping still.

The new addition to their room was going to make morning pushups and sword practice a little cramped, though. Not that Tobio should've been practicing with weapons in the confined space to begin with, but what Daichi didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

The boys stood side by side, Tobio crossing his arms with his perpetual pout, and Shouyou continuously twisting his face like he wasn't sure what expression to make.

They'd managed to, miraculously, get the wooden crate through the door, thanks to it being less bulky all around, and more lengthy. It had once held a deal of furniture inside, but with that delivery over and done with, Kuroo had talked the merchant into letting them keep the container.

The guy had asked if it was for extra storage on the ship, and Kuroo agreed. He didn't mention it was to "store" a merman.

"Are you sure this thing won't flood our room?" Tobio asked, stepping up to peer into the crate.

Kuroo and Koutarou had, apparently, done a little extra patchwork to ensure that it wouldn't fail in holding water. It looked sloppy, but Kuroo swore it worked just fine when they tested it.

Shouyou was still eyeing the thing with conflicting expressions. "Couldn't we just get Kenma a bathtub?"

Kuroo reminded the two of his presence when he set a firm hand down on Shouyou’s shoulder from behind. He leaned forward and pointed at the crate as best as I could from his sling. “You think you're gonna find a bathtub as big as that thing?” He snickered when Shouyou pouted. “We wouldn't be able to afford it if we could, anyway.”

“So, Kenma doesn't deserve the best, is what you're saying?” Shouyou looked up and over his shoulder at Kuroo, eyes wide and frighteningly serious as could be.

Kuroo began to think about how terrifying it would be to have both him and Kenma giving him those intense stares at once.

“Uh,” was all he said, because it was completely true that he would love to offer Kenma a more luxurious housing situation. He’d also love a more comfortable bed for himself, but the Corvus was not a luxury ship, unfortunately.
Tobio stared into the crate. The water they'd already filled it with rippled with the ship's gentle rocking. “It's better than what he already has, either way.”

“Anything's five stars compared to that damn barrel!” Kuroo said, and he grinned and moved on ahead, past the boys and the crate, and over to said barrel.

Said barrel, which anyone else might have assumed was empty, save for some water, if they hadn't known any better.

“Hey, Catfish.” Kuroo leaned over the edge, and, surely enough, there was Kenma’s face, peering up through the ripples back at him.

The exchange of gazes didn't last long, as Kenma ducked his head back down to stay hidden.

Kuroo's grin only faltered for a brief moment. “Can you be social long enough to get a little more comfortable?” He leaned his good elbow on the edge of the barrel. “We'll let ya go back to sulking as soon as we're done. Promise.”

When Kenma looked back up, he was definitely glaring.

“Bad choice of words?” Kuroo tried. “Sorry. We've got you a better soaking space, though, so, please?”

Shouyou was beside him then, and his sudden popping up from over the edge of Kenma’s space had the merman receding back into the water. Not that there was much more room to.

“Kenma!” he blurted, like he was greeting him for the first time in months. It had only been minutes. “You need to at least look at this thing! It's like, twice as big as your barrel!”

Kenma looked up, slowly, and shifted his gaze from one to the other. After some moment of silently judging their expectant faces, he brought his head above the surface.

“Could you please…” he began, and apparently didn't need to say much more for them to step back from the container.

Shouyou’s face still lit up. “We can help you in whenever you're ready!”

Kenma pushed some wet bangs away from his face just enough to get a better look at the crate just a few feet away.

“You don't look impressed,” Kuroo said, frown turning.

“I don't look un impressed.”

“Yes you do.”

Kenma shot Kuroo a look, and Shouyou was apparently oblivious to it all.

“It’s way bigger though, right? You'd definitely rather be in it than that stuffy little thing!”

Kenma looked at the crate again, and then at Tobio. He looked too focused for someone staring at a crate of water.

“I think we filled it too high.”

“He can’t swim even if this is full!”

“He can at least go under and stretch out a little!”

“That’s not what swimming is, idiot!”

“Children, please.” Kuroo turned to Tobio. “You wanna help me get him in there?”

Shouyou jumped too closely into his line of vision. “We can handle it!” He jabbed a finger at Kuroo’s sling. It wasn’t too forceful, so the man only frowned at him for it. “You’ve only got one arm to work with.”

“Thanks. I almost forgot about that.”

Kenma made a small sound at Kuroo’s remark. Not quite a laugh. Not quite something close to a laugh, either, like he might’ve done if in a better mood. A small sound of acknowledgement, maybe. It was better than nothing.

Kenma was silent for a moment after that sound, but then said, hardly audible over Shouyou and Tobio’s bickering, “This really… wasn’t necessary.”

Kuroo blew some messy, black hair away from his face, only for it to fall back in place shortly after. “Sure it was. You’re a guest, not a sardine we’re selling to the fish market,” he said, watching the two squabble. “Besides, watching you all bummed out is bumming us out.” When he looked back at Kenma, he wasn’t sure what expression he was seeing. The merman was always so hard to read, but he figured if it wasn’t hurt, it was at least annoyance. The latter was nothing new. “I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. You do whatever you feel is gonna help you. I just want to help.”

He paused, and corrected, “We want to help.”

He didn’t know how much this would really help. He was sure the barrel had little to do with Kenma’s mood. The source of that wasn’t something he had much control over, though.

Shouyou bounced his way around the barrel so he was behind Kenma, and made to slip his hands beneath the merman's arms. He stopped before he could actually touch skin, and asked, "You ready?"

After a short nod, Kenma was being lifted from the lukewarm water of his barrel. Not lifted very high, thanks to Shouyou's height, but enough for Tobio to gently take hold of the end of his tail and help him out all the way.

Kenma was practically clinging to Shouyou during the transfer. The deckhand couldn't see his face as they moved him, but Kuroo could, and it screamed, 'Don't drop me.'

The boys had the sense not to just plop him into the water. Largely due to the first couple times they'd helped Kenma in and out of the barrel in the past.

Instead, they slowly lowered him into it, releasing his tail first and then working him all the way inside.

Kenma shivered at the chill of the water, but it was pleasant. Petal Reef’s waters were always pretty chilly, too.

But when water sloshed out the sides of the container, Tobio smacked the back of Shouyou's head.
"I told you!"

Kenma stayed on his rear once he was released. He could sit, or as close as sitting went for merfolk, more comfortably in this. He wasn't too cramped. The walls weren't as high as the barrel's, though, so he'd have to lay down if he wanted to be completely submerged. It also made hiding himself a little more difficult.

But still, he could lay down in it. He could stretch out all he wanted, and climbing in and out on his own would likely be a possibility now.

He gripped the edges of the crate and stared down into the cool water between its wall and himself.

"...Better?" Kuroo asked after some pause.

Kenma thought on it for a moment. "I'll tell you when my cramps have gone away."

"Oh, come on." Kuroo rolled his eyes. "It can't be any worse."

"I suppose."

"Did you wanna keep the barrel around for nostalgia's sake?"

A tired, unimpressed glance from the merman, and then he slid down until he was submerged.

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For once, Lev's crew seemed to have luck on their side.

Putting aside the fact that the stone was basically fused to his hand, its icy magic had aided them in escaping the temple. The entrance had even, mysteriously, been wide open by the time they got there.

The good news was that they made it out alive, and the ground didn't collapse on them all after they got out, either.

The bad news, was that Akira wasn't alone when they had gotten back, and it wasn't with the company of another merman this time. Rather, a group of what Lev would describe as 'human shaped rocks,' all of them with bright, hot trails of magma streaming throughout their nooks and crannies.

The worse news was that they were, presently, tied up to poles within some kind of stone shelter in the cherufe village. The village that they really weren't prepared to enter. Especially not under these circumstances.

"At least it's not another tree...?" Kanji had tried to be helpful, but Akira just knocked his head back against the pole.

Figured, that their luck had to be short lived.

"Why can't you do the ice thing again?" Morisuke hissed under his breath once they were left alone.
Lev fiddled with his hands behind his back. The stone was unmistakably still there, and still cold to the touch. The thought of it having run out of magic didn't seem likely.

But, no matter how much he willed it, it didn't do a thing aside from make him oddly chilly, despite their closeness to the lava pits.

"Maybe it only works when we're in mortal peril?" he suggested.

"We're in peril right now!"

Lev made a whiny sound. He was even more frustrated than Morisuke or the others. After all, it was his hand the stone was stuck to. The fact that they'd just risked their asses in a temple trying to get the thing to fight off the cherufe, only to have it not work now that they were with the cherufe, was enough of a letdown without him feeling personally responsible for it.

And he did. A little. Even if part of that disappointment was just in not being able to use some really cool ice powers whenever he wanted.

When one of the cherufe returned to the shelter, it was one of the same that they found restraining Akira back at the temple. He was young, molten cracks burning brighter than some of the other villagers. The rocks atop his head were darker than the rest of him, almost black against the reddish browns, and they peeked up. Lev thought his head looked much like a flame. Or maybe a turnip. A flame seemed cooler, and more relevant.

There was the sound of stone against stone with every motion he made as he stepped inside, and when he approached them, and the group fell silent.

Morisuke was the first to notice the (presumably fire-proof) drawstring bag dangling from the creature's fingers at his side.

No one else took notice until the stone man lifted and tugged the bag open. He reached in to take something, slowly. The bag was lumpy, and a lot of the crew was inwardly panicking over the possibility of it containing hot coals or something. Punishment for trespassing in ancient ruins? Or for, y'know, basically destroying them. Or maybe it would be something to forcefully remove the stone stuck to Lev's palm, if any of them had even noticed it was there, yet. No one had said anything when they were tying him up.

When he did remove his hand, he wasn't holding a coal, but something perfectly round and of a pinkish purple color. It wasn't one that was familiar to the prisoners, but it definitely looked like some kind of fruit.

"Um, our leader says not to let you guys starve," the cherufe said, awkwardly. He sure didn't seem as intimidating as some of the others who had also dragged them here, even with his impressive height and molten veins.

Lev kicked his legs once against the floor. "Don't reach in there all dramatic if it's just food!"

The cherufe balked. "I... sorry?"

"I thought there was gonna be some kinda deadly bug in there," Kanji said with a sigh of relief.

"Maybe the food's poisonous," Takahiro offered, dryly.

Lev gasped.
The cherufe frowned at them. He looked at the fruit for a long moment, like he was truly inspecting it for threats, then turned to them again. "It's just a fruit..."

Morisuke might have commented on all of this, if he weren't so distracted by the steady knocking sound from down the line of captives. He thought it might be drums from outside, or something of the like, but it was really just Akira knocking his head back against the post in frustration. He was tempted to do the same.

"Our hands are tied," Issei pointed out, and he cherufe just nodded, "How are we supposed to eat?"

The cherufe considered this for a moment. "I'll... have to feed you, I guess?"

"Hm. Romantic."

Morisuke wanted to kick Issei so badly.

"I'm sorry." The lava man stepped over to the end of the line, where Akira was tied down, and offered an apologetic smile. "This is as awkward for me as it is for you?"

"Is it?" Akira mumbled. When the fruit was held out to him, he stared down at the thing like it might bite him back. It looked juicy, though, and the heat was drying him out so badly. He sucked down what pride he had and leaned forward to take a chomp out of the food.

His teeth wound up just grazing it, and it fell straight out of the cherufe's uncomfortably hot hands to the dirt floor.

Akira made a face like he'd just gotten a big whiff of sulfur. Takahiro and Issei laughed.

"Sorry!" The cherufe clumsily picked it back up and held it out, but now there was dirt all over the thing. "I, uh, was trying not to burn you, so..."

"Can't you just untie my hands?"

"No? I really, uh, don't want to lose this job--"

"Just my hands. I still have a torso stuck to this pillar."

The cherufe bit his lip, dark stone teeth against a lighter stone mouth. Red hot light shined from inside him every time he spoke. "I don't think I'm allowed to do that."

"See," Lev shouted, "He's loyal to his boss, unlike some people I know!" He leaned forward with a bright look in his eyes, and the cherufe seemed visibly uncomfortable under his gaze. "You wanna join my crew?"

"Lev!" Morisuke banged his head against his captain's shoulder.

Takahiro snorted. "Why would he join if he was loyal to someone else?"

"He'd burn a ship down, anyway," Issei supplied.

"But I could use a cool fire-person on my side!" Lev whined.

"So..." Takahiro said, trying to divert from Lev's antics, but failing to suppress a laugh. "...you're feeding us. That's great, don't get me wrong." He tried to angle his neck in a way that was more comfortable against the stone pillar. It didn't really work in his favor. "But that means you
"Don't plan to kill us."

"Yet," Issei added. "You want something, though. You're keeping us here."

The cherufe pulled the dirtied fruit back. His gold and red, glowing eyes darted from one pirate to another.

"Our leader is..." His gaze settled back to Issei and Takahiro. "...concerned with what you may have found in there."

Lev clutched the smooth stone in his palm.

"Okay, that makes sense." Issei nodded. "Are you gonna kill us after, though?"

The cherufe looked offended. A surprising reaction, really.

"How barbaric do you think we are?"

"You do have us tied up to big hunks of stone," Takahiro said with a tilt of the head upward, to said stone.

"Coming from pirates." Also surprisingly, the cherufe looked like he regretted the bite in his tone after he spoke.

Akira still snorted at the statement, as if in agreement.

"What if we say we didn't find anything out of the ordinary?" Morisuke tried. "What will it take to convince you to let us go?"

The cherufe pushed out his rocky, bottom lip in a thoughtful sort of pout. "That... would be up to our leader to decide. If you stole anything, he'd want it back."

"We didn't take a thing!" Kanji announced, loud and abrupt, and Issei knocked a shoulder against his.

The cherufe didn't look convinced. Which was fair.

"When do we get an audience with this leader of yours?"

"Soon," the cherufe supplied, and there wasn't much more conversation outside of that as he continued to offer each of them food.

Once he was gone, Lev's unusual silence was broken by some less-unusual excitement.

"Morisuke." He bumped his head back against the stone. "What if they notice? What if they cut off my hand?"

"No one's cutting off your hand, Lev," Morisuke whispered.

"You don't know that!" he continued, but at least he kept his voice down, this time. "It's my right hand! I need this hand! I always thought a hook for a hand would be neat, but I think I might be having second thoughts?"

"What the hell ever made you think that would be a good idea?"

"All the famous captains have them!"
"Keep on with this, and you might need a peg leg, too."

Kanji, out of nowhere, gasped, as if he'd just had a brilliant idea. "Do you think we could trade Lev's hand for the hour-ass thing?" Brilliant, indeed.

Lev didn't seem to think so, and he leaned as far from Kanji's end of their little line of prisoners as he could, which meant leaning into Morisuke.

"I'm not sure that we're in a position to make that sort of bargain," Akira said. "They could just take it by force, if they really wanted. We need another strategy if we want to get out of here with both that, and our lives." He had been planning on a civil agreement, to begin with. The stone was just meant to be an emergency backup, and he wasn’t even sure how useful it was now that they knew it controlled water in its solid form, rather than the liquid he’d been betting on. Not that Lev seemed to have any clue how to control it either way.

Kanji peered down at Akira. "They don't seem that threatening, though, do they? They seem kinda nice, all things considered!"

"What exactly does a pirate define as 'nice,' to begin with?" Akira grumbled. He kept staring down at the floor, looking very concentrated. Trying to think up a way out of this with what Eventide needed. "Asking would be easiest," he decided, mostly to himself.

"Come again?" Morisuke leaned forward from the pole as best as he could, trying to get a better view of the merman down the line.

“Just…” He really didn’t want to be the one in this position, but he saw no other choice. Not one with a pleasant future, at least. “...let me do all of the talking, from here on out.”

Kenma had come to the unsurprising conclusion that the crate was much, much more comfortable for sleeping in than the barrel had been.

So, it was a shame that his peaceful slumber was interrupted by a knock at the door. It startled him out of sleep, but he immediately sunk back into the water even after taking a glance at the source of the sound.

Tobio and Shouyou were out, swabbing decks or sparring or whatever it was they did out there. Neither of them ever knocked, so Kenma had figured that whoever it was would just walk away when no response came. His hopes were crushed when he saw the handle turning on the inside.

He tried to sink even lower, as if it would do him any good. As if anyone would think he wasn’t home, that he could possibly be anywhere on the ship but the crate unsupervised. It was difficult to even hide that much so quickly without making a noticeable splash, though. He only ceased his efforts when he caught a glimpse of the person opening the door.

Keiji stepped into the room first, but Kenma didn’t recognize the person that followed behind him. He did, however, recognize the abstract feeling coming off the two of them, a feeling that screamed “seafolk.” Then he remembered Kuroo mentioning something about a siren.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Keiji said, voice low as if Kenma was still asleep, anyway.
Kenma wasn’t sure what to respond with. Rather, he didn’t think he wanted to respond at all, but a small sound of acknowledgement was given anyway.

“I just wanted to check in,” Keiji said, and he raised his hands like he really had to defend himself for coming inside. “Or, I guess, let you know that we’re… here.”

Kenma squinted at him.

Tooru snorted, and moved around to Keiji’s side, almost in front of him. He didn’t waste time in staring Kenma down. He’d never actually seen him until now, only heard of him. “To talk, he means. We figure you don’t have anyone really relatable here as far as fishfolk go.” He tipped his head, the chains of his earring giving a noticeable little jingle. “At least not anyone self-aware.”

Keiji was nodding along with him up until that last part, to which he shot Tooru what the siren supposed was a warning look. Not that he took it to heart.

The words had an effect, though, and they both saw the way Kenma focused on them.

“You mean Koutarou,” he said, not asked, quietly.

Keiji only nodded, while Tooru clapped his hands together with a bright grin.

“So, you’ve noticed, too!” His grin quickly turned upside down when Kenma retracted at his volume.

“I… wasn’t sure. It felt faint, but his aura stood out compared to the others. His, and Noya’s….”

Tooru was nodding with enthusiasm as he went on.

“Yours stands out more.” Something was off about the way Kenma presented the news, like he didn’t want to be saying it at all.

Keiji wasn’t sure if that had to do with the statement itself, or if it was just Kenma being unwilling to converse in general. Or both. So, he pointed a finger at himself, then at Tooru. “Ours, or his?” he asked.

Kenma glanced between the two of them before settling his gaze on Tooru alone.

“You can tell the difference between a merman and a siren, just like that?” Tooru hummed and pulled up a stool from the neglected checkerboard set up for himself, not far from the crate. “Those are some sharp senses, you’ve got there.”

“No,” Kenma said, “I can’t. I can tell when someone’s sick, though.”

Tooru froze on the stool. Kenma was still watching him, eyes burning into his very being, and he was starting to get what Kuroo meant about Kenma’s frightening gazes.

“I’m no more sick than Jiji,” he scoffed.

Keiji, reluctantly, raised a hand, as if to say, ‘That would be me.’

Kenma tore his gaze away, if only in hopes of getting Tooru’s attention off of him in return. “I don’t see what good lying about it will do.”

“He’s suffering from more than just land exhaustion, then.” Not that Keiji found the concept
exactly shocking, after what Tooru had already told him.

The condescending laugh that broke from Tooru’s lips made Kenma flinch. Siren magic may not have had an effect on other sea dwellers, but their voices could sure as hell still be grating at times. And Tooru seemed like he was perfectly capable of being grating without that extra factor, too.

“You just met me,” Tooru said, voice maybe a little too high as he forced out another laugh. “Just now. And you’re going to tell me you can figure out something like that? Based on what, exactly? My aura?”

Kenma retreated a little more, as much as he could without actually sinking back into the water completely. “He said it, not me.” A quick glance at Keiji from the corners of his eyes. “People came through my mother’s clinic from all over these waters.” His voice went a little quiet at the mention of his mother. “I’ve felt this presence before.” He added with a mumble, “I’m only pointing out the obvious.”

*Great,* Keiji thought, because he really wanted their visit to result in more of Kenma’s sulking.

“...He can’t shift back.” Keiji didn’t bother to look at Tooru. He already knew what sort of look he was giving him. “Is that a symptom of something you’re familiar with?”

“I wasn’t a doctor,” Kenma said, but he sounded distracted, now. “I’d recognized auras and things when I’d pass through, but I didn’t work with her...”

“That’s fine,” Keiji said, as soothingly as he could manage. “You don’t need to think on it. I was just being hopeful. We only came here to see how you were doing, anyway.”

A small sound of acknowledgement. Kenma clearly just wanted to sink back into the water.

“Then, we’ll leave you be. My apologies if we disturbed you.” Keiji bowed his head and started for the door, but stopped when he noted that Tooru had yet to move from his seat.

The siren was staring, focused on Kenma, even as he finally took it upon himself to hide beneath the surface, regardless of their presence.

“You know something,” Tooru said, voice like ice. Keiji rested a gentle hand on his shoulder, and made to pull him back, but the siren didn’t budge. “Hide all you want, I know you can still hear me.”

“Tooru,” Keiji whispered.

“You think I’m so sick? Humor me. Diagnose me, I don’t care if you aren’t a doctor.”

“Tooru.”

He stood, but didn’t follow Keiji’s urging hand. “Tell me what someone who won’t even shift to leave a damned crate would know about what we’re going through.”

“That’s enough.” It was more of a hiss this time, an order, and Keiji snatched Tooru by the wrist with more force. “Quit being an insensitive prick, and let him be.” They came here to comfort him, not frighten or distance him.

After some extended staring contest with the unresponsive crate, Tooru finally turned to follow Keiji out the door.
Before they could close the barrier, Keiji caught the faint sound of sloshing water, followed by a quiet, “I know you’re both stupid for doing it.”

The shifting, he assumed Kenma meant. And, well, he couldn’t argue with him, there.

Akira had, by complete accident, begun to doze off against Kanji’s shoulder. The pirate had been staying very still, as statue-like as possible, in his attempts not to wake the merman.

What did wake him, was the loud smack of his own belongings being dropped to the floor in front of him. He tiredly blinked at the old, worn sack. There were loose scrolls sticking out from the opening, and he could tell that whatever was inside had been tampered with, too.

Past the bag, stood two of the rock-people. Neither of them looked like any of the ones who had dragged them to the village. They were unfamiliar.

One stood with his arms folded, the rocks atop his head lighter than the last person, or the one standing next to him, like sandy-colored clay. When he huffed, Akira was certain he saw smoke from his nostrils.

The other, looked less pissy, and about as friendly as one with lava lighting their figure could look. The rocks atop his head were a mess, and if they had been real hair, Akira imagined he’d look something like Keiji. His face was just a little wider than Keiji’s though, and his eyes a little larger. There was the whole ‘lava-rock person’ thing that set them apart, too.

“What the fuck is this?” the smokey one demanded, giving the bag a short kick. A few of the scrolls toppled out and rolled closer to the captives.

“Scrolls,” Akira said. Despite asking that he do all of the talking, he was already off to a bad start. Maybe a proper response could have been offered if he wasn’t stuck on how much more complicated their situation just became.

“No shit!” The irate one leaned forward, over the bag, thin streams of smoke still wisping out his nose and mouth. “But why d’you have ‘em? Where’d you get ‘em?”

The calmer one, or at least the calmer one by contrast, placed a gentle hand on the smokey one’s shoulder and stepped forward, in front of him. “Sorry!” he said, almost frantically. “Don’t mind him! He just gets worked up rather easily, is all.” He turned to the angry cherufe with a pleading expression on his rocky face. “Yasushi, let’s not scare them out of cooperating!”

“I’m gonna scare them into cooperating.” The smokey one, Yasushi, didn’t shrug the other’s hand away, but he still moved to get back into the group’s line of sight. “The hell were you doing in those ruins? What’d you take? The whole place is even more of a wreck than it was before you got out, so what the hell did you do to it?!”

Akira looked up at them, unimpressed. “Am I supposed to answer all of these questions at once?”

With Yasushi’s next huff, Akira wondered if they’d die of breathing in all the smoke before the cherufe could do anything intentionally threatening to them.
“Let’s start with: Who are you people?” the nicer, maybe a little nervous, one offered. “We gathered that you were probably pirates. Is your ship nearby?”

“They were probably plannin’ on loading up the thing with our treasure!” Yasushi sneered.

“Your treasure?” Issei hummed, not minding the look Akira shot him for talking at all. So much for that plan. “According to those scrolls, the temple wasn’t yours, to begin with.”

The more frantic of the two put a hand out to keep Yasushi from storming forward. “They still aren’t!” he said, and heaved a relieved breath when Yasushi backed down. “But we protect them, now. They are, or, were, home to several important artifacts.”

“Artifacts that aren’t even yours?” Takahiro asked.

“I’m not taking this shit, Kaname.” It was interesting, how much brighter the heat streaming through Yasushi’s cracks glowed compared to the other’s.

The other one, Kaname, tried for a smile. “No, but we still protect them. There is too much danger on this island not to.”

Akira was pretty sure he could classify cherufe as part of that danger, but he wasn’t about to tell them that.

“We’ve been searching for something in particular. The temple seemed like a promising location.” The merman desperately hoped that half-lying wouldn’t come to bite him in the tail later. “But, those documents suggest that it may have been in your village’s possession, at some point, too.”

Yasushi furrowed his brow. “Which something is that?”

Akira shrugged. “Looks like an hourglass.”

Then, Yasushi and Kaname exchanged glances. Genuine looks of confusion that didn’t bode well with Akira.

“It’s nothing we’ve ever seen,” Kaname said when he looked back to Akira. “But, we did look through your bag-- sorry about that! But a lot of those papers seem like, er…”

“Bullshit,” Yasushi interjected.

“There are some silly stories among them. I saw a drawing of an hourglass full of water, but we don’t have anything like that, here.” Kaname’s smile was actually apologetic.

Akira didn’t like how authentic that smile seemed, either. After all of this work, after putting up with legs and land for days, only to come up with this end result? He didn’t want to accept it.

He knew better than not to expect it, though.

“If you have it, if you know anything about it, I can offer you something. Anything.” Akira didn’t sound convinced by his own, pathetic pleading. “I’m of the ocean, I can bring your village things you couldn’t attain on your own.”

“We ain’t got it, kid!” Yasushi snapped. “And who the hell do you think you are, tryin’ to strike up a deal while you’re all tied up like this?”

Another idiot, among a band of idiots, really.
“How about you tell us what you did find in that temple.”

“Just some gold,” Morisuke spoke up. “You can have it back, if it’s such a big deal.” The mere suggestion pained some greedy part of him deep down. He reminded himself of what the merfolk were promising in exchange for finding the real goal, here.

He also kind of wanted to live to see another day, though he wasn’t sure if these people were really all that violent to begin with.

“The place wouldn’t have collapsed if all you found was some damn gold.”

Fair enough.

When Akira took too long to think up the proper response, Morisuke took the risk of speaking up again.

“We found a lot of booby traps. We just assumed the collapse was another one.”

Yasushi was clearly losing patience. “Triggered by what?” he asked, and his eyes traveled to Lev, who looked like sitting still and quiet was becoming an actual, physical struggle.

Or, maybe it wasn’t the matter of staying quiet, but he was definitely struggling with something. He was shaking, and his head was turned up while he tried very purposely to avoid looking any of the cherufe in the eyes.

Akira could feel the mild chill off of him, even with the three bodies between them.

Both cherufe were watching Lev now, Yasushi with suspicion, Kaname with something closer to concern.

“Is something wrong?” the latter asked, at the same time that the former said, “The hell is it?”

Morisuke was saying something to Lev under his breath, but Akira couldn’t make it out. Lev didn’t seem very responsive, so maybe he couldn’t, either. Or maybe he just couldn’t focus.

It was then that Lev broke out with a pained yell, ice spreading from his hand and around his legs where he sat, crawling its way toward the cherufe in growing, freezing peaks. The trail of ice melted to puddles when it came to close, and the two rocky figures stumbled back from it with yelps and curses.

“You took the stone?!” Yasushi asked, still backing his way toward the exit as the ice spread across the room.

“We didn’t take it!” Morisuke tried to say over Lev’s yelling. “We got stuck with it!”

They were going to take it either way, but that was beside the point.

The ice collected around Lev’s hands, growing its way up the stone pillar until it shattered, breaking the bonds of rope with it.

Panicked, Lev jumped to his feet, trembling hands out before him, one palm glazed over where the stone rested, both freezing and burning him at once. He pulled and smacked at the stone, doing everything within his power to get the damned thing off, to no avail.

“If you could, please, control that!” Kaname pleaded.
Yasushi was less inclined to beg or bargain. He stepped forward, but winced at the ice that melted and sizzled at his feet. With the cold growing thicker in sheets across the floor, he didn’t get too far.

Morisuke, rope ties broken along with Lev’s, scrambled to snap off a thinner icicle growing from the floor, and got started with cutting the others free as hastily as possible.

Yasushi spat out a curse, and turned for the exit. He shouted something, a call for help, no doubt.

But the pirates and Akira were free from their restraints before help could arrive.

Morisuke took Lev’s hand that wasn’t coated in ice, and tugged him toward the only exit he knew of. Lev, despite all his pain and panic, managed to bring forth two walls of ice worthy of pushing the cherufe out of their path long enough for an escape.

And they fled.

Night fell upon the Corvus like a thick, dark blanket, illuminated with the soft glow of the moon and stars. Pretty night skies aside, the whole crew seemed to be in a state of unrest in one way or another. Everyone was too afraid to talk to Daichi in his current state. Noya was being short and huffy with just about everyone for some unknown reason. Tooru had been annoyingly moody ever since their talk with Kenma.

And Keiji was still longing for the sea with the utmost reluctance.

The deck was quiet, for the most part. Ryuu was taking the night shift in lieu of his sister at the helm. Every once in awhile he’d give an exaggerated yawn or sing to himself to keep awake, but Keiji could hardly hear any of it from the other end of the deck. He was pretty certain that Ryuu hadn’t even registered he was there, too.

He leaned over the railing, staring into the annoyingly inviting waters that sloshed and caressed the ship’s sides. It was more of a glare, really. A “Will you shut up and let me have peace?” of sorts.

Of course, he should have known better than to ask for peace without expecting immediate consequences.

“Jiji!”

Keiji made a face like he’d smelled something rotten, not because of the nickname, but because the voice accompanying it was not the usual.

When he looked up, Tooru was not there, but rather, Koutarou stood beside him, expression far too bright for a time of day meant for the dark.

“Please, don’t call me that,” Keiji almost pleaded, and went back to watching the waves.

“But Tooru calls you that all the time.” It was amazing, how innocently, genuinely confused he was.
“Yes, he does, and it’s ridiculous. You can call me ‘Keiji’ just as I call you ‘Koutarou.’”

Koutarou thought on this, and nodded, agreeing to something he really didn’t have the option of disagreeing on.

And then he was leaning over the railing, too, elbow bumping Keiji’s own as he slung his hands over the side.

“You’re not one for minding personal space, are you?” As if there was ever a point where Keiji had thought otherwise.

Koutarou either didn’t hear him, or was already too focused on whatever he’d approached him to say, because he started talking over Keiji mid-question. “Do you need to go back in?” he asked, too loudly, but then caught himself with a small gasp and a look of guilt before adding, more quietly, “The water, I mean. Don’t you sleep better that way?”

A sigh. “I’m not going to do this sneaking around thing every night, Koutarou. Every few nights is enough for me to recoup.” He propped his head up with one hand and leaned a little ways away from Koutarou. “I wouldn’t want to make Tooru drag me around through the water every night, either.”

“Shouldn’t you two be like… taking turns or something?”

“His case is more complicated than that.”

“What about on the ship? He doesn’t have to hide, right? He can have a crate. Kenma has a crate, now.”

“I’ve seen the crate.”

“It’s a big crate!”

Keiji made a sound of acknowledgement, but not much else, because, yes, the crate was, in fact, quite large. But he also didn’t want to engage in this topic any more than necessary.

“Oh!” Koutarou went on, and whispering almost seemed to be a struggle to him, “And if we get Tooru a crate, then you can just sleep in that when no one’s watching!”

Apparently, avoiding engagement in this was going to mean forcing a change in subject himself. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“The entire crew could stand to take a dip in a water-filled crate every now and then. Preferably with soap involved.”

Okay. Not a total change in topic, but enough to distract from his and Tooru’s problems. He knew it worked when Koutarou gasped more loudly this time.

“You think we stink?”

“I suppose I can’t put you entirely at fault. I understand it comes with the sailor territory.”

“Keiji!”

“I forgive you, but it still stands as fact.”

“But you guys smell like fish!”
Keiji stopped looking at the water to offer a face that wasn’t quite offended, but rather, daring Koutarou to go on.

Amazingly, he didn’t go on right away. He just made a bunch of disconnected sounds as he tried to figure out how to save himself.

“Not like, bad fish. Like, in general, fish smell isn’t a great smell, but you do kinda have a fishy scent! Not that you can help it!”

“Are you saying you forgive me for my ‘fishy scent’?”

“Yes!” Koutarou said, with misplaced relief.

Keiji turned, leaning his side against the railing now and watching Koutarou with enough judgement to make the man want to launch himself off the side of the ship out of pure shame.

“I hope you realize that you sailors smell about as much like the sea as Tooru or Kenma, but with the unfortunate addition of body odor due to lack of proper hygiene.” Keiji’s expression remained flat as he watched Koutarou’s shoulders drop more and more. “Which, again, comes with the territory. I’m not sure if it’s just expected, or if you all think you’re too busy to take two seconds to use a sponge, or apply some perfume, but it’s fine, I’m adjusting to it, really. Thank you for strengthening my immunity to noxious fumes during my stay here.”

“Are you done?” Koutarou groaned out the question less like a man who was honestly insulted, and more like a child waiting for a lecture to end.

“I don’t know, is my fishy scent still an inconvenience?”

Another drawn-out groan. Child-like indeed, but Keiji wasn’t so sure it was for play. “I didn’t say it was an inconvenience! I was just stating a fact! You’re not like, a bad fish smell, Keiji! I actually kinda like your smell!” Not the turn he was expecting that to take, but he didn’t get to think of a response with Koutarou’s continued rambling. “Like, sometimes when your pits smell like soup when you haven’t washed in a while? But like, soup smells great on its own, but not when it’s coming from your body, right?”

Koutarou didn’t smell like soup at the moment, but Keiji still looked disgusted nonetheless.

“So, you’re actual soup, and the real fish are the pit-soup!”

Charming, truly.

The sailor groaned out after more of Keiji’s sickened stares at him. "Come on, don't look at me like that! I'm trying to give you a compliment!"

"You're doing a stunning job of it."

Another groan, and Koutarou flopped his torso over the railing, arms hanging over the side all dramatically. "You said I stunk first."

"I also said I would not hold it against you."

"Do I really smell that bad?" he whined, and Keiji sighed.

"You could stand for more than a sponge bath every now and then. But that goes for most of you, so I'm not sure why you're taking it personally."
"Keiji thinks I smellllll..." Koutarou dragged out the word, and all of it was mumbled so lowly, so pathetically, that Keiji had trouble even deciphering the words at first.

The merman offered a flat, "Like soup," and turned to rest his back against the wooden rail. "Koutarou, why are you even out here? It's late."

"You're out here."

"I'm not a part of this crew. I don't have to be up with the sun if I can help it."

"Just..." Koutarou mumbled, and dragged himself and his arms back up to lean like a normal person, "...wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine, Koutarou."

"Ugh, but you always say that!" He tossed his head back to emphasise his frustration. "And I don't even mean just the sleep or pains or all this sucky deal that comes with the leg thing. I mean... all this stuff you and Tooru are running from. Or trying to stop. Or. I still don't really get it, but I'm worried something's gonna happen to you, I guess."

Arms folded, Keiji tried to keep his gaze anywhere but on Koutarou's. He settled on the main-mast, it's sails rolled tight and it's highest point interfering with the sight of the half-full moon above.

"That's..." he began, "...not for you to worry over."

"But Keiiiiiiiiii," Koutarou whined and slumped against the rail. "What if the bad guys come for you?"

At 'bad guys,' Keiji cringed. "We won't endanger your ship."

"I'm not talkin' about the Corvus! I'm talkin' about you getting kidnapped by pirates or evil merpeople or something!"

Keiji's next words came out more defensively than intended, "They aren't evil, Koutarou."

The sailor looked surprised at the bite in his tone, and slowly turned to face Keiji. The merman still wasn't looking at him.

"But... you're the good guys, right? You're trying to stop them from doing something bad. So, that makes them--"

"Misguided. Desperate." The last word felt heavy on his tongue, and even heavier going down when he swallowed. "Things... aren't always as black and white as that hair of yours, Koutarou. My actions will have their consequences, too." Keiji didn't know when he brought his hands out in front of them, by there they were, fidgeting with fingers that flexed and pulled at each other. "Assuming I go through with any of it..."

If he'd looked Koutarou in the eyes, he'd have known the man was watching him like he'd just suggested tossing a puppy off the side of the Corvus.

"Keiji, are you runnin' from them or fighting them?"

"I don't see how that's any of your--"

A hand smacked down hard on the flat top of the rail. "It's my business! I'm making it mine!"
Aren't they chasing after you either way? Isn't it, like, way too late for you to back out now?"

"Please keep your voice down."

He did lower his voice, but he didn't sound any less angry. "Tooru said whatever they wanna do is gonna endanger Kingston, right? Even if you wanna stand by, shouldn't we be telling someone who can stop it? Does the queen even know about any of this?"

"Likely so..." Keiji's eyes were still fixed on the mast and the moon, but they were hardly registering at this point. "We can't trust any outside help. I don't know anyone well enough outside of Tooru and Eventide, and..."

He trailed off, and hoped to think of a way to escape this conversation. Just running off to his cabin didn't seem like a bad idea.

But Koutarou caught on too quickly.

"And us?"

"I'm not involving any of you. I promised that. Besides, most of the crew is human. It'd be even more of a risk for you."

"Some of us are from Kingston, too. They'd wanna help." Koutarou slid his hand off from the rail with a too-loud sigh. "Hajime acts like he wants to ignore you guys, but I think he wants to help, too. Because of that, maybe."

"And what would you do, Koutarou? Send the Corvus back into serpent territory? Pirate territory? Do you know what sort of people the Black Swan's crew is made up of? Less than half of them are human. Hajime can do all the research he likes, but your ship simply can't handle that sort of battle."

"Being human doesn't make us weak, Keiji!"

"Can your crew breathe underwater? Can you outswim a merman?" Keiji’s fingers were moving faster than his words were coming out, not in large motions, but anxiously brushing against each other as he went on, "Or outrun a naga? Could you outlast a blood-thirsty redcap in a fight? Could you--"

A third hand was over his, and he jerked out of his rambling to look down at it. Koutarou was trying to still the fingers he hadn’t even realized he was fidgeting with. He wasn’t surprised to find that he was. A little embarrassed, maybe. He hadn’t found himself doing it in front of anyone else since he’d left Eventide.

“I don’t know what some of those things are,” Koutarou said, honestly and softly as Keiji tried to steady his breathing. “I’m guessing they’re bad news, but that just means you need all the help you can get, right?”

‘I don’t want to involve more people,’ Keiji wanted to say, for the umpteenth time, ‘I don’t want to be involved, myself.’

He waited for his breathing to even out, for the urge to do something, anything with his hands to fade. It didn’t quite go away, but he at least managed to actually look at Koutarou.

“Your captain wouldn’t be too thrilled if he found out this conversation was happening.”
“But--”

“I assured him that if trouble followed us, Tooru and I would leave immediately. What you’re suggesting contradicts my word, and it’s already enough of a task to keep everyone’s trust as matters stand now.”

“Yeah, but--”

“There’s no need for you to play hero here, Koutarou,” Keiji snapped, but he softened his tone at the sight of Koutarou flinching. “I… appreciate that you want to help. I do. But I’d moreso prefer that you stay out of this altogether.” He separated his hands and fought to keep them at his sides. “I would also advise that you don’t offer to throw yourself into situations you don’t understand, well-intended or not.”

Koutarou stared at him, pouting, clearly displeased with Keiji’s decision, but still, he nodded. “I just really want you to be safe. And, you still didn’t answer me. If you were just running or trying to stop them.”

Keiji had to pull his gaze away again. This time, he returned to facing the sea, head hanging low toward the water sloshing in the darkness. “It doesn’t matter.”

Koutarou huffed. “I just… want a sense of what’s going on, okay? I think I wouldn’t freak out over this as much if I had that.”

“Or you might freak out more.”

“Can I guess? You can tell me if I’m wrong or right?”

“Being that you’re only asking for two options, that wouldn’t be any different than me outright telling you.”

Koutarou was quiet, then, but Keiji could feel him staring at the side of his head. He sighed, and curled his head into his arms so that he wasn’t looking at anything at all. “I would like… to find a neutral solution. A way to keep either party from experiencing loss.” A deep inhale, and an exhale. “But if that proves impossible, I think I may try to stop them.” Because Koutarou was right, he was too far in to keep running away now.

Koutarou crossed his arms and nodded, offering a thoughtful little, “hm” sound with each bob of the head. “Finding a way to keep everyone from getting hurt sounds like the good guy approach to me!”

“You’re entirely too optimistic.”

Koutarou laughed, too loud for the time of day, or anytime, really. “Sometimes! It feels better when I am, though. You should try it once in awhile.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Koutarou smacked him in the back, maybe with too much force, and belted out another short, but loud laugh. “Just don’t think so much it keeps you up! Try to get some sleep while you can, huh?”

Keiji lifted his head, and Koutarou’s grin was no less blinding in the night than the last.

“I’ll try.”
He must have known that was the best response he was going to get, because Koutarou looked pleased with himself when he turned to head back to his own cabin, waving a final “G’night!” over his shoulder.

Keiji wondered if he’d sleep any better or worse after such a conversation.

As much as the two of them would much rather be back home, resting, Eita and Kenji took some amount of comfort in the feeling of water rushing against their faces as their dragons sped through the sea. It was a feeling most merfolk would relish in as long as possible, if they knew they’d be trekking about on two legs soon.

Kenji was probably looking forward to that least of all. For all of Eita's complaining whenever he visited the Black Swan, he visited enough that it was a normal occurrence. Whereas Kenji tried to stay underwater, lower half in one, scaly piece, as often as possible.

They were a ways from Eventide already, with Kenji in the lead, his crystal pendant whipping through the waters with a faint glow as they neared the sister crystal that Akira held.

Eita's crystal was tucked away in his bag, which was fastened to the harness of his own dragon. He gripped tight to the reigns, fighting to hold his body close against the contrasting mass of bright reddish-pink scales as the dragon practically dragged him along. Every so often, either dragon would open their mouths, spitting forth a mouthful of heat in the form of a ball of light, only for it to burst in their path and fade into darkness once more. It was short lived, but it was a better source of light than their tiny crystals at this hour.

Dragon riding was a pain for merfolk, because no legs to secure around a body meant more of a hassle when something was pulling you along three or four times faster than you could swim yourself. Someone had invented a sort of belt to secure the lower half, but that made escaping in an emergency close to impossible, so holding onto the reins for dear life was the next best thing. The worst that could happen if they let go was usually just a short moment of disorientation, anyway.

"Did you think to ask Wakatoshi why Ironfall is such a big landmine spot right now?" Kenji called over the currents.

Eita groaned, and luckily Kenji couldn't hear it. He didn't care much for these rides, as often as he did them. The whiplash was awful, and he didn't want to talk or do much of anything that required thinking until the whole thing was over. Even so, he still responded.

"That stupid table of his doesn't spell out the details. It just points to havoc before it happens."

"Do we know when it'll happen?" Something Kenji should have asked earlier. A time frame on how long Akira would be safe for would have been nice. But, then, judging by Eita's persistence to leave, he figured the answer was probably 'soon.'

"Would we really wanna wait 'til the last minute if we did?"

"It was just a question!" Kenji huffed out bubbles through his nose. He still couldn't wrap his mind around the concept of a future-telling map, or whatever it was that Wakatoshi had. There was havoc everywhere every day, so how could it just point to one place?
“I barely get how the thing works, alright?” Eita lowered his head against the dragon's mane as it broke through a large school of fish. “All I know is, bad news means bad news.”

If Kenji responded, Eita didn't hear it, and he didn't make a point to ask, either.

His dragon, however, heard something, and came to an abrupt stop. Force nearly sent Eita flying off its back, but his tight grip on the reigns had him smacking his face on its neck, instead.

He mumbled a curse as he sat upright, rubbing his nose, grateful that the water at least lessened the impact.

“What's your problem, Spinel?” he asked, glancing each way in search of a possible distraction.

The dragon grunted, and floated its way up toward the surface

Eita gave the reigns another tug, urging the dragon back down. It was dark out, unlikely that anyone but another sea dweller could see them without the dragon’s light bursts, but he still never felt comfortable with letting his steed wander too far near the surface.

But, despite his urging, it gave a grumpy snort of bubbles and glared back at him. He only looked back at it with a look that scolded, ‘Don’t give me that attitude,’ but the creature seemed unaffected. Of course it did. This was normal behavior.

When it nodded back toward the surface, huffing bubbles at it, Eita looked up and squinted through the dark waters. They weren’t close, but there was unmistakably motion up above. Much too small to be a ship. Closer to human legs, struggling to stay afloat.

“That’s not our problem,” Eita said, just as Kenji was making his way back to see what the hold up was. He didn’t get a chance to ask, and Eita didn’t get a chance to explain, because his dragon was soon enough playing rebel and whipping its way upward.

He clutched tight to the reigns. There was no time to consider letting go in favor of keeping himself secret from the drowning human, or whoever was waiting above.

Cool, night air assaulted his face as the dragon broke through the waves, not unlike a dolphin. A big, scaly, lizard-like dolphin. He swore he heard something of a goose-like squawk before they were submerged again just as quickly, and the dragon circled around beneath the body a few times before it resurfaced, this time more gently.

It floated there, and made soft, affectionate noises at the stranded person. Eita was still gripping the reigns like letting go would mean losing his head, but he did manage to get a look at who was floating there in the moonlight.

He realized that he was wrong in thinking they were human legs kicking about in the water. The snowy, white feathers blooming out from the person’s neck and shoulders proved that much. Of course, he recognized the fact by their dumb, angled bangs, first.

“Kenjiro?”

The feathered person was still wide-eyed, still in a state of shock. The poor guy probably thought a shark or some sea monster was about ready to make a meal out of him.

“Eita,” he eventually said, trying to sound calm and collected, but most definitely sounding more frightened than anything. “Was that entrance really necessary?”
Once he decided that his dragon didn’t seem like it would be making any sudden movements any time soon, Eita sat himself up as best as he could, arms propping himself against the dragon’s back and tail slung partially over its side. “You didn’t have to deal with the whiplash that came with it.”

“Just a minor heart attack.”

“The hell are you even doing out here?” Eita looked him up and down, and he realized two things. One, being that his meetings with Kenjirou usually happened on the Black Swan, when his tail was abandoned in favor of legs, and Kenjirou was now staring with something like interest at the black and white ribbons trailing from Eita’s lower body.

Two, Kenjirou had no control over his transformations, as merfolk or some familiars might have. Rather, the time of day determined his state, and there he was, wingless and floating in the middle of the ocean.

Eita smirked. “Didn’t plan out that flight route too well, did ya?”

Kenjirou splashed him. “Are you going to offer me a ride, or not?”

“Uh,” Eita said, and Kenjirou glared at him for hesitating, “I’m kind of in the middle of another rescue mission--”

“You’re going to leave me here?”

“I was going to say I can drag you along ‘til we reach land, if you think you can hold on for the ride.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Eita patted the dragon’s back, eliciting an almost purr-like sound from the creature. “We swim fast.”

A fast ride still sounded like a better option than paddling through the ocean until sunrise, so Kenjirou pulled himself up onto the dragon's back.

The creature slapped its tail against the water, almost in a wag. Kenjirou had met Spinel only once before, but the dragon took an almost instant liking to him, for some reason. Maybe it just really liked birds. Eita didn't get it. Kenjirou didn’t seem to understand, either, but he still awkwardly patted the dragon’s back in a show of affection, or… a half-assed attempt at it.

He didn’t squawk this time when a second dragon surfaced, with Kenji lifting his head from the steed and shooting an impatient look their way. The impatient look, meant for Eita, quickly became a quirked brow.

“Why the hell is there a naked bird-man on your dragon?”

Kenjirou squinted at him. Surely there were more concerning factors about this aside from him being unclothed. Eita climbed onto the Black Swan in the nude all the time, and he never complained. Hell, technically, both of the mermen were nude right now.

“He’s an…,” Eita began, and he could feel Kenjirou’s judgemental gaze shift to him as he tried to figure out how exactly to introduce the damn bird. “…acquaintance of Wakatoshi’s. He’s stranded.”
Kenji snorted. “What, they throw you overboard?”

“I thought you two were in the middle of something important,” Kenjirou said.

“We are,” Eita defended, “But now I’ve got your deadweight to put up with,” he said, pointing at Kenjirou and receiving a roll of the eyes for it, “So, I’ll trail behind.” He glanced back at Kenji. “Or, I’ll meet you there, I guess.”

“You dragged me out here for this, I’d better not be the only one headed for Ironfall.”

“I said we’d meet you there!”

Kenji and his dragon dove back under with a mumbled, “Don’t take too long,” while Kenjirou had a look about him like he was contemplating jumping back into the water himself.

“You’re going to Ironfall? ” he hissed. “Do you listen to nothing?”

"I told you guys we had someone there!” Eita laid himself back down along the dragon, with Kenjirou behind him, and urged the creature onward. "I just want to get him out before whatever happens, happens."

As the dragon swam along the surface (at what Kenjirou was glad to find was a reasonably steady pace), the swan-man got to smoothing out the messy, wet patches of feathers along his arms. "We don't have a timer. For all we know, you two going there could spark the chaos."

"Or it could be entirely unrelated. Hold on."

Kenjirou paused in his grooming to look at Eita, and then he jerked back as the dragon picked up its pace. He clutched at the trail of wet fur stretching down its back, unsure of what else he was supposed to hang onto.

"Well you're not taking me there!" he said over the waves as he held on for dear life. "I need to get back to the ship as soon as possible!"

"Then swim there! I'm not making a detour!"

"I know where the siren is!"

At that, Eita looked over his shoulder. Without that news on his mind, he might have laughed at the frightened look on Kenjirou's face as he tried to keep his balance.

"And Keiji?" he asked.

"Don't know. There was someone with dark, curly hair with him, but I've never seen Keiji to begin with. I wouldn't recognize him."

Eita narrowed his eyes. "Did you see scales? Well, no, he's probably concealed them..."

"I couldn't get close enough to see, either way. The siren threw a gun at me."

"You mean he shot at you?"

"No."

Eita's laugh came quick and sharp. "Did you at least take the gun, then?"
"I flew the hell away!" Wind and water spray was assaulting his face more than he'd like, so Kenjirou looked down at the waves rushing against their side instead of up ahead. "Wakatoshi shouldn't be too far out of your way. Just drop me off on the way there." When he didn't hear Eita respond right away, he sighed. "This is life and death for you merfolk, isn't it? I think your friend on Ironfall will understand."

Eita grumbled out a, "Fine," though he wasn't sure if Kenjirou could actually hear it over the waves. He did raise his voice a little when he nodded to the bag dragging along their side. "The crystal's in there, if you can reach it."

"I don't need your necklace to tell me how to get to the ship. I find it on my own all the time."

"But you're not a bird right now."

Kenjirou almost wished Eita would turn around, just so he could see the unimpressed face he had to offer. "My senses are just as good now as they are during the day, just as yours are when you change forms."

"Okay, fine, but the extra guide wouldn't hurt."

"I appreciate your concern..." Kenjirou said, sounding far detached from concerned, "...but I can navigate us just fine on my own."

*You do that, brat.*

WKakatoshi had risen long before the sun had a chance to greet their side of the world, but, unfortunately, or perhaps it was fortunately, so had Satori.

"Relax for once, Captain," he'd said to him, barging into his quarters uninvited, as usual. Few of their crew could get away with that, but Satori always had. Always would.

It was rare for him to call Wakatoshi anything but his given name, and Wakatoshi had always thought himself to be plenty relaxed, both for the average person, and for someone commanding one of the most feared ships among the islands.

And he stated this, with that blunt, factual tone of his that Satori might have adored, just a little.

"I am always relaxed."

But Satori had insisted that waking up before sunrise was not a thing that relaxed people did. Not willingly. The crew was plenty capable of handling themselves for a few hours, and sleeping in every once in awhile would, surely, never hurt anyone.

Wakatoshi disagreed. Lounging about too often when there was work to be done was no way to run a ship.

But Satori, whom the others thought might have been incapable of fear with the way he handled their captain, would not have it. He sat himself on the edge of the elegant tub his captain had been sleeping in, and pushed his scaly chest back into the water.
And then he grinned, because with Wakatoshi’s build, there shouldn’t have been any reason for him to fall back so easily, unless he didn’t want to argue to begin with. Tendou was plenty fit, but he knew he wouldn’t stand a chance in a physical fight against his captain.

So, it was hard not to take some amount of satisfaction in the way Wakatoshi stayed put, with his fin giving a single flop within the tub.

“You ask me to ‘relax,’ but I see that you’re up at this hour as well.”

Satori tipped his head back, hands gripping the edges of the tub as he leaned against it, legs stretched out before the well-swept wood floor. “Because I had to beat you to it, obviously!” He hummed when he tilted his head to look at the merman. “If you’d gotten up before I could get to you, there’s no way you’d go back to sleep.”

“I am already awake. I don’t see what good this is doing either of us.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not working! And you should go back to sleep. I’m not leaving until you do.”

“Satori,” Wakatoshi said, evenly, lacking the exhaustion Satori would expect from anyone else in this situation, “I am plenty rested. I went to sleep at a decent hour. I appreciate your concern, but it is unnecessary.”

Satori groaned. “Maybe I just don’t want you getting all worked up with this Eventide-hunt business. Things are gonna be a total shit-storm once we find your village traitor.” He slid against the tub, butt thumping against the floor and head less comfortably banging against the edge. He grumbled a small “ow,” before going on. “Not that I mind a shit-storm. More fun for us, in my opinion.”

“It seems that you’re the one who needs to relax.”

The over exaggerated pffffbt sound that Satori made did not aid his case.

“If you are having regrets because of your old crewmate, there is no need to be ashamed.”

“What?” Satori nearly spat, and he banged his head against the tub when he tried to look over his shoulder again. “I’m not-- That-- This isn’t about Koushi, Wakatoshi! This is about you, my beloved captain, learning how to relax and not take every breathing moment so seriously.”

Wakatoshi’s brows furrowed, just slightly. “The best results are achieved when every moment is treated as if your life depends on it.”

Satori stared at him, eyes squinted almost judgingly, but then faced forward again. Partially because it was more comfortable, partially because he knew Wakatoshi’s gaze wouldn’t waver even if he kept it up. “Guess I’ve known ya long enough that I should’ve seen that response coming.”

“I agree that rest is important, though. You cannot function at your utmost potential without it.” It sounded less like a discussion, more like he was reading facts out of a medical book. “Perhaps you should return to bed, then.”

Satori merely hummed in response. He closed his eyes, not that he expected to fall asleep against the cold of the tub.

There was a brief quiet, save for the occasional little slosh of Wakatoshi’s tail in the tub, before
he said, “Ah, I started the book you lent me last night. I believe that reading constitutes as relaxing, so there is nothing to worry over.”

Satori’s eyes popped right back open again, wide and full of enthusiasm. “Really?! You’re reading it?!”

A sound of confirmation, and maybe he was going to say more, but Satori kept his own mouth running.

“How far have you gotten?” he asked, sitting himself up a little straighter and tilting his head back. He couldn’t see Wakatoshi from that angle, not really, and the tips of his hair were dipping into the water now. “Did you get to chapter four? The beginning’s kinda slow, but that’s where all the exciting shit starts! Wait until you get to the part with the sunken ship!”

“I read up to chapter six before bed. The portrayal of merfolk is far from realistic.”

“It’s fiction, Wakatoshi. Fiction written by humans. You just have to enjoy it for what it is.”

“But why would one’s legs transform just from getting wet? The woman in this book grew a tail just from standing in the rain.”

“Fiction.”

“It is highly inconvenient.”

Satori sunk back against the tub again, water from his hair now falling in a light drip down his neck. “It’s a cool story, Wakatoshi. There’s action, and magic, and a really cool, stoic, pirate captain.”

“We have all of those here.”

Satori didn’t know whether to laugh or not. Wakatoshi’s tone was so even, so like his usual, that it was almost hard to tell if he was joking.

He guessed he wasn’t.

“Yeah, we do,” he said, after a long hum, “And my captain’s way better than any fantasy one. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t read more, though. At least so I have someone to gush over it with.”

“Oh,” Wakatoshi said, “I suppose I can, if that will make you happy.”

Satori grinned, and went on with rambling about all of his favorite scenes leading up to chapter six, gesturing wildly with his hands as he spoke. Wakatoshi remained silent for the most part, offering the occasional grunt of acknowledgement or short comment.

In the midst of Satori’s babbling, there was a clang against the far window. He fell silent, large eyes settled on the glass across the room.

“That wasn't a bird, was it?” he asked, and Wakatoshi moved in the water behind him.

“It was too small. I was watching,” he said, leaning over the edge and dripping water into Satori’s shoulder. Not that it particularly bothered him.

Satori hopped to his feet, gaze never straying from the foggy window that covered the length of the cabin wall ahead. He didn't see anything strange lingering by it, nothing suspicious flying
about in the air, but it was also dark, and his eyes didn't adjust to the lack of light like a merman's
or a full-blooded redcap's could.

He withdrew his knife nonetheless, and approached the window with caution. He didn't think
anything was going to leap out from the sea and shatter the wall before him, but better safe than
sorry. Or, rather, maybe part of him was just hoping for that much excitement.

The excitement died down once he made it to the glass and looked downward, squinting
through the dark at the familiar, tiny, purple-ish orb of light rising and falling with the waves.

That gave him a good enough idea of who it was without having to stand around inspecting the
visitor from afar.

Satori spun around and started for the door. "We have company!" he said, even though he
could already see Wakatoshi stepping a fresh pair of legs out from the tub. "And it's probably
coming with urgent news. I can't see Eita coming here at this hour, otherwise. Especially not so
soon. You might wanna put some pants on."

By the time Satori made it to the deck, he already had a towel and pile of clothes reserved for
Eita's visits at the ready.

He dumped the pile on the floor and leaned over the edge of the ship. "A bit early isn't it?" he
called, paying little mind to the rest of the sleeping crew, swinging the end of a rope in hand where
the visitors below could see it. He stopped when the realization that there were visitors, plural, not
singular, kicked in. He could see better now, the mass of scales from the sea dragon beneath them,

He tossed the rope their way with a long whistle, and soon enough there were two very
grumpy, very naked men standing on the deck of the Black Swan.

Satori reeled the rope back in. "You merfolk are turning this place into a nudist colony."

"He's the only fish between the two of us." Kenjirou murmured as he moved to pick at the pile
of clothes. He frowned when he saw that his weren't present.

"I was including Wakatoshi, but you're right." Satori tossed the rolled-up rope off to the side
with the mast it was secured to. "You birds and merfolk are turning this ship into a nudist colony."

Eita was probably about to retort, but then Kenjirou threw his clothes at his face. Not exactly a
welcoming he was unused to with this ship.

"Is the captain awake?" Kenjirou asked, casting a glance toward said man's quarters.

"Awake, and naked. Thus the nudist comment." Satori tilted his head at a near ninety-degree
angle, watching unabashedly as Eita pulled the clothes up over his legs, concealing the patches of
scales dotting the skin along them and his rear.

"Please shut up," Eita mumbled, and he tied off the rope belt of his pants. He threw his shirt
back at Kenjirou, if only to spare them from any more of Satori's comments.

Kenjirou pulled the shirt over himself, and frowned when it didn’t come down long enough to
cover anything important. Eita was just barely taller than him, so he shouldn’t have expected much
different.

The need to ask where his clothes were was present, but other matters at hand took priority. He
started for Wakatoshi’s cabin, adjusting the way the loose shirt fell over him as he walked.

Satori watched, and looked to Eita as he pointed a thumb Kenjiro’s way. “So, what’s the story?”

“I found him on the way to the danger zone,” Eita said, and he stepped around Satori to follow after the swan, “Which you might want to set course for.”

Satori stood in place, watching after him for a moment. He managed a, “What?” before trailing after the two into the captain’s quarters.

When they made it inside, Wakatoshi was already dressed. Partially, at least, with just his pants and undershirt on, but that was still more than either of the visitors had. Kenjiro was the only one without pants at this point, but the swan didn’t seem as bothered by it as most would be. Clothes weren’t all that important to a bird, anyway.

Kenjiro was standing before Wakatoshi, and by the look on the pirate’s face, some of the news had already been delivered.

“Ironfall,” he said, and Kenjiro bobbed his head in confirmation. “Are you certain they are traveling that way?”

“They were heading in that direction, at the very least, sir.”

“They?” Satori chimed in, popping his head out from behind Eita. “You found Nose-Scar’s ship, then?”

“Complete with at least one sea dweller on board, yes.” Kenjiro stepped over to the table at the center of the room, the shallow layer of water stilled over the intricate map drawn beneath it. “I’m not sure about Keiji, but the siren was there, no mistake.” His gaze wandered to the image of the four Ironfall islands. “They’re closer than we are. I don’t see much chance in this ship beating them there.”

“It would be better to avoid getting too close to the islands, to begin with.” Wakatoshi plucked the tiny piece of orichalcum from a bowl and gently placed it over the water’s surface. It spun on a point and traveled toward Ironfall, just as before. “Making our steal before they reach them is our best option.”

Kenjiro hopped up and sat himself down on the table’s dry edge, just as always. He only shivered slightly at the cold feeling of the surface against his skin. “So, we need to throw an obstacle their way to catch up.”

Eita’s shoulders fell when the swan shot a look his way. “Me? No, Kenji’s gonna be waiting for me on the island.”

“You have a dragon. You can reach them faster and slow them down for us,” Kenjiro offered.

“Okay, but, Akira--”

“Will be one casualty, if at all. You say that Kenji is headed his way, as well,” Wakatoshi said, though he wasn’t looking at Eita when he spoke. He was eying Kenjiro, or at least the part of the table he was sitting on. Without pants. “There is no telling whether the risk at Ironfall is for us, or them, but there may likely be many more casualties if we wait for too long.”

“Besides,” Kenjiro leaned back with one hand on the table for support while he inspected the
wet and ruffled feathers on the other, “You’ve been tracking this Keiji person for, how long now? Wouldn’t it be a waste for you to ditch the job now?” He only seemed to notice Wakatoshi’s staring after the captain gave a short clear of the throat, and he reluctantly slid off the table with a huff. Apparently, climbing up on the nice, important, magical furniture was only appropriate when clothed, even for pirates. How silly.

Meanwhile, Eita hardly looked pleased with the suggestion.

He also didn't think he could argue with their logic.

_Fucking pirates._

"How big of a ship are we talking?" he asked Kenjirou.

"About the same size as this one," the swan answered, just as Satori handed him a blanket. Kenjirou wrapped it around himself, finally showing some decency, though he seemed reluctant. "I wouldn't recommend actually boarding for an attack on your own. We just need to stall them."

That wasn't a problem. Eita could manage stalling. The problem was whether or not Kenji would know to go on ahead without him, or if he'd think something happened and would go back after Eita, instead.

But Ironfall’s threat was unknown. Keiji’s was less so, well-intended or not.

"How much time do you think you need to catch up?"

"An hour, tops." Kenjirou sat himself down on the table again, this time with the blanket between himself and the surface.

"An _hour_?" Eita would have slammed his hands on the table for added effect, had he been standing close enough. "How the hell am I supposed to stall a ship this big for an hour by myself?"

"You'll have a dragon," Kenjirou provided, and then chose to ignore Satori's obvious snickering that followed.

"Don't make me endanger my dragon."

"I would suggest sending one of us with you, but I am the only one here who can breathe underwater." Wakatoshi left the orichalcum spinning in place as he stepped away from the table. "Asking you to transport someone like Kenjirou again would only slow you down."

Kenjirou tried not to look offended, but he was doing a poor job of it. "And you're just wasting more time by standing around here, talking about it."

Eita shot him what was maybe a little childish of a pout, then turned to make way for the door.

Satori grabbed his wrist before he could make it too far. When Eita faced him, he was met with the most worrisome of grins. “While you’re at it...” he said, with the sort of excitement in his voice that had made Eita uncomfortable on more than one occasion, “...mind delivering a message for me?”
The Calamity crew was, reluctantly, inside the grindylow cave, again.

And, as if the damp air of the cave with its lake wasn’t enough, Lev’s hand was still setting forth winter’s wrath at a constant pace.

He was huddled against a far wall, the light of the cave’s crystals making the ice growing at his feet glisten.

Morisuke sat across from him, on his knees, glaring hard at the blue-green stone in Lev’s upturned palm.

“I don’t understand.” Morisuke reached out to touch it, fingertips brushing the icy, smooth surface. “When you used it in the temple, everything calmed down before we even made it out. Why is it still acting up.”

“I-I don’t know,” Lev said, teeth chattering. The others had started up a fire for warmth, but Lev kept his distance only because he accidentally put out the first fire with the magic. “B-But it was really amazing the second time, too, wasn’t it, M-Morisuke?”

“Well, it got us out of there….”

“Before we could get any headway on the compass situation,” Akira muttered, and he sat down beside Morisuke. The merman was still dripping from the lake, even now that his clothes were back on, recovering from the dryness of the village heat. The ice wasn’t doing him much better, though, so he scooted back a little after he sat.

Morisuke nodded, a thoughtful look about him. “They really sounded like they didn’t know anything about it, though.”

“We never got to meet with their leader,” Akira reminded him. “Just because those two knew nothing, doesn’t mean there wasn’t a lead among them, somewhere.”

“Maybe when I learn how to control this, w-we can do a sneak attack on them!”

Morisuke scoffed. “We don’t have all year to wait, Lev.”

“I’m a fast learner!”

“Then hurry and figure out why it’s acting up.”

Lev frowned hard at the accumulating ice in his palm. He kept furrowing his brows and scrunching his face more and more, as if glaring hard enough would do the trick.

“It’s probably fear,” Akira said, casually, and the two looked up to meet his tired gaze. “Morisuke thought it might only work when you were in peril, but you didn’t seem all that worried even when we got captured.” Because he was being a stupid, proud idiot, of course. “So, just being in actual danger isn’t enough. You have to believe you’re in danger, or be afraid of it, at least. Like being afraid of getting your hand burned off by a bunch of lava people.” He pulled his knees up to himself, and rested his chin there. “That’s just a guess, though. The scrolls didn’t mention anything about how it works, and now all of those are in that village’s hands.”

“Lev,” Morisuke said, lowering his head slightly, “Were you afraid, just then?”

“I’m not afraid of anything!” Lev declared, clenching his fists. Another chill spiked through the air at his words, and Akira raised a brow.
Morisuke sighed, falling back with his hands against the floor for support. “No one’s brave one hundred percent of the time, idiot.”

“In this case, it would do you some good to actually be wary. Let yourself be scared.”

Lev didn’t seem too fond of Akira’s suggestion, but he still nodded with a serious intenseness all the same.

The three started at the sound of footsteps echoing through the cavern. The other three were still huddled around the fire, and all of their weapons, save for Lev’s stone, were in the village’s possession now. Morisuke was thinking very quickly about how well they’d fare hiding in the water from the cherufe. Hopefully Akira would call off the grindylows, and hopefully Lev’s stone wouldn’t freeze the whole lake over. The latter seemed a lot more risky than the former.

The soft glow of light approaching calmed Akira down, at the very least. Even more so when he tugged at his shirt to find his own crystal necklace emitting the same glow inside.

“I thought you had other matters to take care of,” he said, letting go of his shirt and looking up at Kenji.

The other merman lowered the bow and arrow that he’d had aimed at them with a dirty look. “Why are you still in here?”

“We left. Now we’re back,” Akira supplied.

Kenji slipped the arrow back into the quiver at his back, the container shaped much like a shark’s open mouth, detailed with silver and emerald designs. “The tent wasn’t a good enough base for you?” The chill seemed to catch his attention as he approached the group, and he paused in his step. He could see the ice growing around Lev, now. “That’s new.”

“We’re running from cherufe!” Lev announced, like it was an accomplishment of some kind.

Kenji nodded, slow, like that wasn’t quite processing right away. “That… would explain the big rocky guys with the lizards.”

“Lizards,” Morisuke repeated.

“Flaming lizards,” Kenji elaborated. “They looked like they were hunting or something. I stayed clear of them.”

Akira groaned. “They’re looking for us, and they have salamanders. Great.” He narrowed his eyes on Kenji. “Why did you come back?”

“To get you out.” Kenji cast a glance to the others by the fire. “Eita, who ditched me on the way here, says there’s gonna be big problems around here soon. Or, we think it’s soon. I don’t know.” He pinched the bridge of his nose when he looked down to the floor. “Some pirate and magic bullshit involving a table.”

“Is this like… mermaid talk, or something?” Lev looked excited at the thought.

Akira lifted his head and ignored Lev. “Is this a Wakatoshi thing?” He sighed when Kenji nodded.

The latter held out a hand, expecting Akira to take it. "Going home would be better than hiding in a cave from fire-people, right?”
"Going home would be better than any of this," Akira mumbled. He reached out for the offered hand, preparing to get to his feet, but paused when Lev blurted something out.

"You're leaving now?!" He stood up before Akira could, the ice around his feet peaking up with the act. "But we haven't found the hour-ass--"

"Are they still calling it that?" Kenji whispered to Akira.

"--and you promised us gold for helping you find it! Now you're just gonna say 'nevermind'?!"

"One of us will return to that task when it's safer," Kenji said, and this time he did help Akira up.

"Well you sure as hell won't have our help when you do." Morisuke glowered up at the mermen. "We'll have gotten off this island by then." Or burned alive by the people chasing them down. One or the other. He pointed up at Akira, and looked at Kenji. "You gonna send him back to that village by himself?"

"No." Kenji frowned. "But I'm not leaving him here with you now."

"But it was fine, before," Akira grumbled. But, he supposed he'd have to thank Wakatoshi and his magic table nonsense at some point for being his saving grace.

“I do hope...” came Issei’s voice. Kenji hadn’t even noticed the others stalking around behind him and Akira. “...that you brought us some kind of payment, being that you’re taking him, and leaving us with no sure sign that you’ll actually come back.”

Kenji was already reaching for one of the arrows at his back. “I’m not going to pay you for getting nothing done.”

“But we almost died, like, three times!” Kanji belted. “At least give us those magic leaves you promised!”

Morisuke was pretty sure it had been more than three, as far as the temple was involved. “Not to mention, you’re a bit outnumbered here, don’t you think?”

Takahiro grinned as he leaned against Issei. “Maybe you should come back for your friend after you’ve brought us our gold.”

Kenji lifted his bow with the smallest of smirks, as Akira whistled beside him. “Maybe you should think your threats through a little better.”

Though they weren’t terribly close to the lake, they could still hear water sloshing about from afar.

Right. Those things.

“Let us be on our way,” Kenji said, taking aim at Lev, “and you’ll be spared a few more grindylow bites and arrows to the chest.”

Lev lifted the hand with the icy stone with a look of determination, like he was prepared to strike just as well.

Kenji narrowed his eyes. Akira set a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t know how to control it.”
“He made us a bridge when we needed it, and he got us out of that village.” Morisuke almost sounded proud, and he was grateful not to be looking at Lev or whatever expression he was making at him when he realized it. “If any of us get an arrow to the chest, you’ll be getting one of ice to yours.”

Kenji clicked his tongue. “You can keep the dumb ice rock. Isn’t that good enough as partial payment?”

“Actually,” Akira mumbled, “I was hoping to still use that.”

“Wanna be a little more helpful, here?” Kenji asked, and Akira’s response was, apparently, to whistle again. The wet slapping of webbed feet on the stony ground seemed to be growing nearer.

Then a hand clamped over Akira’s mouth and yanked him away from Kenji, who, in retaliation, set to let loose the arrow.

But it was frozen to the bow.

Lev wasn’t entirely sure how he did that, but he yelped with victory and turned to Morisuke, like a puppy who’d just returned the ball to their owner.

Kenji cursed as the ice spread from the bow to his hands, anchoring the now-useless projectile to his skin. He spun around to find Akira desperate enough to resort to biting Kanji’s hand for an escape. It seemed to do the trick, and the merman went stumbling a ways away from the pirates.

When Kanji reeled back and Issei lunged at Akira, the merman spun on his toes and brought his other leg around for a swift kick to Issei's gut.

He broke into a sprint, then, with Kenji close behind and a trail of ice snaking across the ground after them. Akira was suddenly very glad that the cherufe had confiscated all of their weapons.

Morisuke pushed past the others, rushing alongside the path of ice with what little energy he had left. He could hear the footsteps of the others following his lead shortly, but he could also hear Akira's whistling up ahead, and a nasty wet sound from behind that he was sure belonged to the grindylows. He just hoped they were slower on land than in water.

Lev was up alongside him soon, sweating considerably more so than himself. It left Morisuke wondering how much the stone was draining him, but the question would have to wait for another time.

"I have a plan!" his captain announced. "Remember how I made those ice walls in the village?"

"You wanna seal them in?" Morisuke shot him a look, and regretted it when he stumbled over some uneven ground. Lev nodded with enthusiasm, and lifted his hand like he was prepared to do just that, but Morisuke cut him off. "You'll trap us in here with those monsters if you do!"

Lev frowned as Kanji caught up, the path of ice between the latter and the others.

"Can't you shoot it at them?!"

Lev gave an experimental swipe of the arm in front of him. Tiny crystals formed and grew in the air, then shot outward, some at the merman, others in more random directions.
Morisuke's eyes went wide as one breezed through the tips of his hair overhead.

Lev smiled, apologetic as he kept up his pace. "That would've been really bad if you weren't so--"

"I got it," Morisuke hissed and leaped over a stray patch of ice that formed outside the path. "Could you be a little more careful with that?!"

"But if I call down, it might not work anymore!"

"Are you afraid right now?" Kanji asked, looking over his shoulder. He could still see Issei and Takahiro keeping up, and thankfully still didn't see any grindylows.

"I don't feel afraid!"

Morisuke's eyes kept darting from the floor to the mermen, trying not to lose sight, while trying not to slip on any stray spots. "Is it an adrenaline thing, then?"

Lev shrugged. He waved his arm again, unannounced, flinging out another round of icicles.

Morisuke and Kanji both ducked, Morisuke cursing at Lev as a few shards just missed him again.

Meanwhile Akira's whistling was cut off by a pained yell. Apparently, it wasn't enough to keep him from running, but it was a start.

The air was already getting warmer, Lev's continued producing of ice aside. They knew they had to be getting closer to the entrance.

A few cold slices and jabs to the merfolk later, and another unintentional two to himself and Morisuke, and Lev could see the light of the rising sun bleeding into the cave's tunnels.

They were surprised to see Kenji and Akira come to an abrupt halt in their escape at the entrance.

They were less surprised when they saw Kaname and Yasushi beyond them.

Kenji swore and shook his arms with aggression, like doing so might be enough to free his hands from the ice.

"There you are," Yasushi said, and he punched one rocky fist into his palm with a grin. The lava flowing through his hands burned brighter at the contact.

No sooner than Morisuke shouted his name, did Lev send forth another wall of ice at the cherufe.

The wall began to melt just as quickly, but it left them enough of an opening to make a mad dash from the two.

Of course, in such a desperate situation, there wasn't much time to discuss a plan of action.

Kenji ran in one direction, and Akira in another.

Lev bolted after Kenji, clutching tight to the stone like it might come loose from his palm at any given moment. He could faintly hear another set, maybe two sets, of footsteps crunching through the leaves after him, but it hardly registered as important. He wanted his treasure.
And, really, the chase was becoming a bit exciting. That seemed to be keeping the ice from disappearing, at the very least.

Despite how tired his body felt, how drained it was from the lack of proper sleep and food, and the stone that was possibly feeding off of his energy or something, Lev still managed to stay quick on his feet. When Kenji darted around and between the trees, Lev did the same. When he jumped over logs and ducked under oversized leaves and branches, Lev followed.

He tried to shoot more icicles his way whenever there was a clear shot, and even at times when there wasn’t, but Kenji never seemed to slow down enough. Survival instincts were impressive, even for those who weren’t meant to be on land.

But Lev kept up the chase, kept Kenji in his sight. He was so focused on not losing track of him, in fact, that even when the merman came to a steep slope of land, even when he stopped in his tracks to gauge the situation, Lev followed.

He crashed right into his back, and the two went rolling down the mountain, branches and rocks scratching and cutting up their bodies as they made their journey.

He was sure he heard more people following, still, but it had to be more than just one or two. How many people there were made little difference once he blacked out.

The sun had only just begun to peek through the cabin window, but both merman and siren had been awake for some time, already.

“You want to what?”

Tooru just narrowly avoided poking Keiji’s eye out, makeup-covered fingers slipping from the scaled area dotting the small portion of the latter’s face. Keiji decided that he might have had better timing in not sharing his thoughts while the siren had his stupidly sharp nails so close to his face.

“I didn’t say I wanted to.” Keiji frowned, looking to the mirror and checking his eye. No scratches, just a half-concealed patch of scales. “I’m only pointing out facts here, Tooru. I said that if our situation posed a risk to the Corvus, we would leave.”

“You want to ditch this ship.” Tooru pinched the bridge of his nose with the fingers coated in paint. He only realized the fact after, and pulled the hand back with a furrowed brow. “You want to change plans now, after we just got them to agree to let me board in the first place.”

“That swan knows we’re here, Tooru.”

“I can sing a swan to the depths of the sea, if I need to.” Tooru pointed down, supposedly to said sea beneath them. “I can drown that whole ship. Their Sea Cow will be the only survivor, and we’ll outnumber him. There you have it. One of Eventide’s pawns, out of the way.”

Keiji offered a flat look. “Their sea cow?”

Tooru waved an uninterested hand. “Their stupid captain.”

“Why is Wakatoshi a sea cow?”
“Because I hate him.”

He should have known better than to question any of Tooru’s nicknames by now. “I’m not going to wait for a bunch of pirates to attack this ship for you to put your morbid singing to work.”

“And I’m not going to up and leave when we’ve already made it perfectly clear that this ship is a safer bet for us than any other.” Tooru hooked a finger beneath Keiji’s chin and turned his face back toward him to finish with the makeup. “Besides, Daichi says his lover is missing, and it’s probably connected to all of this.” He tilted his head, looking thoughtful. “Well, he thinks it’s connected to Kenma, but we know better than that.”

“His lover?”

“Sorry, his ‘friend,’ but I’m calling bullshit on that.”

“That’s quite an assumption.”

“You’re right. I’m probably wrong. Probably wrong about your boatswain having it bad for you, too.” He ignored Keiji’s glare, and maybe purposely put a little too much pressure on the spot he was applying the paint to. “The point is, if the Black Swan is responsible for that, then Daichi wants them coming our way.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It is, but it takes the guilt off our backs.”

“Hardly.”

Tooru stepped back, surveying his work before brushing the paint-coated fingers together. “And, you’ve said it yourself, that they’re in danger with Kenma present either way, that we might as well stick around to offer help when their ship is doomed to magical disasters one way or the other.”

“Yes, I said that, because I didn’t think anyone linked to Eventide would find us.” Keiji’s whisper was practically a hiss. “Not this soon, anyway.”

“And, if the swan leads Wakatoshi here, then what? The Corvus would fair better with us on their side, would they not?”

Keiji already knew that. He’d been preaching it himself long enough. But, even so…

“Do you want to stay here?”

Tooru threw his hands up. “Of course not! I hate ships! I hate being surrounded and taunted by water that I can’t properly shift in! This place is horrible, Keiji!” Oh. His real name, again. “But even if we leave, it’ll be too late to help anyone once those pirates have already turned the ship over looking for us. If you feel guilty now, I guarantee you will, then.” He really, really wished he could have drowned that swan. His fingernails were growing and changing a bloody, reddish brown at the very thought.

Keiji hated that he was right, even moreso for throwing his own words back in his face. Maybe what he hated most was that no matter what they did, nothing would work in their favor.

“End of discussion!”
There it was, that gross, fake-happy voice of his. It rang through Keiji’s ears as Tooru brushed his makeup-coated, clawed fingers together and waltzed out from his room. Keiji’s sigh was long, that of someone suffering a great inconvenience, but he still followed.

“You’re positive about the swan being theirs?”

“I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have told you.”

“You threw Ryuu’s gun at it. I would have gathered something either way.”

“I did say ‘end of discussion,’ didn’t I?”

Keiji snatched him by the arm. “Could you not be impossible for one damned second?”

“I’ve only known him a few days, and I could answer that.”

The two looked down the hall to find Hajime behind them, a sheathed sword in each hand. He arched a brow when they stared. “D’ya mind not blocking the hall?”

“I was going to hold him down. I thought you’d intended to use those.” Keiji nodded toward the swords.

Tooru yanked his arm out from his grasp. “That isn’t funny!” He stepped back, and pouted as he eyed the weapons. He almost looked curious, for a moment, then irritated when he spotted the earmuffs hanging from Hajime’s neck.

"Are you giving me permission?" Hajime asked Keiji, and Tooru made for the stairs with a huff. The sailor watched him disappear from view before pointing a finger his way and looking at Keiji. "I interrupt something?"

"He was done with the discussion, either way." Not that Keiji didn't plan to find a way to bring it up again before they could make it to land.

For now, he walked with Hajime, and found himself unable to keep his eyes off the swords with a small amount of interest. He knew that Hajime was the crew's weapons expert, but he'd only seen him wielding long-range weapons up until now.

Hajime seemed to pick up on the staring, and lifted one of the covered blades. "They're not mine. Tobio's been training, but I noticed they were getting dull. Fixed 'em up for him."

"The deckhand?" Keiji asked, and Hajime nodded in response.

When they reached the deck, Tooru was walking alongside Saeko, grinning as he spoke while she laughed. Or cackled, more like.

He'd already found an excuse to avoid speaking further with Keiji, curse him.

Keiji frowned at him from afar, not missing the annoying wink the siren sent his way when he caught his eye.

It wasn't until Hajime was exchanging words and weapons with Tobio that Keiji even noticed he'd still been following alongside him.

The deckhand withdrew one of the dual swords, and the face he made was oddly... cute? Even comical, perhaps, but that was because Keiji was so accustomed to only seeing a scowl set in the boy's features. The look of his lips fighting a smile and the unmistakable sparkle in his eyes was
"Better?" Hajime even seemed to be fighting a grin of his own when he asked.

Tobio bent his head low with a loud and sudden, "Yes sir!" that made Hajime crack into a short laugh. A proud laugh, Keiji thought. "Thank you, sir!" the boy went on as he lifted his head to examine the weapon with greater detail. "It looks better than when it was brand new..."

Hajime rocked on his heel. "Ah, thanks." He sounded gruff, as usual, but his body language said he was embarrassed by the praise. "I know I said I'd just sharpen the blades, but I got a little carried away. I didn't have the right paint to touch up the hilts, though."

Tobio nodded. Maybe he didn't actually hear what Hajime said. He still looked too entranced by the shiny metal in front of him. He turned the blade over a few more times, then finally slipped it back into its scabbard. "I was, ah..." He seemed to be struggling to come phrase whatever was on his mind. "I thought that. Maybe. Well, you're good with weapons, so..."

"Are you being nice?" came Shouyou’s voice, filled with absolute shock as the boy passed by, mop in hand.

"I wasn’t talking to you!" Tobio snapped back, but he didn’t stop looking flustered even with the angry little outburst.

In fact, he probably looked moreso, especially when Hajime said, “Was there something else you needed help with?”

Tobio immediately straightened, both arms and the swords falling straight along his sides, standing to attention when it really wasn’t necessary. “If you could, er, teach me.”

Hajime raised a brow, both to the not-quite-a-question, and to the formality that he’d assured Tobio more than once wasn’t needed. “Swordplay?” he asked, “I’m not sure I’d be much better with dual wielding than you.”

Keiji kept his question to himself, because he really had no place in this conversation, and was considering just disappearing from Hajime’s side altogether, but then Tobio posed the very same question in his place.

“Didn’t you train in Kingston?”

Hajime crossed his arms with a short nod. “I was trained, but I’ve been out of touch. Or, at least I don’t practice it as often as the weapons we use more regularly on the ship. I see you practicing every day, though.” He tipped his head in the direction Shouyou had run off to. “Why don’t you get your roommate to spar?”

“Because he’s awful at it.”

Hajime tried not to snort at the bluntness of that statement.

“And he’s never learned Kingston-style dual swordplay. I need someone who’s familiar with the stances.”

“Toru’s familiar with them,” Keiji said, only half-thinking his words through before he spoke them. Maybe he needed to go back to sleep, after all. Or maybe part of him just wanted to torment Tooru, a little.
Both eyes were on him, then. Hajime’s less thrilled than Tobio’s.

“The siren can use a sword?”

“So he’s told me,” Keiji shrugged.

“Dual wielding?”

“Indeed.”

“Kingston-style?”

“Shall I repeat myself?”

Hajime opened, then closed his mouth in something like a pout, because he couldn’t exactly ask, ‘Are all you sea dwellers such dicks?’ with Tobio standing right there. Instead, he said, “No one on this ship is going to be trained by a siren.”

“Technically,” Keiji tipped his head, just slightly, meeting Hajime’s eyes with his usual flat gaze, “He’s been training you.”

“He’s been showing me books. Teaching, not training.”

“I see.” Keiji, in fact, did not see any difference. “Perhaps he can teach your crew how to better fend themselves, rather than train them.” Until they made it to land, anyway.

Hajime didn’t seem to miss the sarcasm. “There’s no way--”

“Is he good at it?” Tobio asked, clutching his weapons just a little more tightly.

Keiji gave a thoughtful hum. “You would be a better judge than me on that front. You would have to ask him to demonstrate.”

“Like hell he will,” Hajime nearly growled. “He’s not getting his hands on any weapons as long as he’s here.”

Keiji offered another glance, this one colder than the last. “Did you think that his voice was the only weapon he traveled with?” ‘Under our circumstances?’ he wanted to add, but also held back due to Tobio’s presence.

Meanwhile, Tobio turned to the source of Tooru’s voice, easily heard from across the deck. All interest was knocked from his train of thought when Shouyou came hurdling at him, slipping from the water of his own mop in all his hurrying.

The two went slamming to the floor, but neither Hajime nor Keiji made a move to help them up, like they probably should have. They just watched as the two awkwardly tried to detangle themselves from one another and sit upright. Shouyou was rambling on about something, in a way that may have been either excited, or freaked out. It was really unclear. The word “fish” was about all that could really be made out, at first, until he propped himself back up on his knees and shoved Tobio away for extra space.

“There’s a huge fish!”

Hajime’s nod was slow, and not quite understanding. “Okay…” he said, not quite sure why this news was of any importance. They were surrounded by water at all times. Fish, regardless of size, were not unusual sightings.
But apparently, he was wrong in thinking so, because Shouyou made a frustrated grumbling sound as he tugged at his hair. “A really huge fish! Bigger than a shark! Or, maybe more like a whale shark, or a small whale, or…” he rambled on, and soon Tobio was back to his feet and stomping over to his cabin mate. Shouyou’s rambling only ceased when he smacked a hand to the back of his head.

“Maybe it was just a whale or a shark, then, idiot!”

“It wasn’t a shark!” Shouyou shooed his hand away. “It was huge, and long, and really sparkly. I’ve never seen a shark with pink scales, have you?” He shot Tobio a challenging glare, which was, of course, returned.

“Pink?” Hajime offered a glance Keiji’s way, but the merman just shrugged.

“It was really close to the ship,” Shouyou added, and then the others looked a little more concerned. Even moreso when they heard a loud thump from the direction Shouyou had just come from.

Keiji and Hajime exchanged glances, then spun on their heels and bolted for the edge of the ship.

Once there, they didn’t see much outside of the expected waves. They heard footsteps racing toward them from behind as Shouyou caught up. The younger sailor hopped up to peer over the railing, hands gripping the edge and feet pressed up against the sides for extra support. He squinted out at the water, searching for a sign of whatever it was that he saw earlier.

“Are you sure–” Hajime started to say, just as Tobio was catching up behind them, and they heard another thump, this one louder, and closer to the bow.

Their heads whipped in that direction, and Taketora shouted a “The fuck was that?!?” from the helm. There were chatters of “Did we hit something?” and “Where’s that coming from” all around.

The next thump came from the portside opposite them, where Tooru and Saeko were already leaning over the edge. Saeko shouted something, but it was hard to make out over the screech that broke out from the water.

Saeko pulled a pistol from her side, and Tooru spun around and ran for Keiji and the others with an expression even more frantic than when he saw the swan.

“Throw me a gun!”

“You fucking threw the last one off the ship!”

Still, Hajime withdrew one of his own pistols, but he didn’t make any move to give it to Tooru. “The hell kinda fish are we dealing with?”

“Not a fish!” Tooru snatched Keiji by the wrist and tugged him away from the railing. “You. Inside. Now.”

Keiji’s eyes went wide with horror. He could hear gunshots from Saeko’s side of the ship, then more when her brother joined her side.

“Out of sight, Jiji!” Tooru practically flung him toward the door that led below deck, and he stumbled a few steps in making his way for it, himself.
“Hey, asshole.” Hajime snatched Tooru by the arm. “You’re the expert here, right? Tell us what the fuck we’re dealing with, and how to get rid of it.”

The sound of something speeding through the waves came closer to their side, making its way around the perimeter of the ship. It came with a violent rush of water, and a flash of pink and red and white.

The splash of color lept out from the sea, long reptilian body spinning and landing four sets of ruby claws down upon the side of the ship. Its body weighed down on the legs, belly thudding against the wooden walls, before it kicked off and back beneath the waves.

Hajime aimed his weapon, but the thing was traveling way too fast, and he knew a flintlock wasn’t exactly going to be his best option against a big scaly monster, anyway. Still, he shot, and cursed under his breath. “Shouyou--” he began, but the boy was already saluting and darting out of sight, dragging Tobio along with him. Hopefully to retrieve the more suitable firearms that Hajime was going to ask for.

The creature jumped at the ship’s side again, this time in another spot, and it just narrowly avoided a shot to the neck in doing so.

“Is that a fucking dragon?” Hajime didn’t take his sight off of it, watching its shadow whiz about beneath the surface. “The fuck am I supposed to kill a dragon with?!?”

“Not orichalcum.”

Hajime would have shot Tooru a look, or maybe a bullet, if he weren’t so preoccupied.

The siren didn’t provide an actual, helpful answer, as expected. Instead, he fidgeted with something in his pockets, mumbling little curses to himself while Saeko caught up to Hajime’s side, and Ryuu made his way up the rope ladder of the mast.

A door swung open soon enough, and Daichi came rushing out from his cabin, sword at his side and musket in hand. Their captain ran to the edge, and leaned over it, squinting at the scaly thing assaulting their ship. Though, he wasn’t sure if he’d really call it an assault.

The dragon continued to launch itself against the side, but it wasn’t doing any real damage, from what they could tell. It kept aiming at different places, rather than trying to break through one.

“The fuck is wrong with it?!” Ryuu shouted from his perch, weapon lowered.

“Does it… want something?” Daichi furrowed his brows, then looked around for someone more useful to their situation. And, there was Tooru, all the way across the deck, one leg swung up onto the railing. “What are you doing?!”

“Helping!” The siren pulled himself up to stand on the wooden beam. “I’ll be right back!”

“Wait, no, we need your guidance, here!”

Tooru spun on his toes, miraculously catching his balance at the last moment. “Aim for the throat, but try not to piss it off too much!” He offered a salute, two fingers extended out from the bladeless sword grip he was now holding. Its twin was in his opposite hand, and once the gesture was made, he slipped back from the rail and dove backwards into the sea.

“How do we do that without pissing it off?!”
“How do we do that when it’s so damn fast?” Hajime growled with another shot at the dragon.

Shouyou and Tobio returned with armfuls of dangerous-looking things. Muskets, spears, swords, cannon supplies. They weren’t carrying any of it in a way that looked safe, either, but Daichi and Hajime both decided on saving scolding them for another time.

Others followed not far behind, Koutarou with a musket slung over his back, Kuroo with a spear in his one good hand, and Noya with a suspicious bag of something at his waist, and a shaking crow on his shoulder.

“S’this a little overkill for one tiny dragon?” Noya asked once he caught sight of the thing bashing itself against the ship. “Is it even attacking us, or is something wrong with it?”

“Is it trying to get up here?” Kuroo frowned down into the waves.

“You can stand around playing guessing games…” Hajime snatched a firearm from the pile the deckhands brought up and tossed it at Noya. “Or you can help get rid of it before it calls any friends.”

“That’d be our luck.” Daichi took aim, but found himself hesitating even once he had a decent shot. The dragon had slowed down, but it wasn’t alone, and it wasn’t with Tooru.

The (probably) good news, was that it wasn’t with more dragons. The confusing news, was that it looked like a person catching up to it beneath all the violent ripples of the sea.

Said person climbed up onto its back, balancing themselves on their feet. They held a long spear in one hand, its end a sharpened, dark purple stone that glistened with the reflection of the sun and water. They peered up at the ship, shielding the light from their eyes with their free hand.

Hajime swallowed a nervous gulp. White hair, black tips. He’d met this person before. He couldn’t see all of the scales coating his torso when they were covered up back in that shop on Owl Roost, though.

“Y’mind toning down the target practice?” Eita called up at them. “I don’t go around shooting your pets.”

“That thing was attacking our ship!” Ryuu yelled from his high point.

“He just wants attention. Promise.”

“For what?” Daichi didn’t take his aim off of them.

Eita tilted his head of black and white, eyes wandering, thoughtful. “We don’t play with sailors, often. Not your kind, anyway.”

“We ain’t up for playing with any sea monsters!” Hajime spat.

Eita’s gaze wandered back to him. His jaw dropped, slightly, possibly recalling Hajime from the island. He then shook his head. “We already tagged you. You’re it.”

Daichi did not have the patience for any of this. Less now than ever. “If you want something from us, then out with it!”

He was studying Daichi now, carefully. Specifically, the scar across his face. “Is your name Sawamura?”
Daichi’s grip tightened on the weapon.

“My… friends are probably gonna be better with the negotiations than me. They’ll be pissed if I do it without them, anyway.” He shrugged. “There was just one message I was supposed to give until then, though.”

Tag. Negotiations. Daichi didn’t know what this guy was on about, but he didn’t like it one bit.

The man sighed, adjusting his footing on his dragon’s back and lowering his hand from his eyes to his hip. He looked down, trying to recall the exact words, then tilted his head back to say, “Three good deeds won’t help you now… or something like that.”

Even without getting Satori’s words just right, the message still got across, and Daichi looked like someone had just reached in and dug their nails straight into his heart.

“Get him up here,” Daichi said, voice low. He didn’t take his eyes off of his target, even when he could feel his crewmates’ uncertain gazes upon him. “I don’t care how. Throw a damned fishing net at him, if you have to.”

The man on the dragon frowned. “Got your attention, then?” He was already getting tired of yelling up at the ship. “In that case, I’ll say it again. Tag. You’re. It.”

He adjusted his footing in the time it took the dragon to regain speed, and the creature dashed through the waters with him standing atop it, not unlike a surfboard.

“Tooru!”

“Captain, this is obviously some kind of trap!” Kuroo protested.

“I don’t care!”

No sooner did something-- some one leap out from the water, tackling the dragon rider from his steed.

Tooru’s teeth were sharper than the norm, biting around the sword grip while he used a free, clawed hand to push Eita by his throat deeper into the water. The nail of his thumb grazed the merman’s gills, eliciting a sharp yelp and swing of the spear. The wood of the weapon bashed against the side of Tooru’s head with more force than the siren anticipated, and his hold on Eita’s throat immediately went loose.

Eita kicked him back and spun the weapon so the sharp point of the spear was aimed at Tooru. He casted a quick glance upward, but his dragon seemed to be unharmed, still zipping about overhead as a distraction.

Tooru didn’t waste a moment in snatching the spear by the end, just below the stone. He swung it to the side, taking a reluctant-to-let-go Eita with its pull. The merman clasped a second hand onto where he was already holding it, and swung his legs around to kick Tooru in the side of the face.

The siren’s ear was already beginning to throb from the growing abuse to his head, but he pushed the concerns away when he spat the sword grip out from his mouth. It spun through the water, slowly, before he snatched it up and held both grips out to his sides.

Eita had already reclaimed his own weapon and put some distance between them, again. “Aren’t you supposed to be playing neutral?” he scoffed, and dove deeper when Tooru made a
move for him.

“Aren’t you supposed to be playing *serpent’s pet*?” Tooru swung one of the grips at him, and Eita dodged, even if he wasn’t completely sure what it was he was supposed to be dodging.

The question of “what” was answered with the next swing of the arm. From the grip came a distortion in the water, so subtle he almost missed it, in the shape of a curved blade, with bubbles and heat pouring up toward the surface from it.

Eita escaped again, but he was certain he could feel the obscene amount of warmth flooding out from the weapon. He made a quick dart to the side, bubbles leaving a L-shaped path in his wake, and spun around to greet the siren with a jab of the spear.

Tooru tilted his body just enough to avoid being speared through the head, but the result was still a slice across his cheek that drew a screeching hiss and a thin stream of red from the siren’s face. Eita pulled the weapon back in his moment of agony, and kicked his way back up, toward the surface.

Tooru was having none of that.

He snatched the other by his ankle as best as he could, his boiling “blade” still in hand and scalding the flesh and scales of Eita’s leg when they touched.

Eita yelled, a burst of bubbles breaking free with the sound. He tried to kick himself free, but Tooru just dragged him back down.

“Who are you stalling for?” he hissed, unintentionally pushing the boiling sensation further into Eita’s leg as he brought him down to his level. “Those nasty pirates are on their way, aren’t they?”

Rather than answering, Eita whistled, and a rush of bright scales came knocking Tooru away from him, sending the siren spiraling through the water with a series of fresh claw marks that cut through his shirt and across his chest.

Before he could catch his balance, he saw darkness fall over them, the shadow of something as large as the Corvus passing overhead.

Tooru cursed under his breath while Eita clung to his dragon and rushed back toward the surface.

Toward the Black Swan.

By the time Tooru felt sea breeze against his face again, Saeko was already tossing a rope from the side of the Corvus for him. She kept throwing nervous glances over her shoulder, at the approaching pirate ship, as he made his way back to the deck.

He wiped some blood from his cheek and snarled at the Black Swan, an almost animalistic look in his eyes. “Your captain’s about to get his wish.”

Saeko frowned from him to the ship. When Tooru pulled away from her attempts to support him, she didn’t argue, and kept her gun at the ready.

The rest of Daichi’s crew already had canons prepared for an attack.

“Long time no seeeeeee!” came the loud voice of the Black Swan’s redhead first mate.
Satori waved from where he stood on the ratlines near the ship’s edge. His face looked ready to crack with the size of his grin breaking across it. “Doin’ pretty well for yourself these days, huh, Scar-Nose?” he called.

Beside him, standing at the ship’s edge with an unsheathed sword propped before him, stood none other than his captain. Somewhere off to the side Alisa was helping Eita and his burned legs out from the water.

Daichi, nor any of his crew, looked thrilled to see them.

“Oh, come on. It’s been years! Ain’tcha at least gonna give me a ‘hello’ or something?”

“Where is Suga?” For all the human that Daichi was, the words were as close to a growl as one could get.

Satori blew out a bored breath, narrowed eyes skimming over the merchant crew. “You think we’re just gonna hand him over, like that? Nah, Scar-Nose, we ain’t leaving empty handed, here.”

“But we aren’t so barbaric as not to work out a trade,” Wakatoshi supplied. “You have something of ours.”

“Some one!” Satori swung his body out from the ratlines, keeping himself balanced with just a hand and a foot. “You guys have the siren, but where’s our other fishy?”

It was Kuroo’s turn to shout, now. “The hell d’you want with Kenma?!”

Satori raised one brow, high, his free arm and leg dangling from the lines like some ragdoll. A very confused, ragdoll. He and Wakatoshi exchanged glances.

It was Wakatoshi who asked, across the gap between ships, “Who?”

About half of the Corvus looked just as confused, while Hajime and Koutarou struggled not to shoot any looks Tooru’s way.

Tooru wasn’t about to let some stupid cut on his face keep him from putting up a mask, however.

He came up to Daichi’s side and set his hands down on the rail, leaning over, practically out across the water. “‘Who’ being the only merman they’ve got on this hell-ship! Were you looking for someone else, Captain?!” The urge to spit in Wakatoshi’s general direction was all too compelling. “Looks like you’re outta luck!”

Wakatoshi didn’t seem fazed. “Then, I suppose we’ll be keeping our part of the trade.”

Tooru clicked his tongue, and Daichi was leaning over the edge with him, at that.

“You give him back!”

The cackle that Satori made was one of utter delight. “Maybe...” he said, cocking his head to the side in a way that looked close to broken, “...you need a little more convincing, if we’re gonna try to be civil about this.” He pulled himself back upright on the ropes, and grinned over his shoulder at the door that two of their crewmates had disappeared to not long ago. “Our hostage should be here any second, after all.”
With all of the splashing and yelling going on outside, the Black Swan’s men were not prepared for the complete silence they were met with within the ship’s brig. Not even with Suga’s never-ending reluctance to provide the information they’d wanted.

But, it was quiet, and while Shigeru and Kentarou had hoped that it was nothing but a sign that Suga had just passed out, they weren’t so lucky.

As they came to the bottom of the steps, they were met not with locked bars and an out-of-shape prisoner, but instead, an open door to an open space, void of one Koushi Sugawara.

The only thing in his place was a tiny, piece of fish bone.

The two hardly bothered to exchange looks. Only stared where their hostage should have been, with a muttered, in unison, “Shit.”
Suga really hoped that Daichi and his crew had found an alternative to the barrel they'd found Kenma in, because he'd discovered firsthand that they did not make for comfortable hiding places.

He was low on options, though. He hadn't exactly spent much time thinking through what he was going to do once he broke out from his cell. He couldn't, when he had no idea what this ship's layout was to begin with.

He'd hid behind boxes beneath the stairs, and sidled along the walls in the shadows, and, by god, sneaking around a ship was so much easier when he was smaller.

The barrel hideout was the last hiding place, and, thankfully, he was out of that cramped situation now.

Presently, he was pressed up against a hallway wall, avoiding the footsteps of the two pirates who’d just burst through a door a ways down.

They were talking, and their voices grew more distant as they wandered down another hall. Suga did make out one, very important piece of their conversation, however.

“Are we supposed to knock him out when we drag him up there?”

He barely recognized that voice. It was Kentarou’s, the crocotta’s, but he’d heard him speak so infrequently that it took him a moment to realize it. It was low, and gruff. Annoyed, too, maybe.

“I think they would’ve told us to if we were.”

He didn’t recognize the other’s voice at all. But, then, he’d really only interacted with about four people on this ship thus far.

“He’d be less of a pain that way, and that ship’s captain would be more desperate if he saw him, probably.”

“You knock him out, then.”

Suga held his breath until he could no longer hear them, and he hoped that Kentarou couldn't smell him, or whatever it was those hyena creatures did to find their prey.

His heart was pounding out his chest, drumming up a storm that clouded his thoughts with questions of 'What ship captain?'
If it was himself those two were looking to drag out, then he already knew the answer.

Once he felt semi-safe, he let out his held breath, slow and steady, or at least he tried for steady. Every turned corner and every door so far had him anticipating some inhuman pirate jumping out at him, probably with bared fangs, or at least a knife.

He, however, was unarmed. He hadn’t been so lucky as to find a weapon lying around in any barrels or piles of rope.

He peeked around the corner, slow and cautious, and studied the door that Kentarou and the other had just come through. It was a ways away, but he was certain he’d heard more commotion from the other side when it had opened.

A reasonable part of him screamed 'avoid it,' and, 'danger,' but another cried 'freedom,' and 'Daichi.'

That other part assumed that they were anywhere near the Corvus to begin with, or land, even. If he was wrong, if he was grossly misunderstanding what he’d just heard, then “freedom” would mean tossing his life into the ocean. Making himself shark (or sea monster) bait didn’t sound like the better alternative to his current situation.

Suga swallowed, and continued his staring contest with the door. Waltzing on outside when he could hear footsteps galore above him would be stupid, even if he did have a weapon on him. Unless everyone out there was too distracted by an enemy ship to notice.

Other options? Find a porthole somewhere? Find a way to climb up top, unnoticed? He didn’t have the time for that, not if his friends were out there. And, really, he couldn’t see being stealthy when he had no idea where anything was on this vessel.

Best case scenario: Everyone on deck is too preoccupied to notice him sneaking out a very obvious door. He finds a hiding place, one where he can scope out a better, final escape route, and somehow make it from one ship to another.

Worst case scenario: He’s caught, Satori gets a hold of him, probably. He doesn’t die, but he’s waved in front of Daichi as a bargaining chip. He either gets to the Corvus safe and sound, at the expense of giving up some poor merman’s safety, or the two ships break into some kind of battle, and he has to watch the Corvus sink to the bottom of the ocean, because they’d be a little outmatched, he thinks, and--

Dear god, Hitoka must have been rubbing off on him.

Really, in either situation, a fight seemed inevitable, and focusing on that was not going to help him now, when he was standing stranded in some hallway.

He supposed, going through that door wouldn't be the first dumb decision among his life choices.

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Daichi didn't know much about the Black Swan and its crew.

He knew their name, knew that Wakatoshi and his crew were an infamous bunch among the
islands. People had called them relentless, unforgiving. Tyrants. Monsters. Powerful.

He didn't know if any of that was true, but he certainly knew a little about the redheaded first mate that kept eying them with a wicked sort of amusement.

He'd only spoken to Satori a handful of times during his time as a captive of the Spectre, and he was unsettling then, even as a child. Most of what he knew, however, came from Suga's stories.

And, as much as Suga tried to portray his former friend as misunderstood, or "just a kid," Daichi absolutely did not trust redcaps.

Or pirates, for that matter.

"You look a little worried there, Captain!" Satori grinned from the ratlines, while Wakatoshi remained stoic, patiently awaiting their bargaining chip.

Daichi's nails dug into the wood railing, when he knew very well he should have been preparing a weapon, at the very least. The others were, with cannons and firearms at the ready, from the deck and from the masts. The Black Swan's crew looked equally prepared.

"What do you want from us?" Daichi called across the water. He must have had splinters in his fingers by now.

"Your fishy friend!" Satori swung himself toward the edge of the ropes, and hopped back onto their own deck. "And I don't mean the siren, but, hey, we'll take him, too."

"Like hell," Tooru spat. He stood beside Daichi, weapon cooled down from his scuffle with Eita, back to otherwise harmless sword grips.

"Tooru Oikawa," came Wakatoshi's voice, and the siren outright hissed in his direction, "Why do you oppose us, when you vowed to remain uninvolved?"

Tooru didn't take his eyes off of the pirate captain, even when he could feel Daichi and the others staring daggers at him. "It's a bit difficult to stay uninvolved, when your friends are sending possessed dolls after me."

"I know nothing of such a threat," Wakatoshi claimed. He didn't hear Eita's small "shit" from across the deck. Or, if he did, he likely assumed it was related to Alisa tending to the merman's burns.

Tooru scoffed. "Just hand over your damned prisoner, before things get ugly."

"Oooh, no, but Mr. Siren," Satori chimed, coming up beside Wakatoshi. "We won't be the ones bloodied and mangled when things get ugly."

"And I see no sense in us handing anything over without compensation," Wakatoshi added.

"What do you want, then?!" Dachi repeated, all attempts at a sense of composure thrown off the deck.

Satori leaned over the edge. "We told you!"

"And we don't have him!" Tooru nearly snarled.

Daichi looked to him, voice hushed, "What do they want?" Tooru was sure of an unspoken, 'And how are you involved?'
Eita was beside Satori soon enough, almost limping his way to the Black Swan's edge. "He was with you when Yuuji sent his stupid dolls after you!"

"Dolls?" Daichi repeated.

Tooru was chewing his lip, mask slowly cracking under the pressure. Hajime looked about ready to shoot someone, be it one of the pirates, or the siren. Koutarou was struggling with everything not to run back inside where Keiji had gone, if only to remind himself that he was still safe, still among them, for now.

"If you do not produce the merman in the time it takes my men to bring out Koushi Sugawara," Wakatoshi warned, "there will be consequences."

Satori cackled as he drew a finger along his own throat in a cutting motion.

"How are we supposed to produce someone we don’t have?!" Daichi slammed his fists on the edge for emphasis, nearly snarling at the pirates across the water. "If it’s not Kenma, then I don’t know what you’re looking for!"

Kuroo stepped up behind Tooru, voice quiet enough for him, maybe even Daichi and Hajime, to hear, and them alone. "Aren’t you and your friend supposed to be helping us at a time like this? Wasn’t that the deal?"

"I’m trying--"

He cut Tooru off. "Yeah, you’re here, where’s the guy they’re demanding from us, though?"

Daichi turned his head toward Kuroo, slowly, eyes still trained on the pirates for most of the action until he was fully facing his first mate. His eyes were wide, not quite with total shock, more with a realization that should have hit him earlier.

"The guy talks to sea monsters, Captain. He ain’t human."

Tooru glared at Kuroo. It was a glare that said, ‘I knew you knew something, and I hate that I was right.’

They all looked back to the Black Swan at the sound of Satori’s indignant cry of, "What do you mean you can’t find him?!"

A man stood before Satori and Wakatoshi, with mousy, fluffy hair, but it wasn’t Suga’s mousy, fluffy hair. Beside him stood a creature on all fours, something like a wolf, or a hyena, or some strange combination, with black and gold fur that coated its neck in a wild mane. It sniffed the air, oversized fangs bared with a snarl.

Shigeru looked absolutely helpless, but no one from the Corvus could make out what he was saying, only that he was desperately trying to explain something of importance to his captain.

Among his frantic explaining, among Satori’s frustrated, “Well he’s on the ship somewhere!” came the snort-like bark of the crocotta, over and over as it looked upward.

The next sound that left its maw was far more human. “The mast!”

Both crews looked up to the sails of the Black Swan. The person climbing his way up the rope ladder of the main mast was not one of the ship’s resident pirates.
Daichi was overcome with relief at the sight of Koushi Sugawara, alive, and not bound and in the hands of some pirate monster.

He was also very much terrified, at the same time, because he wasn’t the only one aware of his presence.

“Kenjirou!” came Wakatoshi’s voice with an unspoken order.

Suga looked down from where he hung, still weaponless, and cursing to himself when he saw everyone on the pirate deck staring up at him.

He hoisted himself up onto the yard, swinging a leg up onto it and holding tight to the center pillar that was the mast. Daichi could see the breeze whipping through Suga’s hair, some hundred or so feet up from the deck, and he could see the way he fought the wind to stay upright.

He also saw, before Suga had a chance to react, a white swan come soaring toward the mast, but something much smaller than itself came crashing into it in a blur of black feathers, sending it for the deck and away from Suga.

Daichi whispered a quiet, “Thank you, Asahi,” as he moved around the others, running along the edge of the deck until he was standing across from where Suga stood, albeit on a lower level.

What the hell was he thinking? No, that was a stupid question. He knew exactly what Suga was thinking, his suspicions confirmed when he saw the innkeeper snatch up one of many ropes intended for purposes unrelated to what he was about to do.

“Is he crazy?!” Ryuu shouted. “He’s gonna fucking crash into the side of the ship if he tries that!”

But Suga was already breaking into a run across the yard, steps clumsy and just short of toppling over, but maybe sheer willpower and adrenaline were on his side, today. There were gunshots, from a firearm Wakatoshi had snatched from someone else among the crew at the last moment, followed by Hajime’s in retaliation. Hajime’s were enough to serve as a distraction, to give Suga some time, not that he seemed to have anything on his mind outside of ‘run’ at the moment.

Suga’s feet left the wood, and then there was nothing but cool sea breeze beneath them.

He clung to the rope, and Daichi backed away from the edge of the Corvus, arms out and eyes wide as Suga kicked through the air, feet searching for ground they couldn’t find. All of the background sounds were fading out. All of Satori’s shouting, Wakatoshi’s commands, the calls of a swan and crow going at each other’s throats. It was all white noise, and the only thing he could see in front of him was the sight of Suga crossing over the railings of his ship, the rope slipping from his palms, leaving burns in its wake.

Koushi Sugawara’s feet hit the deck, just short of missing it, then they lifted, one after the other as he stumbled across the old flooring and dove into the captain hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

When Suga pulled back, his hands were still tight around Daichi, and his shoulders moved dramatically with his breathing while he looked the captain over. His hair, everything about him was a dirty mess. His face was covered in tiny cuts and bruises. One eye was yellowed, probably recovering from being heavily swollen, at some point.

“You're alive,” they both began to say, Suga before Daichi, and, while Suga got all of the
words out first, he stole Daichi’s right off of his lips on the “You’re.” His own, chapped lips pressed against the sailor’s with relief, and warmth, and Daichi could hardly process what was going on because they had never done this before, and there was absolutely still a ship full of angry pirates right across from them.

Suga released Daichi just as quickly as he’d stumbled into him, and he ran past him, waving and shouting at the others to toss him a weapon.

And Daichi stood there, thoughts a mushy, swirling mess of too many emotions that really needed to be pushed aside at a time like this.

There were shouts of, “Suga, get inside where it’s safe!” and the like, as if the man hadn’t just jumped a space between two ships in the midst of gunfire. Of course, Suga was having none of that. He talked Tobio into handing him a pistol, and ran up beside those at the edge of the ship.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve used anything like this, but there’s no way I’m going to go hide out in another cramped up room while all of the action’s going on.” He prepared the weapon to fire. “Besides,” he said, waving the pistol around carelessly, “I could use the fresh air.”

Suga jumped back when a mess of black feathers came speeding between himself and Hajime. Asahi came tumbling across the deck, wings flapping in a panic to right himself.

Noya ran to his aid, but the crow bristled away from his touch, a silent, *Don't worry about me,* despite the blood darkening the feathers on his back.

Daichi's attention went from Suga, to the crow, and to the helm in glances too quick to truly process anything.

"Are we waiting for something?!" he called to the helm.

Suga, Hajime, Koutarou, and Tooru all remained at their battle stations, while the others rushed to get the sails and all that they needed ready for a retreat. Daichi came up behind them, and cursed when he saw others aboard the Black Swan climbing the heights of the masts, readying ropes and grappling hooks, no doubt to pull off a stunt much like Suga's own.

And there were cannons being loaded, gunshots being fired. Against a ship like this, the Corvus had a lot more to worry about than a single hole in the wall or a demolished desk.

"Cannons--!"

"Workin' on it!" Koutarou huffed, shoving a ball into the contraption with Tooru's aid.

The snap of Hajime's gunfire echoed through the air, and it was soon followed by a splash. The poor sap who'd been swinging across the gap between ships fell to the sea.

He was reloading the weapon with quick, experienced motions, but he heard the thud of someone hitting the deck before he could get another shot in.

The sound was echoed by more, like raindrops following the first drop of water, but a storm might have been preferred over pirates.

Hajime managed to hit another, only for them to fall and tumble onto the Corvus with their new injury.
Shigeru hissed as he pulled himself to his knees. Blood was already seeping through his pant leg from his thigh.

Kentarou, now in his more human form, outright growled in response, eyes set on Hajime, dark and predatory. He advanced toward the sailor, but an obstacle soon found its way in his path.

Tooru brandished his weapon before him, paying little mind to his own bloody mess at his chest. Water pooled out from an opening in the sword grip, concentrating in their air in that blade-like shape, boiling where it hovered.

"Hellooooo," Tooru hummed. "I remember you, Mr. Crocotta. And, hm... Shi-something, correct?" He leaned to the side, eying the injured Shigeru. "Would you two kindly go back to your own ship? And, please, tell your captain that, if he wants something, he should come get it himself."

"You're as pleasant as before," Kentarou mumbled. He was still glowering at Hajime, only giving the scalding blade minimal attention.

"And you're as rude." Tooru nudged the air with the blade. "Make eye contact when you're talking to someone."

"We're not here to talk anymore," Kentarou barked, and in a smooth leap, he was all fur and fangs again, dodging the water and going for Tooru's legs.

The siren kicked at him, slashed at him, stumbled back and swung his blade when the creature made to attack again. He grinned when his weapon drew across fur and flesh, the water of the blade parting and reforming with the contact.

Kentarou yelped at the burn, but determination or revenge kept him going, and he raced around Tooru, tackling him to the ground from the back. Heavy claws sunk into skin and scales, and teeth came down with an open maw, right for the neck.

Gunfire had him reeling back, saving Tooru from an almost torn-up throat. Hajime pulled his aim from the creature long enough to reload the weapon, and Kentarou charged for him next, despite the red pouring from his hind leg.

Tooru pushed himself up into a crawl, desperate to get back to his feet, but then another weight came pinning him back to the floor.

"Should you really still be moving?" the siren hissed when he caught a glimpse of Shigeru over his shoulder. The pirate nudged Tooru's gaze away with the end of a pistol to the back of his head.

"If you're so concerned for us, you could be helping."

"I don't help pirates."

"Last time, it was 'I only help myself,' but I'm seeing some holes in that."

"Call off your pet."

"Call out your friend."

Shigeru gave his head another nudge, and Tooru watched Hajime struggle to knock the crocotta away. He heard one, pained yell from the sailor, and a glimpse of a bloody leg between
sharp teeth.

Tooru opened his mouth in a deep inhale.

And he sang.

The ongoing scuffling could be heard from below the deck, muddied with creaking wood and sloshing waves. There was also the occasional bang of a door swinging open to hit a wall, as Satori rushed down the halls of the Corvus, checking every room he came across for any sign of Keiji Akaashi.

So far, the only sign of life he'd stumbled across was a frightened rat that scurried away at the sight of him.

"Come out, come out," he sang, kicking the next door open with more force than necessary. Ah, the kitchen. He stepped inside, eyes wandering as he spun his dagger beside him. "Mr. Merman, if you're in here, it would be so helpful to the rest of us if you'd come out to play." He bent down to peer beneath the dining table. "You realize you're killing yourself, dontcha? We just want to help."

He peeked into the stone oven, as if that were a reasonable hiding place to begin with. "You don't want to let Wakatoshi and Eita die because you're so stubborn, do ya?"

He furrowed his brows, and held still for a moment. Then, at the sound of an old floorboard’s creak, he turned. Satori found himself with a sword hovering between the eyes.

"Your sneaking around is becoming a real pain, Koushi," he hissed.

Suga now had his pistol stowed away at the belt, and held a cutlass with a false air of confidence. He hadn't properly fought with one of them in years, not against another person, and that was only if a child's swordplay even counted as "proper" to begin with.

"The whole kidnapping thing was kind of a pain, too, you know," he offered.

"Guess we're even, then."

Suga feigned contemplation. "Sounds unfair. Plus, you want to kidnap someone else from this ship, on top of that."

"I wanna save some lives, Koushi. You should be pretty damn proud of me. Look how noble I turned out."

Suga did not at all look like he was buying that.

"Look..." Satori lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender, but the sudden motion had Suga nudging the blade forward. Satori stumbled back a step with a lopsided grin, but Suga kept the cutlass close on him. "...You're gonna be rustier than an anchor with that thing. We both know you don't spend your time in your cozy little inn reliving the good ol' days. So, how about you save yourself from looking stupid."

"You're the one trying to talk his way out of a sword to the skull, not me."
Satori's grin looked strained, at that. "Wanna talk this out?"

"No."

"How 'bout a gamble?"

"Nope."

"Loser jumps out the porthole."

"You're kidding me."

"Fine. Wanna see a magic trick, then?"

"I'd rather knock you out, I think, if we're being honest."

Satori could see Suga twisting his wrist, readying the cutlass for something he was sure to dislike.

The click and creak of the door had Suga twisting his head around, instead. Judging by the look on his face, he must have realized it was a stupid mistake, the moment he felt Satori's leg smack into his own.

The pirate's foot swept out from beneath Suga's body as the latter crashed to the floor, weapon slipping from his grasp. In a few swift moves, his dagger was tucked away, and a cutlass of his own was drawn and poised to Suga's throat. "Shoulda knocked me out, then!" There was something like a cackle in his voice. He tossed a glance over his shoulder, ready to thank whoever had barged in for the much wanted distraction. Instead, he found himself gaping at the sight of someone with black and white hair leaning against the doorframe, spear touching the floor behind them like it had been dragged the whole way there.

"Eita, what the hell?"

Eita dismissed him. "Did you find him?" Then, he registered the person beneath Satori’s boot, with his cutlass to their throat. Not someone he recognized, and not at all Keiji. "No, then," he answered for himself. He ducked his head into the room, like he might find another merman curled up away from Satori in the corner of the kitchen.

"Did Wakatoshi let you jump across ships like that?" Satori pointed to Eita’s legs, still soaked and probably a scarred mess beneath his pants, thanks to Tooru’s boily trick. Satori may have unintentionally poked Suga with the blade a little when he did this.

"I’m not part of your crew. I don’t need Wakatoshi’s permission for shit." Eita winced when he turned back for the hall. “You’re clearly preoccupied. I’m gonna find Keiji while you pirates waste your time.”

"You ain’t gonna be able to walk far enough to find ‘im! Hey, don’t you walk away from--!"

The door closed behind Eita, and Satori’s cutlass was knocked from his hands in his distraction. Suga took Satori by the ankle before he could retaliate. He twisted and brought him to the floor, a loud crack resounding as Satori’s head hit the wood. Suga scrambled over him, pinning the pirate by one wrist, while Satori’s other arm found itself stuck between his own back and the floorboards.

They were both weaponless now-- no, that wasn’t right. Suga’s gaze shot to the small dagger
Satori was larger than him-- well, taller, at the very least. If he seemed more well-built, it was only because Suga had been spending days with minimal food and too many bruises. The pirate still had an advantage that he couldn’t overlook, either way.

He heard Satori curse when he slipped Shooting Star out from its sheath. He gripped it by the handle, steadily hovering it over Satori’s face, just where he’d had the cutlass moments ago.

“You’re going to tell me what you want from them, in detail...” he said, glowering as Satori grinned up at him, like he was proud of Suga or something. He didn’t comment on it. “...And then you’re going to call off your friends.”

“And why am I going to do that, Koushi?” Satori’s eyes were nearly slits, his lips curled with too much amusement. “Because you’re going to kill me?” He laughed, disbelieving.

Suga did not respond. Of course he wasn’t going to kill him. He could lie, and say that he was, but he knew Satori wouldn’t buy it.

He’d stop him one way or another, though.

Keiji sat on a stool in the doctor’s cabin, foot tapping and hands fidgeting as he kept casting occasional glances to the door.

He needed to be out there. Whatever was going on, whatever all of the noise from up on deck was about, he needed to be there. To resolve it. To distract it. To keep a bunch of clueless sailors from sinking into a situation they had no right to be a part of. Didn’t deserve to be a part of.

“If anything should happen while we’re here, we’ll abandon ship at the first sign to save you the trouble.”

He’d said that, just days ago. He’d repeated it to Koutarou, over and over.

He was doing the opposite. The one thing he’d told someone on this ship with absolute sincerity, and he was going back on it, playing the coward act, instead. The coward act was fine, on Owl Roost, in the little town of Shelley Rock, where the only thing at risk if he was found was a small cottage and what few belongings he had there. Not an entire ship, not an entire crew of sailors just trying to make an honest living for themselves.

“Is that a fucking dragon?” He was sure of the words he’d heard Hajime say, even from the inside with his ear pressed to a door.

Eventide had dragons. Dragons that he’d trained, tamed, and raised before he hid away to an island of birds. Those dragons were pets. Companions. Steeds. Partners in war, when necessary. And why would Tooru be so pushy about him getting out of sight, if this one was unrelated to Eventide?

Things had gotten louder. There was more than just a single, puny dragon up there.
He needed to be neutral. He was fine with hiding, but not here, not--

“You will wear your fingers to the bone, if you can’t calm yourself.”

The doctor’s voice was a clear try for reassuring, but Keiji could sense the man’s nerves just as well as his own, pounding at his skull and twisting his fingers together against his will.

Keiji lifted his head. Dr. Takeda was looking at the door now, too, worrying his lip. He seemed to notice Keiji’s gaze, though, and he met it with a forced smile.

“I know you had to save us from that serpent, but, really, they’ve all dealt with a great deal, even before then. They can handle themselves!” The doctor’s laugh was unsteady, and the merman gathered that he may have been trying to convince himself more than Keiji.

It took conscious effort for Keiji to separate his hands. “I hope so,” he offered, almost distantly, “Or else you’ll have quite the job on your hands, Doctor.”

Unless he ran out there and did something to settle it all himself.

He flexed his fingers, but left them frozen, splayed open at a sound beyond the cabin door.

Footsteps.

Cautious, unsure ones, too. Not likely those of someone used to the Corvus.

Keiji and the doctor exchanged glances, and both, very slowly, rose to their feet.

The latter stepped back, toward the wall across from the door. The former, plucked a knife from inside his boot, and scanned the room for anything else he could make use of. Dr. Takeda’s small “psst” and pointing hand drew his attention, to a bag beside his bed. Keiji didn’t think a scalpel was going to do much better than what he already had, though.

The footsteps drew closer, and Keiji waved from the doctor to the bed.

“Get down,” he whispered, and the other only hesitated for the briefest of moments before scrambling beneath the bed in hiding.

Keiji, truth be told, wanted to hide, too.

Instead, he was pressed up against the wall, beside the door, where it would block him from sight once opened.

He could very easily not go this route. He could leap out the porthole, maybe. Play dead, even.

But there came a click at the door before either of those ideas could be put to action.

He went still, holding in a breath and clutching his sad little blade as the door creaked open, swinging out slowly, ever so close to his face.

The footsteps grew louder, and the first thing Keiji saw peek out from beyond the door was carved stone, a deep purple, glossy in some spaces, but worn from use in others. Strings coiled and criss-crossed around its base, tying it down to a wooden pole.

A spear. A spear that he recognized, that sent something inside his stomach plummeting.
The spear was followed by scaled arms and the back of a head of black and white hair.

Eita’s movements were awkward, those of an injured man, as he made his way into and searched the room. The crystal necklace dangling against his scales gave off a bright purple glow. A sure sign that the Black Swan was near by, confirming just about all of Keiji’s concerns.

Keiji could have stayed quiet, could have held his breath in hopes of Eita giving up and moving on to the next room.

But as the other turned his head, inching in Keiji’s direction, that idea seemed like less of an option.

Keiji tried to be quiet, and maybe he would have been successful, maybe he would have managed to knock Eita out, at the very least, if the damned creaking of the door hadn’t given him away.

Eita whirled around, swinging the spear Keiji’s way, but Keiji ducked and slid forward, under the weapon’s reach. When he shot back up, he’d snatched the wooden shaft into his hands, and shoved the thing horizontal into Eita’s chest until he was rammed up against the wall.

A heavy breath escaped Eita at the force of the blow, and his head hit the cabin wall with a very audible, very unpleasant sound. It took him a second to collect himself, lowering his head to meet Keiji’s gaze as the spear’s shaft pressed him closer to the wall.

“And here I was worried…” he choked out, “…you’d be a crippled, land-exhausted mess when we found you.”

“I can still shift, but thank you for your concern.” Keiji narrowed his eyes on him. “Who’s up there? Who did you bring with you?”

“I’m doing fine. Thanks for asking.” Disregarding his question, Eita took hold of the spear, hands alongside Keiji’s own, and shoved back at him. “Could be better, though, if I hadn’t been chasing some asshole around the islands for months.”

Keiji shoved back, trying to slam the other back into the wall. “Then perhaps you should have left me alone.”

Eita kicked a leg back before he could hit the wall. He winced at the pain from the burns, but that was the most he allowed himself. He stumbled forward, forcing Keiji to backtrack toward the doorway. “You knew that wasn’t going to happen.”

“I was minding my own business.”

“You made yourself a threat!”

“I refused to take a side!”

“Cut the ‘playing neutral’ act, already!”

They pushed against each other, back and forth, until one forceful shove and a ramming of foreheads freed Keiji’s hold of the shaft and sent him stumbling out of the room.

His back collided with the hallway wall, but he managed to slide out of the way before Eita could jab him with the spear. Keiji stumbled, nearly fell, but caught and pushed himself upright with his hand as he scrambled down the hall. He could hear Eita pursuing, but he only glanced
over his shoulder at the turns of corners. Whatever happened up on deck, Eita was definitely injured, and it was definitely hindering his chase. Good. Well, good for Keiji, anyway.

A few turns and a flight of steps later, Keiji found himself in the ship’s cargo hold.

Around him were crates, sacks, barrels, ropes, pieces of furniture too large to be boxed up, and miscellaneous cargo draped with tarps and sheets. He’d come in and out of this room several times when they’d docked at Kingston’s port, and he knew there was more than one entrance.

He made for the path left between cargo, knowing full well that there was a door at the other end of the hold. Some boxes and goods had fallen over during their travels. Just small obstacles for him to jump and climb over. He did so, hurriedly, picking up his pace when he heard Eita clambering down the steps and into the hold.

“Gandril trusted you, you know,” came his voice, impatient and bitter. “But now he won’t tell any of us anything. He can’t trust his own children because you swam off with everything he taught you.”

Keeping that information secret was such an easy task when they weren’t hunting him down, Keiji thought as he slid over the side of a fallen barrel. When he looked behind him, Eita was nowhere to be seen.

Something whirred by, outside his vision, and cut through his sleeve and grazed his arm. Eita’s spear sent Keiji’s arm flinging back, pinning the now-bloody fabric of his shirt to a crate among a stack taller than himself. When Keiji found the other merman, he was standing atop a crowd of boxes to the side of the path, arm outstretched from the throw.

“How the hell can we save Eventide when our own guardian won’t tell us shit?”

“How the hell can you save anyone when you’re wasting your time chasing me?” Keiji tugged at the spear, but it was lodged into the wood pretty damn well.

Eita was nearing him, stepping across the tops of the boxes. “Why do you want us dead?!”

“I don’t!” Keiji opted for ripping the shirt, even when doing so meant deepening the cut in his arm near where the spear had landed. “I don’t even want to be involved!”

“Someone who doesn’t want to be involved wouldn’t be caught running around with an informant in the City of Kingston, of all places.”

Eita paused in his tracks only when Keiji ripped himself free of the spear. The latter took the weapon by both hands, and tore it from the crate. Then, it was trained upward on Eita, who took a single step back.

“You’re choosing the humans who wiped out our kind over us.”

“Those people are just as innocent as anyone back home, and you know it.” His heart ached more than he’d like to admit over the word ‘home.’ “I’m not choosing either. I’m going to find a neutral solution, or I’m going to run, but I did not want blood on my hands, if I could avoid it.”

Eita furrowed his brow and took another step back when Keiji advanced. If he didn’t want blood on his hands, then the weapon pointed at him was an empty threat… unless he only meant as far as body counts were concerned. “You’ve never been crazy about playing hero. So, you trying to be the good guy, or is this all about you being a selfish prick?”
“It’s about me being a selfish prick.” Keiji didn’t so much as flinch at the face Eita made in response. “But I’ll be one with a mostly clean conscience, at the very least.”

He jabbed with the spear, and Eita jumped back. Keiji stepped up the crates to Eita’s level. He hadn’t used a spear in a long time. He’d always favored blades, even back in Eventide, but he wasn’t a complete novice when it came to pole weapons. It would do better than the tiny blade he had at the moment, anyway.

He tucked away said tiny blade, and spun the spear at his side. When Eita broke into a run, Keiji did the same, careful of the rise and fall in the cargo’s heights. When he came close enough to get a jab in, Eita had already snatched something up from against the wall. The spear collided with the handle of a mop, of all things. The wide-eyed look on Eita’s face with his new choice in weapon was almost comical, but Keiji didn’t have it in him to offer so much as an amused smirk.

Instead, he spun, swinging the spear again at Eita, but it was successfully blocked with each attempted hit. He felt like he should have had the advantage in all of this. One, he had the better weapon, and two, for once, his legs seemed to be faring better than someone else’s. Eita would stumble, every now and then, but he still had a better grasp on this style of fighting than Keiji did, in the end.

Their back and forth involved a lot of swinging and jabbing, a lot of leaps over gaps between cargo, and far more complicated footwork thanks to uneven heights. It also involved a lot of scratches and nicks in Eita’s case, and a lot of jabs to the gut and the occasional, distracting mop-to-the-face and kick to the stomach in Keiji’s. The most recent of which, had him tumbling from atop a crate to the floor and the spear clattering off to the side somewhere.

He rolled out of the way when Eita came descending from above with a loud thud. Keiji crawled to his feet, searching out the spear, but when he didn’t find it, he went for the next best plan of attack.

He bolted for a stack of barrels and shoved his weight against them, toward the topmost one, until it came rolling down, path set straight for Eita. Said merman lept over it, but was less graceful as more came tumbling after him. Keiji didn’t stand around to watch him struggle with the mess. He snatched up the mop that flew out from Eita’s grasp, as a precaution, and made one final run for the exit.

The deck of the Corvus had fallen eerily still, save for two—no, three exceptions.

One, the obvious, being Tooru, his water blades deactivated and hanging at his sides for the time being.

The second was Hajime, whose ears Tooru had clamped over with his hands the second he freed himself from beneath Shigeru’s weight. Hajime was sporting earmuffs, now, because of course he had to have kept a pair nearby. But Tooru was still singing that melodic string of wordless sounds, and even if it was muffled enough to keep him from falling completely under the siren’s thrall, he could still hear it, and it was still as dizzying as it was the first time, or the time in Kingston.

The third, Hajime had a lot of questions about, still. Koutarou had never covered his ears,
never requested a pair of muffs for himself, but he was going about his business like Tooru’s song didn’t even exist.

But those questions could wait.

While Koutarou went to unceremoniously tipping the entranced bodies of pirates over the sides of the Corvus, Hajime ran to their captain’s side, and Tooru tried very hard to keep up his spell without getting shot by a furious, unaffected Wakatoshi.

Hajime found Daichi slumped over the rails, pistol dangling from its trigger by the finger. First, he plucked the gun from him before it could fall to the sea. It was a good pistol, and he wasn’t one to waste. Then, he took Daichi by the back of the shirt, and dragged him onto the floor of the Corvus.

The man fell on his back, his cold, dead gaze staring back up at Hajime. It made him shudder. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to seeing the effects of the siren’s thrall like this. Not on his comrades’ faces.

He pressed his hands firm over Daichi’s ears, and skimmed his gaze over the deck. Shigeru and Kentarou were nowhere in sight, already tossed overboard. He didn’t see a single other pirate in sight, either, save for those under Tooru’s spell aboard the Black Swan. And, well, Wakatoshi, who had just come short of shooting said siren in the head.

A hiss found its way into Tooru’s song, and he was all fangs and claws, dark eyes and scaly spines growing off the edges of his ears and shoulders. The front of his shirt was still blood-soaked.

And he looked a different kind of exhausted than usual. Drained by his own voice, and maybe the blood loss.

Hajime whipped his head Koutarou’s way, and even doing that much was becoming dizzying. “We need to set sail while he’s still singing!” he called over the song. He could see Daichi coming back to, but he couldn’t keep sitting there, cradling his head like this.

Koutarou spun around, frantically searching out their crewmates, all of whom were leaned against masts and rails, caught in the trance and unmoving. He turned to Tooru, then. “Can’t you just aim it at the other ship?!?”

Tooru flashed him a look that was beyond done, and marched back to the edge of the Corvus. He latched onto the ratlines and pulled himself up. He planted his feet in the ropes, leaned out as far as he could, and ceased his singing. He hardly spent a second catching his breath. He couldn’t afford to do much more than that.

And then, he inhaled again, lungs filling with more salty air than he’d ever taken in one breath. On the exhale, came a new sound. A yell. A screech. A dissonant sort of song that knocked those already entranced who had been swaying on their feet to the decks.

Even those who’d been tossed into the water, saved from the old melody by the overpowering thrashing of waves, went still at the siren’s shriek.

Hajime felt something in his mind throb at the sound. Briefly, his vision went white, but he shook his head and pressed his hands tighter to Daichi’s.

Wakatoshi fired, and Tooru let his hand slip from the ratlines, dropping and catching himself on a lower section of ropes, dodging the shot while he sang his throat raw.
He twisted and pointed one clawed hand down to the sea, to Shigeru and Kentarou and the others turning over like discarded dolls among the waves.

Even from the Corvus, Wakatoshi’s expression was threateningly clear, uncharacteristically full of emotion, of rage and a mix of too many other things. One of those things, concern, maybe even fear, for his crew. He dropped his weapon to his side, and went to their aid.

Koutarou, still hardly looking fazed by the song, ran past Hajime, tossing another pair of earmuffs his way while he made for the helm.

Hajime pulled them over Daichi’s head, but he wasn’t sure how much good it’d do now, with Tooru’s latest trick.

He could already feel himself slipping.

The kitchen of the Corvus was an absolute disaster.

Now, it being a disaster was not unusual in itself. The first time they escaped the clutches of the sea serpent, they had celebrated. Wildly. They had done so as well after several other encounters, from lesser pirate scuffles, to living whirlpools. There was once a chandelier over the dining table, but thanks to one of Noya’s drunken stunts that nearly set the ship in fire (and not his first, mind you), they no longer had such a thing.

So, disasters in the kitchen, were not out of the ordinary.

The current disaster was just a different sort than the usual.

Chairs were tipped over, kicked to spaces they had no business in, and broken. Bowls of breads and things had been tossed aside. A keg of ale had spilled all over the floor, and maybe Suga was just spoiled by the Dockside's bar, because he didn't know how anyone could drink this stuff when it smelled, quite frankly, like piss.

Kitchen utensils and foods scattered the room. They were both equipped with swords, but somehow it was still inevitable that Suga and Satori resort to something of a childish food fight in their scuffle.

The clashing of blades had become white noise by now, as Suga shuffled back toward the table and met each of Satori's swings with a clumsy, but effective enough block. His own attacks weren't making much of a dent. But, then, with Suga out of practice or not, Satori had always been a little better with this sort of thing, anyway.

Suga backed himself onto a chair, one foot on the seat’s edge, and the other at its back as it tipped to the floor onto its back. He kept his balance, continued meeting each swing of Satori’s blade. When he stepped off the furniture, he kicked it, knocking the chair toward the pirate’s legs, but Satori leapt over it and followed Suga onto the dining table.

“The hell kind of business does a boring ol’ innkeeper have being this good, anyway?” Satori sneered, stepping around and over neglected plates and fruit bowls. “You’re supposed to be rusty.”

“I trust you’ll keep that to yourself?” Suga met his blade with another clash that echoed off
the kitchen walls. “Mother would likely faint if she knew I kept a sword beneath my bed for practice.”

“If you really want more excitement that badly, maybe it’s about time you left that dingy little fishing town.”

“Tried that once. Didn’t go so well.”

Satori laughed with the next slash, and something was condescending in his tone as he said, “We could use another deckhand.”

“I’ve spent more than enough time on your ship, thank you.” Suga’s heel met the edge of the table. He blocked, swung, and forced Satori into backtracking, instead. “If I’m going to try the sailing bit again, I think I’ll do it without the piracy, this time.”

“You’ll get bored.”

“I’ll manage.”

They went back and forth, until Satori was at the table’s edge. He jumped into a backflip, landing on his feet just short of the ale pooling over the floor. Suga kicked something off from the table, and at Satori’s retaliating swipe of the cutlass, the pirate found himself with a pear impaled on his weapon. He frowned at it, and Suga came falling down on him with another slash.

*Parry, parry, slash.* Suga could feel his footing slip when they traveled over the piss-ale. Satori seemed to be faring better. Maybe it was his boots, or maybe he spent too much time in a shared space with merfolk. Was Wakatoshi’s cabin full of water? Suga didn’t know. He hadn’t seen much outside of the brig, the past few days.

*Clang, clang, scratch.* He winced at the fresh slice in his side, and he was so sure Satori was doing everything to hold back from stopping just to wipe his blood from the blade. To put it in his hair, probably. Gross.

The pear was chopped to pieces, scattered on the floor among the rest of their mess. The chef wasn’t going to be happy with them, but surely he’d bring himself to understand.

The way Satori's blade drew against Suga's next made an almost ear-grating noise, ending with a clink that sent Suga's weapon flying from his hand to the floor, clattering with pots and knives and ladles.

Suga stumbled back, but before he could even meet the wall, something cut through the air, over Satori's shoulder and his own.

The chef's knife cut through the air before Suga as Satori slipped out of the way. The pirate cursed as he slid across the alcohol coated floor, and snatched up the weapon that Suga had
dropped. He spun to face them, and spun each blade at his side. His grin was worn, and an eye
twitched, and clearly he wasn't having fun with this, anymore.

The chef stepped between him and Suga, and no sooner did something dart past the open
kitchen door.

There was a clacking sound, and a snap. Suga watched two figures rush by, one with a head of
dark curls, the other of black and white. Half of a broken mop went skidding across the hall.

"Found him!" Satori moved for the door, but the chef blocked his path. With a huff, the pirate
bent low and slid to the ground, between the chef's legs with both swords. Chef Aone yelled as
each leg was slit, but he still whipped around and snatched Satori by the back of his shirt. He
yanked the pirate back, tossing him at the unlit, stone oven.

A sound followed that of his collision with the stone. A screech, ringing from the deck above
when it couldn't be heard before.

The sound was clouded, with the floor and walls between them, but the siren's wail still made
for three dizzy heads in the Corvus' kitchen.

Hands clamped over ears, and among all of the distraction, and despite the newfound pain in
his back, Satori made for the door.

At the swing of the door, two people stumbled out onto the deck. Followed by a third. Then
two more. And, eventually, a sixth.

This was the last place Keiji needed to be. He knew that coming out into the open was
begging for more chaos, and yet, he was the first out the door, with Eita on his tail-- well, his not-
tail, and a redhead with a crazed look and slightly bloodied weapons behind him. He only caught
glimpses of the others that followed soon after. The chef, for some reason, alongside someone who
seemed to be on their side, but Keiji had sure as hell never seen on the Corvus before then. The
last, he thought was the doctor, but by then, he was more concerned with trying to avoid a spear to
the gut than anything.

He made for the mast, sails set when they hadn’t been before. The wind hadn’t been in their
favor on their path to Ironfall, and it still wasn’t, now, but Koutarou was at the helm, turning them
to follow the breeze wherever it might take them for a speedier escape.

And the sound, the sound. He’d never heard Tooru sing like this. He heard him sing, yes, and
he’d seen him in more than one vicious state, in the past. He’d seen him with swords, with claws
and fangs and eyes blown black and predatory, all snarls and hisses, but he’d never heard such
dissonance in the siren’s song.

Still, it was Tooru’s voice, and if Keiji hadn’t known that, he’d have thought the four who’d
followed him and Eita out the door had been shot, with how quickly they dropped to the deck upon
hearing it.

The sound of their bodies collapsing seemed to catch Eita’s attention. He paused in his chase
to look over his shoulder, with a curse and a mutter of the redhead’s name.
Keiji did not pause. He darted past the mast, past the unconscious Noya, with powders and potions scattered about the deck around him, and past the nearby feathered man and the swan, which looked like it’d only just landed on the Corvus before falling prey to the song.

He only stopped when he caught sight of the Black Swan, growing smaller still as the Corvus rode the wind. It wasn't giving chase, and that may have had a lot to do with Tooru's song, but Keiji also knew that their captain, at the very least, wouldn't have been affected by that.

"Hey! That's enough, already!"

Hajime fought against the song like he was walking against the harshest of winds, hands over his earmuffs and head bent low as he slowly dragged himself toward Tooru.

Keiji thought to run his way, too, once he saw how Tooru sagged against the ratlines, heard the way his voice cracked with the already ear-grating screeches.

But Eita was over his distraction, apparently, and Keiji only avoided a jab from him when he slipped behind the mast, out of Eita's view. He stumbled his way around the pillar, hastily dragging the knife back out from his boot, as if it would do much against Eita’s weapon. He’d been better off with the mop, really.

Keiji leapt over piles of rope and discarded weapons, making a point to kick some in Eita’s path as he went.

Despite all of the noise from that, and from the waves and sailors trying to yell over their earmuffs, the air around them suddenly felt silent. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hajime just barely catching one tired-out siren by the wrist, before he could fall to the sea below. Tooru’s song, if one could even call it that, came to an end, but the bodies around them remained motionless.

Gunfire sparked into his hearing next. Daichi stood at the upper deck, ears covered and musket aimed past Keiji. The captain looked dazed, no doubt from the song, but not dazed enough to keep from shooting at one pesky merman with two-toned hair.

Eita stumbled back with a pained yell, spear clattering to the deck and hand shooting up to cover a bloodied, bullet-grazed wrist. The gills at his neck flared when he looked up to the captain of the Corvus. Another click had his head whipping to the starboard side in search of the source. Hajime stood there, pistol at the ready in one hand, while the other supported an unconscious Tooru. The siren’s arm was draped over his shoulder, while the rest of his body was limp and useless at his side.

Eita muttered a curse, and Keiji raised his knife before him.

“Playing neutral, my ass,” Eita whispered again.

“You’re not giving me much of a choice, are you?”

Red droplets fell from Eita’s wrist to the deck, even as he tried to cover the wound. He narrowed his eyes on Keiji, and the latter kicked the spear out of his reach.

Eita opened his mouth, trying to form words that Keiji knew he wouldn’t like, but he snapped his trap shut when the bodies around him began to stir.

Noya rolled from his side against the scattered magic powders. Kuroo murmured something incomprehensible at the too-much-pressure on his shoulder where he’d fallen. Someone tried to untangle themselves from the rope ladder at the mast above them. Keiji didn’t check to see who.
The group of four by the door shifted where they lay as well, and Eita’s eyes went from a staring contest with his enemies to locking onto a certain redcap among the pile.

More gunfire sounded when he bolted for Satori, and the only thing keeping Keiji from burying the knife in his back was a sleepy white swan clumsily shuffling across the deck to snap its beak at his ankles.

Satori was only halfway to his knees when Eita snatched him by the arm and dragged him portside by his one good hand. He tugged the redcap up onto the railing, and at the call of his name, the bird came flapping its wings after them, albeit like the animal was drunk off the siren’s magic.

Keiji would regret the way he pushed his legs in that moment, later on. He’d be full of aches and complaints that he’d keep to himself, but for the moment, he let them carry him with as much speed and force as he could muster.

By the time he made it to the edge, the only thing left of the three was a splash among the waves, and a flash of a dragon’s red and white scales carrying them away beneath it all.

He leaned over the side, teeth clenched and legs shaking. Every detail in the handle of his knife had to have left its prints in his skin, he was holding it so tight.

No, no, this was fine. Eventide knew where he was, which wasn’t so fine, but they’d gotten away. He was still on the Corvus, still out of their hands. Letting Eita escape was for the best. If he hadn’t, it’d just give Eventide and Wakatoshi’s crew another reason to pursue.

This was fine.

He exhaled, drawn-out. Letting go of the edge felt like ripping his hands from dried glue, when there was really nothing but condensation there.

He turned to find the whole of the crew rising from the after effects of the siren’s song. That was, everyone but said siren.

Asahi pulled Noya up from the floor, patting him clear of the powders while the sailor murmured angry little, “Whahappen”s. Kuroo pulled himself up against the nearest wall, gripping his shoulder with a grimace, while others stumbled about, holding their heads to fight off the ensuing headache left behind by the thrall.

Daichi, earmuffs pulled off and around his neck, pulled the mousy-haired man that Keiji still didn’t recognize up from the floor. The mystery man’s face was coated with recovering cuts and bruises, and his clothes red and sliced open from more recent struggles. The captain brought him into his arms, and cast his gaze to the vanishing sight of the Black Swan.

“I’d said...” he began, in a low tone that sent some of his crew stiff, even with their aching heads, “...that I wouldn’t pry, after what happened with the serpent.” He turned to Keiji with a look that was downright lethal. “I think... I’ll be going back on my word.”

Scops Point, Owl Roost, was easily missed by those who weren't searching for it. It was a small town, south of Shelley Rock and its infamous bird sanctuary, with little to nothing of worth
surrounding it. Merchants never passed through, and its trade was always handled in the larger towns and cities. Travelers would find nothing, not an inn nor any form of entertainment, for the most part.

That was, if you weren't searching for entertainment of the magical sort, and if you didn't know who to look for.

One particular merman - who perhaps drew too much attention to himself, with the many shells decorating his ears, and with black gloves, despite the warm weather - knew exactly who to look for.

Yuuji approached the small, brick home with a less-than-excited face. It stood along a cobblestone street, with a worn sign that hung by two fraying strings at the door. It read, "The Waxing Wick," with the paint fading on every other letter. It had been touched up several times, sometimes with completely different colors, and it was probably due for another.

The shop front had no windows, though the second story of the building did, with curtains and glimpses of furniture to indicate that whoever ran the place lived inside.

He let himself in, and at the faint jingle of the old bell overhead, the person behind the desk lifted their head.

Light, brown hair, bangs falling in a clump between his eyes, Kazuma Bobata blinked up at Yuuji, first with surprise, then with a knowing look.

"I can't believe you came back, after last time," the witch said, closing the book he'd had open, only to realize a second later that he'd forgotten the bookmark again. He frowned down at it, no longer paying any mind to the merman wandering inside his shop.

In the rare occasion that a traveler did come about this town, or this store in particular, they would find nothing peculiar of it, save for the lack of windows, perhaps. It seemed to be no more than a humble candle shop, with wax of all different colors hanging from spiral fixtures, and candles stacked at varying heights among tables and shelves.

At the wall adjacent the desk, a shorter boy with black hair was dipping a white candle into a vat of red wax, heated by a flame from below, likely kept ablaze by magic. Several candles of the same colors were already hanging beside his work station, some still taking their time to dry, while others at the bench had been carved into ornate shapes with ribbon-like curls that revealed the layers of color within.

A simple candle shop, in the middle of a town that no one visited. They sold their wares in the city, not here. Yuuji knew exactly what sort of business they handled, here.

He picked at one of his gloves. It was itchy, and he hated wearing them, but even when he shifted, the black scales coating his fingers never went away. Hiding them was a pain in the ass, as was everything about shifting.

"...So, he here, or nah?" he asked, after some time of zoning out over Yuuki's candle-dipping process.

"Depends," Kazuma said, already flipping back through the book to find his place.

Yuuji pouted at him.

"Whatever you want, I bet you're not prepared to pay for it. Again."
"I brought him the damn knife before!"

"Whatcha got now, then?" the witch glanced up from the pages with the smallest of smirks.

Yuuji's face scrunched up, and that was enough of an answer. He might as well have said, ‘I've got my sparkling personality, what the fuck else does anyone need?’ or, a more accurate, ‘I've got nothin.’

Instead, he said, "I brought... stuff."

Kazuma snorted, and Yuuji thought he heard Yuuki chuckle from behind the work station, too.

"Look, man, I ain't stickin' around here with these legs longer than I gotta." Yuuji kicked up one of said legs for emphasis. "Is he around, or not?"

With a shrug, Kazuma pointed a thumb past his shoulder, to a doorway blocked off by nothing but an old, colorful curtain. "Upstairs, second door on the left."

With a nod and a grunt of acknowledgement, Yuuji ducked beneath the curtain and headed up the stairs. The door in question had the shape of an X carved into it. No, that wasn't right. Upon closer inspection, it looked like a drawing of two planks of wood carved over each other, with lines, or strings dangling down from their ends. It looked like the controller to a marionette.

He didn't knock. Probably should have knocked. But he didn't.

The door came open without any trouble, so he didn't see the need. The possibility that someone could be naked, or in the midst of some sort of ritual or sexual act (or both) never crossed his mind, and thankfully, was not the case, today.

The witch he was looking for was standing over a cauldron, a book in one hand as he sprinkled something sparkly and pink into it with the other. He seemed to be concentrated, his thick, roundish eyebrows furrowed as he counted the movements of his fingers with every drop of dust.

Yuuji was about to announce his presence, as if that was necessary, when the witch interrupted himself in his counting.

"Shoes at the door."

Yuuji gaped, and looked down at his feet. All he had on were some old, cheap sandals, and he wouldn't have even worn those if this town didn't have such uneven roads.

"Off. In the hall. Right next to the door is fine. He won't stop grumbling if you bring those things in here."

’He,’ likely being the dark grey weasel curled around the witch's neck, staring Yuuji down with a beady-eyed little glare. Above the creature’s right eye, were two black dots of fur, one vertical to the other.

Yuuji removed his shoes, and placed them where he was told, but not without grumbling through the process.

"Please and thank you!" the witch said, tossing the remains of the sparkling stuff into the cauldron. A glittering puff of smoke came up around him, warranting a hiss from his familiar.
When the stuff cleared, the man was finally facing Yuuji with a suspiciously warm and cheery grin. "And how's my best merman customer doing, today?"

"Am I your only merman customer, Motoya?"

"You sure are!" The witch moved around him to retrieve a group of empty bottles from a shelf, of which he began to carefully ladle pinkish, shimmering liquid into from the cauldron. "If this is about those slips, by the way, I already said no refunds! If you screwed up the magic somehow, you'll just have to buy more."

"I didn't screw up!" Yuuji stuck his tongue out. "But I... could use some more."

Motoya glanced up as he corked the first bottle. "Why would you need more?"

Yuuji huffed. "I ran out, so I need more."

"You ran out?" Motoya's eyes went a little wide. "I gave you a ton of those things. More than that knife was probably worth, too. What'd you do, use them all at once?"

Yuuji said nothing. Only stared at the witch while he tried to search for a defense that could maybe, possibly, save him from looking uncool. Or stupid.

Motoya bit his lip as a smile formed, trying to hold back laughter.

"You used them all at once," he said, and the laugh still found its way into his words.

"It's not like I wasted them! I gotta a lotta good info outta those things, without havin' to split my tail for it."

"Like right now?"

"Like right now."

"So you want more slips, because you want more spies on land, right?"

Yuuji nodded.

"And I'm betting," Motoya continued, swirling the contents of another newly filled bottle, "that you haven't brought me anything of value to trade for them, yes?"

Yuuji dug through his pockets, and withdrew a pair of crystals, both of them casting a yellow glow on the bottles, making the liquid look almost orange. "These only grow in Eventide, s'far as we know."

Motoya chuckled. "I've got tons of glowing rocks. You're gonna have to do better than that."

"I'm not-- I wasn't finished!" Yuuji took one crystal in each hand, and pulled them away from each other. "They only glow like this when they're close to each other! See, they're cut from the same stone. We use 'em to track things, or each other." He frowned when they still continued to glow, even when he held them as far apart as he could. "Okay, well, they're still in the same room, so I can't really demonstrate right now, but--"

"We have magic like that on land, you know." Motoya set the last of the bottles down with a friendly smile. "They're pretty rocks and all, but I don't really need them. One of the others might want them, but you won't be getting anything from me in exchange." He tugged a stool toward the cauldron with his foot, and plopped himself down on it. The weasel at his shoulders crawled
beneath the hood of his cloak. Motoya crossed his legs and set his chin on his hand. "Any other offers?"

"You're shittin' me."

Motoya laughed. "I'm not trying to be rude, Yuuji, I promise! I really just... don't need anything like this."

"Why can't you just take gold or somethin' like a normal person?"

"You may want to search another town, if you want normal." He tipped his head. "What do merfolk consider 'normal' up here, anyhow?"

"Could ya quit bein' a dick about this?"

Motoya raised his brows, smile strained for only a short moment, but then he seemed more amused by the accusation, than anything. "I think I'm being more than friendly, considering how our last transaction went."

Yuuji dropped both hands with the stones to his sides. "I gave you the fuckin' knife."

"You did. You also nearly destroyed half our shop with its magic before I even had the chance to hold it."

"Well maybe warn a guy the next time you send him after a blade infused with wind magic!"

Really, he might have known if he’d fetched the knife himself, instead of begging Eita to get it, for him. The fucker probably figured out what it was for when he found it, and didn’t tell him out of spite.

Motoya tapped his chin, as if that was really something to mull over. "Alright," he said, "I'll warn you about this next toy, before I send you to claim it."

"Wha-- Fuck no. Fuck you." Yuuji tossed both stones into one hand and held them out in a fist in front of Motoya's face. "I already brought you something! I ain't swimmin' or runnin' around the islands for your dumb requests!"

Motoya didn't react much to the fist. He only shrugged his shoulders, and tilted his head with that sunny face and tone as he said, "Then I guess you don't need my magic that badly, do you?"

The fist in front of him shook. Not with anger, not as a threat, but only with frustration. Yuuji shoved the stones back into his pocket a moment later. "If I agree to whatever this is, I want at least five of those papers as payment beforehand."

"Have an emergency on your hands?"

"They're just good for communication. And. Yes. Sort of."

Motoya hummed, thinking over his offer. "You can have three."

"Fine," Yuuji said, only realizing after that he maybe should have gotten the details before giving any sort of agreement. "...What do you want?"

Motoya clapped his hands together. "I'm so glad you asked! But it's not actually what I want." He looked down to his shoulder, to the lump hiding in his hood. "Kiyoomi?"
The weasel popped its head back out from the clothes. When Motoya extended an arm, the familiar scurried along it, and leapt from the witch's hand. Before its tiny paws could even reach the carpet, it was engulfed in a cloud of smoke, and soon replaced with the figure of a man, fully clothed, an aspect of transforming that Yuuji always kind of envied familiars for. Kiyoomi stood taller than Motoya, with a messy head of black curls and two birthmarks over dark, heavy lidded eyes, in the same places the discolored fur dotted his animal form.

He waved the smoke away with a sound of disgust, and one hand over his mouth and nose. When he turned to Yuuji, he looked the merman up and down, and asked, "Your people have close ties with the Black Swan, yes?"

It didn't take too long for Eita's dragon to get them from the Corvus to the safety of the Black Swan, what with water dragons being the speedy creatures they are. Spinel swam circles beneath them as they climbed up onto the ship, Satori with a still-spinning head and a swan tucked beneath his arm, and Eita struggling to make it up the rope with one injured wrist and two less-than-comfortable legs.

The three tumbled onto the deck, and Eita swore he'd be kicking Satori in the head if he didn't stop with his damn moaning and groaning over his head soon.

The merman pushed himself up to his knees and scanned their surroundings. The helm was occupied, and there were a few from the crew scrambling about here and there, but there was no sign of their captain, or anyone he'd seen board the Corvus.

"Where's Wakatoshi?" he asked, holding his bullet-grazed wrist.

Satori rolled onto his side with another pained sound. "Tending to the wounded? Who knows...." He sat up and pressed a hand to his forehead. "Fuck sirens. My head's still throbbin....." He winced, and squinted eyes soon fell to Eita's legs. "Speakin' of sirens--"

"It's fine."

"Ya shouldn't have even jumped ships." Satori pushed himself to his feet, one hand gripping his hair while he offered the other to Eita.

The merman didn't argue, either because Satori was right, or he was too tired to waste the energy on it. He let him help him up, by his good hand, but bent back down only to scoop Kenjirou into his arm. "The hell were you doing?" he muttered to the bird, seeing specks of blood dotting a once pure white wing. "You let a little crow do this?"

All he got in retort was a half-hearted honk.

"Better make sure everyone ain't dead, then," Satori said, starting for the door that led below deck, but Eita caught him by the wrist. Kenjirou fidgeted in his hold, worried he'd be dropped, but Eita managed.

Satori turned to look at him with barely open eyes and a frown. Those eyes fell to the hand holding him, where fresh blood was already dripping from the bullet wound, re-coating what the ocean had managed to clean of the merman's wrist. Eita didn't explain, only tugged him in the opposite direction, toward Wakatoshi's quarters.
Once inside, he finally released Satori, and he set Kenjirou down upon Wakatoshi's bed. He sat himself beside the swan, and held an open palm out toward the redcap.

"Dagger."

"What?"

Eita only bent his fingers, motioning for Satori to hand it over.

"What the hell do you want a dagger for?"

"Your dagger, Satori," he repeated, and maybe the pirate was too dazed by everything to keep questioning it, but he was soon setting Shooting Star in Eita's palm.

The merman pulled the blade from its sheath, and tugged at one of the thinner blankets from the bed. A ripping sound filled the room as he cut a piece from it. He winced at the pressure it put on his wrist.

"What are you doing?!" Satori snatched the blade back from Eita, but he'd already ruined the blanket by then.

"Making do," Eita said, taking the torn fabric and tugging a reluctant Kenjirou into his lap. "Do I... need to splint this or something?"

"You coulda used literally anything but my captain's bedding!"

"You're not being helpful. Do you know how to treat a broken wing?" Eita stared up at him from the bed, and when he got no answer, went to wrapping the cloth around Kenjirou anyway. He bound the wing tight to the bird's body, or as tight as he could manage with one hand, and the squawk he received for that was less half-hearted than the last.

He didn't let go of the bandaging, though. He began to tie it off, in fact. "I'm sorry, okay? I don't speak bird, the redcap's useless, and this has got to be better than just letting it hang limp."

"Useless," Satori repeated.

"I'm not even sure if it's really broken. Can't you, like... give one squawk if I'm doing something right, two if no?"

The swan only glared at him. Or, he thought it was a glare, anyway.

Well, he'd tried.

He moved the bird to the side, placing him gently on the pillow. Wakatoshi lived with a redcap, surely he wouldn't complain about getting a little blood in his bed. Maybe.

Eita reached for the blanket again.

"Stop that," Satori hissed, and he rubbed at his eyes as he stumbled across the room, catching himself on the magic table for support on the way. When he came back, it was with what looked like one of Wakatoshi's bandanas.

Satori knelt before the bed, and held a hand out. "Gimme that," he demanded, and Eita slowly turned his wrist, wound up. Then, quicker, he drew it back.

"Wait."
"I'm not gonna be weird about it!"

"You have a fetish for mermaid blood."

"It's not a _fetish_."

"That's _exactly_ what it is."

Satori grabbed Eita's arm just before the elbow, and turned his wrist toward him again. "You should've let me fix the swan. Quit strainin' your wrist," he muttered, and dabbed at the red oozing its way from the cut flesh.

Eita flinched. "You kept whining about your head. I didn't think you'd be able to control yourself with all the blood."

"You dragged me in here."

"I... had a plan."

Satori lifted his head, raising a brow while Eita flinched at the pressure he put to his wrist. "And that was?"

"That fucking hurts."

"Gonna hurt more if you keep tryin' to pull it away from me. Fuck-- stop tugging like that-- let me _help_, Eita."

Eita's gills flared in time with his nostrils when he turned away from the redcap.

"What's this even from?"

"Bullet grazed me," Eita mumbled, flexing his fingers with the pressure.

"Grazed ya pretty damn good."

"No shit."

"So, your plan?"

Eita made a point not to look at him. "I'm gonna need another bandana."

"You gonna tell me why, first?"

Eita, still focused on the window instead, pouted. Satori sighed and took the merman's free hand, and set it over where he was holding the cloth.

"Keep that there. Don't be a wuss, keep applying pressure." He rummaged about, and returned with another cloth. One meant for the bath, this time. "We do have actual bandages somewhere on this ship, y'know."

"Is there any sea water in the bath?"

The answer was yes, and Satori got the gist of where Eita was going with this. He dunked the cloth into the salty water before bringing it to the merman.

When he knelt back down, Eita motioned for him to come forward, closer. Eita lifted the
bandana, and unfolded the thing. He made a point to soak up as much blood onto as much of the cloth as he could.

Satori's lips were parting on the beginnings of a "What" when Eita reached forward, around the back of his head, and tried to work the bandana over his crazy, red hair. Satori caught his arms to still him, eyes ridiculously wide as could be.

Eita met those eyes, this time, and had trouble tearing away from them, from the look of utter shock staring him back. "That... helps, right?" he offered, "It'll soak in better, this way, won't it? And aren't redcaps supposed to have some kind of hat, anyway?"

His hand was shaking, and Satori must have mistaken it for fear, because he instantly loosened his grip and let his fingers slip, just barely lingering on Eita's arms. Really, it just hurt, and maybe he'd lost a bit too much blood.

"...Quit usin' that hand, if you want it to heal."

"...Wrap it for me?"

Satori gently took the injured arm back into his hand. He lifted the wet cloth, moved to lay it over the wound, but found himself staring down at the cut, instead. When the redcap bit his lip, Eita knew exactly what was going through his head.

"Satori."

"You know I wouldn't hurt you, right, Eita?"

"You've already got a ton of my blood sitting on your head right now."

"I know, I know, and-- fuck-- you never even let me look at you when you get a papercut, but, shit, Eita--"

"What do you want, Satori?"

"You smell so good."

"That's fucking disgusting."

Satori lowered his face, hovering just above the wound. He kissed a spot below the cut, catching the smallest bit of lingering blood off Eita's skin. Wide eyes found their way back to Eita's expression. "Can I?" he asked, voice uncomfortably, uncharacteristically quiet.

The thing about redcaps, was that they really only needed to keep their heads coated with blood to stay alive. There was no need for consumption, they weren't vampires. Satori didn't even need it as often as a pureblood would have. So, denying him lapping at his injuries should have been very easy, and really, very logical.

And yet, it wasn't Eita's own protesting that stopped him, but the abrupt sound of an offended swan honking beside them.

Right. He was there, too.

"...Just," Eita began, once he found his voice again, "Bandage it up."

Satori wheezed out something like a, "Yeah," and went to wrapping the wound in the wet cloth. "We should. Uh. Your legs." He pointed to the bathtub. "Soaking those gonna help?"
Eita tugged at one of his pant legs, revealing the bandages Alisa had hastily supplied to cover the burns caused by Tooru’s stupid boiling blades. “It... might.” Admittedly, he had no idea how to handle burns. Satori didn’t seem to have much of a clue, either.

"Can you shift?"

"I don’t... know if I should?" He’d never had his legs injured too badly before. He didn’t know what sort of effect it'd have on his tail if he changed forms, now.

Which brought a whole new set of problems to his plate, because hell, he was supposed to be catching up with Kenji at Ironfall, not soaking away in some pirate's bathtub.

If he couldn’t shift, he could at least ride Spinel to the island. And… then what? The only tracking stone he had was for tracking the damned ship he was already on, so he wouldn’t even know where to look for Kenji or Akira, to begin with. And how much more could he walk like this? Could he even fight anymore, if needed? He couldn’t use a spear with his wrist like this, not effectively, anyway. What was he even going to do, make a new spear? Ride his dragon back to the Corvus reclaim the one he’d left with an, “Oops, sorry, left this here, thanks, bye.” The Black Swan might have had a fishing spear lying about, somewhere, or he’d have to make do with a sword. He wasn’t as good with a sword, though.

He was staring out the window as he contemplated this mess of thoughts. A finger hooked beneath his chin, and Satori yanked his attention back to him. Eita hadn’t even noticed that he’d already wrapped his wrist.

“Nuh uh.”

Eita frowned. “‘Nuh uh’ what?”

“‘Nuh uh’ to whatever stupid bullshit you’re thinkin’ of.”

Eita pulled back from his hand. “I’m supposed to be at Ironfall. We fucked up this mission, I’m not gonna mess up the one I came out here for, too.”

Satori laughed, so high and sudden that Eita winced. “You’ve pointed out the amount of blood I’ve lost, yeah.”

“And would that have happened if you hadn’t jumped ships right after a leg injury?”

Eita glared at him, then shot out his good hand in an upturned palm. “If we’re gonna keep arguing over this, at least help me into the damn bath so I can soak while I think.”

Satori obliged, and helped the merman into the cool, salty water. Even though they’d just been in the ocean, it was so much more soothing to be able to sit still, relaxed in the soothing embrace of the water.

He didn’t get to return to protesting, though. Not when the cabin door swung open to the room’s rightful owner.

Wakatoshi’s expression, to anyone else, maybe even his own crew, may have looked the same as ever, but the three of them knew better. The slight, barely noticeable widening of eyes, the hardly present raise of eyebrows. Shock, and then, as his expression settled, relief.
“Wakatoshiiii,” Satori sang, leaning over the tub, stirring his finger through the water, leaving red swirls and wisps where blood seeped through the cloth around Eita’s wrist. “Glad to see at least one of us isn’t injured. I missed all the action. You get any good shots in, out there?”

The Black Swan’s captain looked his first mate up and down. “You’ve been cut. You should tend to those, immediately.”

“I can handle a little blood, Captain.” Satori lifted his finger, dripping with salt and a tinge of red, and slipped it over his tongue and into his mouth. When he pulled it back out with a pop, Eita smacked his hand.

“Blood is important to you. You should try to keep from losing your own, so you have to rely on others, less.” Wakatoshi stepped past them, toward the table at the center of the room. He paused when he saw the swan curled up on his bed, wing crudely bandaged and bloodied with his sheets. He frowned, but at least Kenjirou seemed relaxed, for the time being.

“Hmm,” Satori hummed, “It’s just a few cuts. Koushi’s not that great with a sword.”

“Don’t talk cocky when we turned up empty handed,” Eita muttered.

“Wakatoshi, Eita got shot in the hand.”

“It grazed my wrist. Quit exaggerating.”

Still, Wakatoshi looked over his shoulder to the merman in his tub. “You should not have boarded that ship.”

Eita’s jaw dropped. “You-- I-- You wouldn’t have stopped one of your men from doing it over some lame burns. Why am I getting lectured?”

“You are also not one of my men.” Wakatoshi found the piece of orichalcum, and spun it like a top over the water of the table. “When you are here, you are a guest, and a friend. It will also be difficult for you to return to Eventide, if you are not mindful of your legs. I would not advise shifting any time soon, in this state.”

Eita leaned over the edge of the tub. “I can’t stay here, Wakatoshi.”

“If my legs had been injured enough to make shifting difficult, and I insisted on venturing into deep waters, without proper use of a tail, what would you advise me?”

Eita bit his lip.

“Rather, returning home would only be a minor issue, when you have your dragon. Journeying to Ironfall, however… what would you say to me, then?”

Eita slowly sunk back into the water. “…Not to go,” he whispered, as a grumpy child might.

“Then you understand.”

Satori snickered, and Eita dunked the pirate’s head beneath the water without much thought. The red soaking the bandana only served to bloody up the water more, so he let go just as quickly.

Satori came back up with a loud gasp for air, and whipped his head around to view Wakatoshi at the table. He could see the orichalcum spinning over a single spot, now, but he couldn’t see the map from that angle.
“So, the others?”

“Mm.” Wakatoshi frowned as the metal stayed in place. “Eita’s dragon helped to keep them from sinking while you were on their ship. We managed to get everyone back, safe and sound.”

“Everyone but Keiji,” Eita huffed, and sank into the tub until his nose was just above the water.

“Should’ve snuck one of your magic mermaid tracking rocks on their ship,” Satori offered. His fingers were back in the water, stirring up the area above Eita’s legs. The red had mostly diluted, though.

Eita blew bubbles in the water before he spoke. “Keiji would’ve recognized it, and probably make a point to throw us off our trail with it, too.”

Satori leaned his head over his arm on the edge of the tub. “Shoulda just killed ‘im.”

“I have a feeling…” Eita watched the water ripple around Satori’s fingers. “…Gandril’s not going to be so worried over keeping him alive, after this. This is entirely different from when Wakatoshi left.”

“I had never made myself an enemy. I am even lending Eventide my aid, as we speak.”

“But you did sneak around on shore with a washed-up redcap for months, when you were told to stay in the village,” Eita reminded him. “And then you ditched home completely to live with him on a boat.”

Satori snorted. “You snuck around just as much.”

“I was making sure the blood-thirsty idiot wasn’t gonna kill him.”

“Soooo attentive.” Satori’s hand brushed Eita’s leg, and the merman shivered.

A squawk from the bed assured them that Kenjirou was, in fact, still awake. Eita whispered something along the lines of “Take your sass somewhere else,” in retort.

Wakatoshi seemed unbothered by it all. He only leaned over the table, brows pinched at the map in front of him. The damned metal was taunting, the way it hovered over the same spot among those four islands.

“...It’s still Ironfall,” he said, after some time.

The room fell silent, for a short while. Eita realized then that he hadn’t been the only one hoping that this little scuffle was the only reason for the map’s reaction.

He hoped Kenji and Akira were holding up well enough without him.

The Corvus’s kitchen was still, frankly, a mess. The ale had mostly been swept up, but aside from that, the results of Suga and Satori’s fight were still plenty evident.

Cleaning that mess was not top priority.
Figuring out where they were to go now, was much higher on the list. Ironfall was too close, and returning to Morrigan's Coast would be too obvious, now that Suga was with them.

For the moment, Saeko was steering them south west, with no real plan in mind. They couldn't afford to stay still and think things over, though. Not with the Black Swan after their throats.

Or, at least after one or two of their throats.

Daichi stood in the kitchen, the bridge of his nose pinched between his fingers. He still had a headache, but he could think at least a little more clearly without Tooru's singing.

Said siren had been unconscious for some while until now, bandaged and tidied up by the doctor, as everyone had been. He had only just begun to blink his tired eyes open. Keiji had insisted that no one wake him, that he sleep as much as his body would allow.

Now, Tooru, while somewhat awake, didn't seem to be completely aware of his surroundings. He was sitting at the bench in front of the dining table, leaning his head on the shoulder of a very unamused Hajime at his left. Keiji sat to his right, followed by Koutarou, then Suga, who had his hand raised over his head.

Daichi sighed. "It's not-- This isn't a classroom. You don't have to do that."

Suga dropped his hand. "Why do I have to sit at the naughty table?"

Kuroo, leaning an arm on Daichi’s shoulder, grinned at the innkeeper. “You’re sitting at the naughty table because you didn’t tell anyone you were a pirate.”

"Was. When I was a kid. And I wasn’t keeping it a secret,” Suga said, “Also, Daichi knew. If I have to sit at the naughty table, he has to join me.”

Kuroo patted, or more like smacked, Daichi’s arm. “Sit your ass down, then, Captain.”

Another sigh. “Sugawara, get up from that bench.”

Kuroo whistled out a long whistle, eyes rolling and landing on the man he was leaning on. “You’re still gonna give him the formal treatment?”

Red faced, Daichi corrected himself. “Suga, get up from that bench.”

“I jump off a ship, into your arms, stop a pirate from wrecking your kitchen, and you still talk to me like I’m one of your men.” For whatever reason, he left the kiss out of that list. For whatever other reason, he did not get up from the bench.

Daichi coughed into his hand. “We’re getting sidetracked.”

“The kitchen looks pretty wrecked to me,” Koutarou supplied, unhelpfully, as he turned his head at all possible angles to take in the sight of the place. “You even wasted all our booze!”

“It’d have been more helpful if you tossed that piss-water off the Corvus, instead,” Tooru grumbled. And, since he was apparently awake enough to comment on that, Hajime shoved him off his shoulder. The siren only offered an offended noise as he bumped Keiji’s arm, and settled for leaning against him, instead.

Keiji might have shoved him back, if it weren’t Tooru’s first time getting any sort of rest in
hell-knows-how-long.

Hajime raised his hand, next.

Daichi frowned. “I said this isn’t a classroom.” When Hajime just stared him down, hand still raised, Daichi relented. “Yes, Iwaizumi?”

“Why am I on the naughty bench?”

“Because you knew about this.” Daichi pointed an accusing finger at Keiji. “You and Bokuto, both.”

“Your doctor should be on the naughty bench, too, then.” Tooru said, words harder and harder to make out as he rolled his face against Keiji’s shoulder. “N’ your first mate there, too. Pretty sure he knew something was up.”

Daichi snapped his head in Kuroo’s direction, and the latter quickly pulled away and raised a hand in defense. “Hey, this didn’t have shit to do with me.”

“If the ex-pirate is on the bench, the ex-conman should be, too,” Tooru supplied.

Suga seemed to, for some fucking reason, perk up, at that. “Ex-conman? Kuroo? Really?”

“I’m not putting my entire crew on this godforsaken bench.”

“Can we leave, then?” Keiji asked, and Daichi glared something terrifying at him. Kuroo wheezed out a laugh.

“You owe me explanations. A lot of them.”

With an exasperated breath, Keiji dropped his head into his hands, and Tooru slid from his shoulder. "I suppose, at this point, it doesn't matter how much you know." Keiji kept his eyes on the floor, even as he felt Koutarou’s hand brush his back. The touch was hesitant, unsure, and withdrew just as quickly. Truth be told, Keiji wasn't sure if he'd have minded a little more reassurance. "We..." He closed his eyes. "...We can leave. We'd promised Hajime that we'd abandon ship at the sight of danger--"

"And I said that was stupid," Koutarou interjected. "Ya think we'd feel better if you turned yourself in to a bunch a pirates for us?"

"That was their intent." All eyes were on Suga as he stared off at nothing in particular, deep in thought. "Rough me up, make it look like I was in real danger, and convince Daichi to hand over the person they were looking for."

"You were in real danger," Daichi corrected.

"Satori wouldn't have killed me." Suga shrugged. "I said he wouldn't kill me. I didn't say he wasn't an asshole. Pirate, and all."

Keiji opened his eyes, but even as he lifted his head, he was still looking down. "We could flee now. There's no sense in us staying here when it could lead them right back."

"They'll be coming back to the Corvus first, either way." Suga, chin in his palm, tapped his
cheek. "Satori had a feeling the Corvus had what they needed before they even got confirmation. But, then, the merman those men had smuggled at my bar was Kenma. But they were expecting you, not him. So they thought you were on the Corvus, when it was really Kenma. And then you happened to be here, anyway…?" He squinted, like trying to explain it was almost painful.

Kuroo leaned toward the group at the table. "Then, those pirates we ran into by Kenma's home were…"

"After Jiji," Tooru supplied, leaning back against the table, now that neither of the men at his sides were available to rest on. “Possibly. Eventide tried to get me on their side. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d hired more than one gang of pirates.” He waved a hand as he slid down the bench, leaning his head back against the table in a position that hardly looked comfortable. “Or maybe they just wanted to make a purse out of your friend’s tail. Just as likely.”

“And what is Eventide?” Daichi asked, setting a firm hand on Kuroo’s good shoulder when the man’s expression twisted into something sickened by Tooru’s suggestion. “And what are they hiring pirates and sirens for that involves you two?”

“And how the hell did they convince Wakatoshi Ushijima to cooperate with anything?” Kuroo sneered. “That guy’s crew is infamous as being the worst of the worst.”

“The worst of the worst…” Keiji said, “…would have ruined your crew without regard to their own, rather than stopping in the midst of a battle to rescue drowning comrades. If Wakatoshi’s crew were the worst of the worst, none of us would have gotten out alive.”

Kuroo scoffed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Tooru pulled himself back up, and Keiji offered a sour look while the siren continued fidgeting for a comfortable position. He decided on swinging his legs over the side of the bench and laying his face down upon the table, back facing the others completely. When he spoke, his words were muffled by arms curled around his face as a makeshift pillow. “You humans like to see power as this big, angry, menacing thing. So, when someone’s strong, it doesn’t matter if that’s how they are or not. The stories just wind up that way.”

"Wakatoshi is a pirate. He can be ruthless. Not enough to dispose of his own crew, though. Even pirates and thieves can have their families, I guess….” Keiji sighed upon seeing the looks on Daichi and Kuroo’s faces. He could feel Koutarou and Hajime offering the same, just as confused and curious. “He… We… Wakatoshi is like me. He’s a merman. We’re from the same village. He left home a long time ago, though.”

“Wait wait wait.” Koutarou waved his hands too close to Keiji’s face. “Aren’t the merpeople from your home the ones chasing you? How come he gets to run away, and you don’t?”

“Because Wakatoshi knows that helping Eventide will keep him alive, whereas Jiji refuses to help them.”

“Could we get a translation for all this fish talk? Please?” Daichi pleaded.

“I’m too tired for this,” Tooru groaned against the tabletop.

“Then you’d be too tired to put up a fight if we tossed you overboard, then.”

Tooru lifted his head, just enough to glare at Daichi. “It’s Jiji’s problem. He can explain.”

Keiji would have very much liked to have tossed Tooru off the ship, himself, but he
recognized that as nothing but a tired and pity train of thought. He could breathe under water. They both could. They’d be fine, as long as no dragons or pirate ships came after them. Or whatever other hired hands Eventide had.

He inhaled, exhaled, and tried for a moment to quit with the fidgeting of his hands.

“It’s… a lot. And it’s complicated. I suppose… I owe you the explanation, but you may want to consider taking a seat, at least.” He stared at the floorboards, long and hard, searching the mess of stories and his past for a starting point.

He’d much rather climb into Kenma’s old barrel than deal with this.

“...Are any of you familiar with the Serpent Trio?”

Chapter End Notes

Will questions finally be answered? Will there be MORE smooches? More new faces? What the heck is going on with Lev’s crew, anyway? Who knows.
“Young child of mine, you are safe, as long as my heart beats.”

Keiji had thought, back then, that the serpent had meant ‘my heart’ to be one within himself, just as Keiji had one beating within his own chest. He had thought, that as long as the serpent lived, all of Eventide’s people would do the same. They could all live on. Happy. Healthy.

He’d heard tales from the elders. Tales that dated back centuries. He’d heard of a time when the village was plagued, when all had fallen ill and lost hope of their home continuing to flourish. Doctors had traveled from other communities, from Petal Reef and far, but most fell to the illness before a cure could be found.

And then, he appeared.

Gandril, with his mighty presence, with his power, gave Eventide a gift. He shared with them his life, renewed their own, so that the merfolk of Eventide Trench could live on and grow.

Those were the sorts of stories Keiji had been taught, from the time he was little. And Gandril had warned them, that should he disappear, history would repeat itself.

And they all believed him.

So, when the serpent expressed to Keiji that he was growing weak, Keiji had listened, because a weak Gandril meant a weak Eventide. A weak Keiji Akaashi.

Keiji was the sort to offer a hand, if asked, or offer useful advice when the situation called. He didn’t see purpose in using cruel methods to gain what he needed, when other options could be found. He could manipulate, but not to the point of destroying someone.

But, in the end, his own well being came first.

So, he had listened, and he had been obedient, when Gandril had asked of his help.

Maybe it was because the serpent knew. Maybe he had thought that what Keiji had seen as selfishness could be used. Could be morphed into a weapon. Maybe he had thought that self preservation would make Keiji willing to do whatever the serpent asked of him, even if it meant allowing an island of innocent people to suffer for it.

Gandril’s ‘heart,’ he had soon found, was not one that beat within the serpent.

Gandril had showed him, deep within a cavern, where no one else was allowed passage, the heart.

He had seen a crystal, clear and hollow, in the shape of a heart. Within it, beating, despite no attachments or blood, was the real heart.

But the organ’s pulse was slow. It had looked close to dead, already.

“There are others like it, my child. It can be replaced. We can find more. With more, I shall prosper. With more, Eventide will not fall again.”
With more, Keiji would never have to fall to the illness he’d heard of in those stories.

“Where do we find them?” he had asked.

“I can only guess the whereabouts of but one,” Gandril had told him. “In Kingston.”

In Kingston.

In Kingston, which had once been a second home to merfolk. Kingston, with land that Eventide’s people had once used for trade, for growing crops and resources that could not be found beneath the water’s surface. Kingston had been Eventide’s before its people had fallen ill. It had been theirs when Gandril had found them, and remained so, until a second serpent appeared one day. It had chased them away in their weakened state, and claimed the island for itself.

Keiji did not know the name of the serpent who ruled the land. No one knew its name, except for Gandril, who would not speak of it even to Keiji.

“There may still be a heart there. It rightfully belongs to your people, my child. That monstrous land-snake would hoard what should be mine. Should be ours. We must take it back. Find it, if it is there. Return it to me, and I can protect your home for more years to come.”

“If that serpent chased our people away so long ago, why has it let humans take residence?” Keiji had asked. “If it were really still there, wouldn’t Kingston be different than it is, now? Wouldn’t the humans be more wise to the existence of magic?”

“The royal family hides the wretch beneath their people’s noses, while it may still be leeching off of the heart, after all these years. It stole it from us. It is undeserving.”

“Does it protect their people beneath their noses, too? Does it give Kingston life, as you do us?”

“Kingston is unworthy of such life. What importance are their lives, when your own kind’s are on the line? What of your life, my child?”

Keiji’s own well being came first, but not at the cost of others’.

His selfishness had a limit.

But he had agreed. He had told Gandril that he would help his cause, for their people. For himself. All the while, he searched. Searched the caverns, turned Eventide Trench upside down, trying to find answers. Gandril avoided his question every time he had asked, “And what becomes of Kingston?” So, he had gathered, that nothing good could become of Kingston.

He just could not, for the life of him, find out what that nothing good was.

Gandril was hiding answers, and more than Keiji even had questions to, he was sure.

Keiji had traveled to land many times. He had searched the streets of Kingston’s city, all of them washed clean of the stories he’d been raised upon in Eventide. Some knew tales, but all of them vague, “They say merfolk once lived here.” But they were all laughed off as they were told, like a joke, as if anyone could actually believe in a person with gills.

But then he met Tooru.

It was by chance. The Sailor’s Knot seemed an ideal place for gathering dirt and rumors, but
he hadn’t expected to find the absolute gold mine that was Tooru Oikawa. A short amount of
questioning the Knot’s regulars was all he needed to know of the man’s reputation as an
information broker. But, then, Keiji had found many informants on land.

None of those screamed ‘fishfolk’ in their presence like Tooru did, however.

And that was the sort of informant he’d needed.

“Some are suspicious of the queen and her family. Not the general public, no, but I’ve heard
it straight from the mouths of their oh-so-loyal knights. They’re hiding something, they think. They
don’t feel threatened, but they know. There’s something. You know too, don’t you, Child of
Eventide?”

Keiji lied every time he returned home. He’d swear he’d come up short. No leads, yet, he’d
tell Gandril.

“One knight has told me there are several doors that only the queen and her family
may enter. No servants, no knights. Even if they were to hear their lady scream, they would not be
permitted entrance to save her. Don’t you find that interesting?”

Keiji had only been caught twice back home, stashing crystals and silver into the bag tied to
his dragon steed. The first time, by Haruki, who tended to the dragons along with Keiji. He had let
it go easily. The second time, by Kenji, who did not.

Keiji had told him the truth. He’d told him it was in exchange for information. He just hadn’t
told him it was the siren, or what that information entailed.

“Have you ever been to a serpent’s temple, Jiji?”

Tooru had actually gone through several irritating nicknames before settling on that one. It
hadn’t been the worst, but Keiji still didn’t care for it.

“Three serpents came down from the heavens to protect the land, sea, and sky. That’s what
everyone says, right? But no one believes in those stories, anymore. Just another bunch of myths,
abandoned over time. What would you say to those legends, though?”

Keiji had told him that the serpents of sea and land he knew of were no gods. He had said that
there were serpents all over the ocean, and that humans were notorious for twisting the truth of
things they did not comprehend. A siren, with all the misconceptions surrounding their kind among
land dwellers, should have known that much.

“What if I told you, then, that centuries ago, the royal family had purged a great deal of
records regarding those myths? What if I told you, then, that they were responsible for the sealing
of the temples across the islands? There are more than just Ironfall’s, I’ve been told. I haven’t
found them myself, of course. No one seems to know anything concrete. No locations, nothing for
certain.”

“But, what if there was more to those ‘gods’ than what the lingering stories tell us? What if
the royal family was hiding something of their history?”

“I’ve dealt with more merfolk than just you, Jiji, and I’ve dealt with other beings who have
lived far longer than us. Maybe I’ve been fed lies, but perhaps I’m not the only one.”

“What do you think they’re hiding behind those doors, Child of Eventide?”
Keiji had noticed several instances in which Tooru hadn’t requested compensation for his information. As if he was just dying for someone to discuss any of this with. He wanted to know what was in that castle, just as much as Keiji.

Granted, Keiji had a feeling he already knew.

And, really, he’d meant to keep that to himself. He’d never meant for anyone in Eventide to know that he’d been going to Kingston, that there were others who might have known of the serpent and its heart, or at least be suspicious of something hiding in the castle. He’d never meant to tell his people that he was suspicious, that Gandril might have been hiding just as much as the royal family.

What sort of information had they purged? Where did the hearts come from? Why did Gandril need them to live, to begin with? What would happen to Kingston?

“What importance are their lives, when your own kind’s are on the line?”

Gandril would not have said that if the risk didn’t exist.

Keiji wanted no part in that risk.

And he’d voiced that, when Eita had caught him returning home, coming from Kingston. The concerns he’d been pushing down for months came crawling out of him like vomit, in a mess of “I don’t want any part in this,” and “I will not be responsible for whatever happens to those people.”

It was because he was selfish, he thought. Because he didn’t want that on his conscience.

But he couldn’t go against Gandril, not without his own people’s lives on his conscience, instead. He couldn’t be guilty for either party. He refused.

So, he ran.

Dragging an entire crew of sailors, plus one crate-ridden merman and a siren, into that mess was not doing much to offer a guilt-free conscience, though.

He supposed running was difficult when you weren’t meant to have legs.

The naughty bench had gone very quiet, once Keiji had gotten all of the important details out. Those details included Eventide’s hiring of pirates, and the wanted posters Tooru had found, all to prevent Keiji from warning the royal family of the threat that was Eventide Trench. That was, if a certain land serpent hadn’t already warned them by now.

During the silence that followed, he took the time to try and think up any other details he might have left out. They had finally fessed up about the incident at the Toy Chest, and the fact that they’d given Hajime and Koutarou at least a vague sort of rundown of all this already. Very vague.

But what he’d just told them all, had been much less vague. Daichi hardly looked like he even believed any of it, which was impressive, being what he’d already witnessed in his lifetime so far. Kuroo just sort of whistled, because that said ‘Sucks to be you, buddy’ without an actual need for
“So, they’re trying to keep you from being Kingston’s hero--”

Keiji interrupted Kuroo to insist, “I’m not any hero.”

But Koutarou nudged him, grinning away as he whispered, “I told you.”

Keiji looked far less amused.

“--okay, but, why the hell are they spending this much energy on you? Shouldn’t they actually be, y’know, putting all that effort into getting this heart thing, instead?”

“When I’d left, they hadn’t had anyone there yet. Gandril didn’t want us traveling to Kingston, or at least not anywhere near the castle. He thought it was too risky.” Keiji balled his hands into fists at his thighs. “But… there were wanted flyers in Kingston, with my face on them. At the very least, they sent someone to do that.”

“And someone to plant those magic papers of Yuuji’s.” Tooru offered a tired hum. “More than likely, they have other hired hands throughout the island. Maybe even spies in the castle.”

Hajime grunted. “S’that a maybe, or an ‘I know something, and I’m being smug about it?’”

“Tooru’s smug about everything,” Keiji supplied.

“It was a maybe, alright? I’d only found those posters a little while before you all arrived in the city.” Tooru stretched his arms out across the table. He refused to lift his head, even though it was plain he wouldn’t be getting any more sleep now. He didn’t even think his last moment of unconsciousness even counted as sleep. Blacking out couldn’t have counted. “Not that I haven’t heard about plenty of suspicious people around the castle, but that’s nothing particularly new.”

Suga held onto the bench and leaned forward, looking down the row of guilty faces. “Do you have a list?” he asked. “Of recent rumors? It’d be worth looking into, at the very least, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah!” Koutarou shouted and nearly bounced on the bench. “I mean, you could at least narrow it down or something, right?”

Tooru rolled his eyes. “They could have multiple spies. And… he added, with a yawn, “…judging by the amount of people they’ve sent after Jiji, I’d say it’s more likely than not.”

Suga was absolutely beaming. “Then we should have spies.”

“No,” Keiji said, sharp and quick. “The point was not to get more people involved.” A pause, and he studied Suga. “You said ‘we.’”

“We’re all involved in this now, aren’t we?”

Keiji’s jaw hung open, slightly. Maybe a little horrified. “I… No, as I said, we can--”

“Don’t say ‘leave’!” Koutarou was raising a hand, and Keiji leaned back, having fully expected the sailor to clamp the thing over his mouth to shut him up. Koutarou seemed to think better of it, though, and just gave Keiji this sort of frustrated, constipated look, instead. “They ain’t gonna let you run away more after all that, are they?”

Keiji could only frown.
“So, you gotta fuckin’ fight back! I mean, I’ve told ya that before, but now that I know everything, you like… really gotta hand it to ‘em, Keiji.”

“I don’t intend to hand anything to anyone.”

“You were totally fighting that other fishy guy, right?!”

“That wasn’t planned.”

“No one ever plans for these things. I sure wasn’t planning on getting dragged away from my inn for another round of Pirate Adventures Gone Wrong, but here I am.” Suga caught a distressed look from Daichi, peeking out from beneath the hand he’d had covering his face, like he’d been trying very hard not to continue scolding everyone. Suga looked away, lips pressed tight together.

“We are a merchant ship,” Daichi reminded them. “A simple, normal, merchant ship. We handle trade, not merfolk and royal conspiracies.

Koutarou raised his hand, because that was apparently still a thing, when you had to sit on the naughty bench. He didn’t wait for Daichi to actually call on him, though. “We were handling merfolk before these two even got here.”

“Kenma’s an exception,” Daichi supplied.

“You don’t see Kenma on this damn bench,” Kuroo added.

“Kenma couldn’t sit on the bench with his fish-butt.” Koutarou sounded very sure of this.

“Right, sorry, fish-ass expert.”

Keiji had no idea why Kuroo was looking at him.

“In any case,” Daichi was growling out the words at this point, “It’s none of our business.”

Suga pouted. “So when everyone on Kingston is dead, it’ll be fine, because it was none of our business?”

“You said you were through with… this.”

“With what, Daichi?”

“The… “ Daichi waved a hand with a frustrated sort of breath. “Adventuring. Sailing. All of this.”

“I’m not going to sit around in my inn when I could be saving an entire island.”

“I’m-- You can’t just-- volunteer my ship for something like this.” There was a snap in Daichi’s tone that maybe some of his crew had heard, on occasion, when things got too out of control. It had certainly never been used on Suga, they were sure.

The rest of the bench had gone quiet again. Uncomfortably so. Like they’d just walked in on a very private sort of spat. Even Tooru had lifted his head from the table to watch them. Granted, he maybe looked a little more amused than the others.

Daichi looked a little guilty. Maybe not for his words, but for the tone, at the very least. Whereas Suga tried for a smile, but it turned out forced, and sad.
“No, I can’t. I’m sorry, Daichi. You’re right, that isn’t my place.”

“Suga--”

“But I’m going to help one way or another, and I can’t do that from Mooresville.” He turned his gaze downwards, struggling not to let his smile fall. “But… Mother’s probably worried. And Hitoka. I shouldn’t leave them to deal with that alone… But Kingston….”

“We could…” Hajime wasn’t making eye contact with anyone, either. “Depending on how much traveling is involved, we could, technically, still handle trade. The trade would double as a cover, too.” He tapped his foot. “Granted, we’d have to have some sort of idea of what we’re doing, and how much risk it would pose to the cargo….”

“You’re considering this.” Daichi lowered his hand to properly look at his men. Well, his men and the three guests filling up the bench. “You’d be willing to put yourself at risk, for this?”

“I’m from Kingston, Daichi. My family’s there. So is Tobio’s. The Corvus isn’t our only home.”

“We put ourselves at risk every time we set sail! Besides, we’d be heroes, Daichi!” Koutarou was standing now, fists clenched in front of him. “We’ve got a good rep now, right? Imagine people being able to do trade with The Traders Who Saved Kingston!”

“That is the most ridiculous marketing strategy I have ever heard.” Daichi sighed. “It’s just… what could we even do? Wouldn’t you be far better getting the help of other merfolk? Or any other beings that could be of more use than a ship full of humans?”

“We don’t know who Eventide has wrapped around their fingers. We don’t know who’s safe to approach, yet,” Keiji admitted.

Tooru took the chance to lean on Keiji’s shoulder again. “Not that I couldn’t figure that sort of thing out. The backup would be nice, though.” Another yawn. “Even if most of you are a little on the useless side—ack!”

Hajime hadn’t even smacked the back of his head that hard. It was more of an annoyed pat. He was at least a little sensitive to Tooru’s exhaustion.

Daichi muttered something. A complaint, a comment of disbelief, maybe even both. That was fair, as this was a lot to take in. Keiji hadn’t exactly expected, or even asked for anyone to offer their help, to begin with.

“I vote we save the world,” Koutarou announced.

‘The world’ was a bit of a stretch, Keiji thought.

“Are we taking votes?” Kuroo asked, and then raised a hand. Daichi arched a brow. “I mean, I’m for whatever you decide, Captain. I wouldn’t mind rescuing a few people if we can help, though.”

Daichi was quiet for a bit, eyes on the floor, mulling it all over. “This… is a lot. There are people on this ship besides us, too, and this is not the sort of task I had them agree to when they joined this crew.” When he saw Keiji open his mouth, he raised a hand to stop him. “Neither of you leave. Not yet. Just… give us some time. I know there isn’t much to give, but this is going to… take some thought.”
Keiji swallowed. “Really, I didn’t mean to drag you all into this.”

Suga tried for a laugh. “I understand where you’re coming from, but, you know, it sounds like this was all a little bigger than you, to begin with. You wouldn’t be the only one affected if you mess things up, you know.”

Keiji’s eyes widened a barely noticeable amount when he turned to Suga.

The innkeeper seemed to catch himself. “Wait, no, that sounded far too harsh. I just meant, well, this… isn’t like something you caused. It’s already happening, so you shouldn’t feel responsible if someone else wants to lend a hand.”

Koutarou pumped a fist in the air. “The votes are leading for Team Heroes, so far!”

“We’ll discuss it,” Daichi repeated. “We still need to settle on a safe course for the meantime.”

Koutarou crossed his arms. He understood, but the answer seemed to obvious already, to him. “The assholes they’ve got in Kingston better take their sweet-ass time, then. They gotta wait up for us to ruin their stupid plans.”

Keiji lowered his head into his hands, and he swore he heard Tooru chuckle at him.

---

The royal City of Kingston was full of idiots.

Gullible, absolute, idiots.

But, he’d always known humans to be like that. He’d spent years pawning off everyday items to them, under the guise of magical wares. Mermaid tears? More like a bottle of water with ground up shells for some sparkle. Phoenix feather? Just a fuckin’ feather dyed in berry juice. Good luck charms, amulets, papers with spells that would grant your wishes if you read it every night before bed. The list went on. They’d paid the most outrageous prices for the cheapest, fakest shit.

People were so stupid.

But, that went for people all over the world. Humans, specifically.

Kingston’s stupid was just another level of stupid, with their rich snooty ways, and all those fancy types who thought dolling themselves up with the most unaffordable of treasures would catch the attention of the royal family.

Part of him kind of missed ripping them off on the streets, the way he used to. But, he’d had a partner then, and fuck that guy, honestly. He was fine with wandering about by ship, stealing and collecting with a larger group that was less likely to be weighed down by morals and all that bullshit. Back when he was selling fake dragon scale belts and the like on the streets, he’d never expected a future in actual, sailing the seas piracy, though.

And yet, here he was.

Or, rather, what he was right now, was pretending not to be the pirate who didn’t bathe as often as he probably should, but instead, of all things….
A goddamn loyal knight.

Suguru Daishou stuck a forked tongue out to the faded mirror of his bedroom. This place sucked.

He’d agreed to coming to the city, because Wakatoshi said he would be the best actor for spying on the castle. That was flattering as hell, and it sounded like a fun idea at the time, so… here he was.

The intent was to get a job as a servant within the castle. He would do some good deed for the royal family, and they’d welcome him with open arms.

Said good deed, had been planned as meeting the royal family’s carriage outside the city. He’d paid a thief to go after them along the dirt path, and he’d swoop in to stop him. Then he’d bullshit his way into offering his services, or give some sappy story about how he can’t find an honest job or… well, he had a few ideas. He was pretty good at going with the flow. He could change his plan of action based on the situation. He just needed a servant’s job. Cleaning the stables would have been something.

The thief, apparently, after realizing that it was the royal family he would be ambushing, decided to bring company along for the job. The staged thievery turned into an actual threat, which Suguru had to actually stop from going too far.

He’d swooped in before the knights accompanying them had a chance to react, because he knew the thieves, or at least a thief would be there. He did a very convincing job of not letting anyone realize he knew, of course.

He’d saved the queen’s aunt from an arrow to the chest, which was way more than he’d had planned for the day.

And serving as a knight to the family was way more than he’d expected in reward.

Did people just… do that? Did they just hand out knightings like medals? Apparently, they did. Granted, he did save someone’s life, and he supposed they saw that as worth more than he did, so maybe he was the strange one, there.

The room he had was about the cheapest one he could find just outside the castle, and that wasn’t saying much. Cheap, in the City of Kingston, was typically not so cheap. Especially not in such close quarters to the queen. But, hey, he was a knight. He was making some extra money off of this job, in the end.

Would sure be easier to steal or scam for it, though.

He ran his tongue along his teeth, its shape changing to something that would be less alarming to a bunch of humans. The scales dotting the bridge of his nose and around his eyes sunk away into something more fleshy. More human. He made a gagging face at himself, and shook his head to clear away the tingly feeling that came with the shift in appearance. His pupils were less like slits now. It still looked weird, despite having hid himself for years. He liked the natural look a lot more.

Putting those thoughts aside, he fetched the clothes he’d been provided with, the ones he was expected to wear among the other knights, when he wasn’t covered in annoying chainmail.

Once changed, it was out for another scheduled training session. While he could use a sword just fine, and had proven it when he’d met the family along the road, he still wasn’t quite up to
their stuffy expectations.

The training tents were a ways past the castle gates, and he played Everybody’s Best Friend to each servant and knight he passed.

They all loved him already.

Their mistake.

There were plenty of knights already at the tents when he’d arrived. There were some who were more dedicated than others, who would rise far earlier than necessary to get some extra practice in, be it target practice or sparring. Suguru had come to expect their presence there first thing, and assumed they had been at it long before his arrival.

He’d showed up early a few times, himself, but for the most part, he had better things to be doing. Sneaking around the kingdom, for one. If he played overachiever, it was only to win over a few likings.

The person he was meeting with was not one of the early birds. He was the sort who was a knight by blood, who was expected to follow the footsteps of his father, who had only retired due to a leg injury. Not that his son intended to follow him as far as the injury, he was sure.

Said son was in no hurry to begin today’s training. Said son had no idea how the hell he got stuck with the job of training the new guy, to begin with. Suguru had a feeling he knew how.

Commander Ikkei hadn’t exactly seemed thrilled when Suguru was dropped on him. Most of the knights and guards were born with the blood to be just that. They’d been raised into knighthood, and so the commander knew them all from early childhood. Maybe he was even more of a parental figure to some than their own fathers.

At first, Suguru had thought the man might be frustrated, having to teach an old dog new tricks, when he was used to starting his underlings young. Suguru had thought that he’d been dumped onto his particular mentor because the commander felt that the more ambitious knights had better things to do. That the commander thought he had better things to do.

The ‘teaching an old dog new tricks’ aspect, he still thought had a lot to do with it. The more time he spent around his mentor, the more he realized that perhaps he’d been dropped on the man to be some sort of motivator.

He didn’t look motivated right now, though.

Taichi Kawanishi had his rear planted firmly on the wooden fence outside the tents. His sword was at his belt, but he was more interested in the book in his hands. Something about cooking, this time.

He reminded Suguru vaguely of a boy he knew back home, with his messy hair and disinterest with the circumstances he found himself in.

Taichi didn’t look up from his book. “You ever jousted?”

Suguru raised a brow. He looked to the expanse of dirt behind the fence. The practice arena. No one was using it right now, though. There were no horses in sight, either.

“I haven’t.”
“There’s a tournament coming up.” Taichi flipped a page. Suguru wasn’t sure if he was even reading the thing. “Commander says you might as well get a better hang of horseback combat.”

“Isn’t that more of a sport than actual battle technique? No one carries a lance like that into a real fight.”

Taichi shrugged. “You ever ride a horse?”

“I have.”

“You ever fight while riding a horse?”

“I… have not.”

“I guess that’s today’s lesson, then.” With a sigh, he closed his book and slipped from the fence. “We’ll do swords. You know how to use that, and sport isn’t as crucial, I think. We can settle for watching the tournament.”

“We? You don’t plan on entering?”

“Heck no.”

Suguru laughed as he followed after the knight. “What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion. Tournaments are the norm during peacetimes.”

*Peacetimes*.

Suguru did very well to keep a grin from snaking across his face. “Is this one open to the public?”

“It is.”

“Will her highness be attending?”

“Mhm.”

*How interesting*.

“The commander might not call you lazy so often if you participated in such a thing,” Suguru offered. He didn’t stop his grin when Taichi’s face scrunched up.

“I’d rather watch,” he said. “If he tells me to do it, I will, but I’m fine being part of the audience.”

“You are lazy.”

“Excuse me for not having Tsutomu’s level of enthusiasm.” He looked off to where said younger knight was eagerly hacking away at a straw dummy, all focused determination and energy. Beyond him, two others were polishing their weapons, or pretending to for the sake of looking busy, at the very least. Kazuhito and Hisashi were in the same boat as Taichi, being expected to carry on a family legacy. “I think I’m a fair middle ground,” he said, on that train of thought. “I’m average.”

“You’re fine with being average?”
Taichi shrugged.

Suguru sighed, long and deliberate. “I got saddled with the average mentor. What sort of future does that promise for me?”

Taichi clicked his tongue, but he was smiling, just a little. “You’re one to talk. I’m not so sure you can even achieve ‘average’ while you’re so distracted all the time.”

“By what?” Suguru asked with a laugh. Surely, Taichi hadn’t figured him out. Admittedly, it had always made him a little nervous, having to spend so much one-on-one time with someone when he was meant to be spying.

But as they approached the stables, Suguru had a much better idea of what ‘distraction’ Taichi had meant.

There was, perhaps, one exception to the list of people Suguru could remain composed around. Well, perhaps two, but he liked to very often pretend the second didn’t exist, so, for now, it was one.

The one exception didn’t seem to take notice of him, but Taichi absolutely took notice of how his jaw hung open ever so slightly at the sight of them.

With an almost playful sigh, Taichi tapped the bottom of Suguru’s chin, popping his mouth shut, and started through the stable doors.

The list of people Suguru could remain composed around was nearly endless, in his head, because he was, of course, smooth as fuck. He knew this. He was sure of this. He was a good actor, and that was why he was here, dammit. He had spent so much time in the company of other knights, even with the most dedicated and loyal of them, without ever letting his act fall to pieces, or do so much as crack.

And yet, every time he caught a glimpse of The Exception, his mouth went dry, and he came so, so terribly close to forgetting why the hell he was here in the first place.

The Exception was, presently, sweeping the stable doorway. The Exception was a knight, far higher ranked than Suguru. The Exception should not have been wasting time, sweeping floors. The Exception was better than that. The Exception deserved to have someone else sweep the floors before every step The Exception took, at the very least. The Exception would look far better with a crown than the queen, in fact, he thought--

The Exception was looking right at him.

Suguru swallowed, and was struck with the realization that Taichi was no longer anywhere in sight.

Horses. He was here for horses. He was here to ride a horse and swing a sword at some targets, not to ogle at pretty auburn hair, parted in messy, flat-cut bangs at one side. It could have had that stupid angled cut of Kenjirou’s bangs, for all he cared, and it would still be the most beautiful hair he’d ever laid eyes on, the way it flowed past those pretty shoulders and--

He was still being stared at.

“M-Mornin,” he stammered, ending the word in that awkward way where he probably meant to say more, but abruptly stopped, like he’d forgotten the person’s name or something.
Mika. Her name was Mika. He couldn’t possibly forget it.

“Good morning,” she said, with a single bat of those too-beautiful-to-be-real lashes. She then turned back to sweeping, as if Suguru wasn’t even there anymore. It was, maybe, for the best, but he couldn’t help but want to stare at those eyes a little longer.

That was creepy.

This was not like him.

Taichi whistled from within the stables, and Suguru followed after him before Mika could offer another judgemental stare.

He wasn't here to flirt, anyway.

Though, he'd kind of like to....

"You know," Taichi said, petting the muzzle of a pretty brown mare who'd stuck her head out from her stall, "Mika is good with animals. Should I ask her to take over your training for the day?"

"Is that just you trying to get out of it?"

"No, that's me wanting to see you fumbling with a sword in front of a pretty girl."

He couldn't have been that obvious, dammit. He shook his head and wandered further inside. He stopped in the center of the path, still turned away from Taichi, where he could quickly collect himself.

Focus on the job. Focus on the job. He wasn’t going to get any dumb comments or pretty faces get the best of him. No chance.

“So,” he said, casually, like nothing was wrong, because nothing was wrong, “Which horse is mine?”

---

The serpent gods or whatever must have been really mad at Lev and his crew for entering that temple. Lev was sure of this, because he couldn't see any other reason as to why they weren't running off with armfuls of gold and magic leaves, by now.

What he had, instead, was one frozen hand and a lump on the head. The lump was from tumbling down the hill, and it had gone down at least a little since then, but his forehead was still a sight to behold.

“Morisuke,” he whispered. Or, rather, he shouted, in something of a mock-whisper. He elbowed his first mate in the arm. “We should run back to their village and find the hour-ass for ourselves.”

“They might not even have it.” Morisuke was doing a much better job of whispering, but it made little difference when Lev leaned over and rustled the leaves of the bush they were hiding in.

“They might have those magic leaves, then! That’s something! Takahiro needs those.”
They all could have used them, at this point, really.

“We don’t even know where Takahiro is. We don’t know where any of our crew went.” Morisuke squinted through the leaves at the other three people who were certainly not their crewmates. “Akira’s nowhere in sight, either.”

“That should make it easier to sneak in, then!”

“There are other rock-things in that village!”

They simultaneously clamped their hands over each other’s mouths, and maybe the smacking sound that came with that was a bit much, but everything past the bushes had gone quiet, so they tried to do the same.

Beyond them, one irritated cherufe had one exasperated merman pinned to a boulder, while the second cherufe tried very hard to keep his friend from burning off the fish-person’s flesh.

Kenji’s bow was no longer frozen to his hands. It wasn’t in his hands at all. Kaname was holding it, and Kenji almost seemed more concerned over his fancy weapon going up in flames than himself.

Yasushi pulled Kenji away from the stone, then slammed him back against it. The merman glared at the lava man through one open eye.

“Where’d your friends with the stone go, huh?” he snapped with sparks in his mouth.

Lev was kind of impressed, really, by how not scared Kenji appeared to be in the face of molten rock yelling in his face.

“They aren’t my friends.” He struggled against the rocky hold on his shoulders, but to no avail. He tried for a kick to Yasushi’s leg, but that did more harm to his own toes than anything. He pouted at his feet. “I don’t even know their names. They’re just some useless people a friend hired.”

Useless???

Morisuke grabbed the back of Lev’s head, only to reinforce the hold he had over his mouth. Right. Okay. Maybe not the time to defend you and your crew’s honor.

Because there was so much to defend while they were hiding in a bunch of bushes like frightened mice.

“Hired for what?”

Kenji offered Yasushi a flat look, then tried to lean his head enough to aim it at Kaname, instead. “Can you call him off? My scales are getting dry around you guys.”

“You poor thing!” Yasushi’s hands filled with heat, but cooled back down when Kaname cleared his throat.

“Technically…” Kaname stepped closer to the two, hands raised as if to say ‘I’m not a threat,’ despite his friend still pinning Kenji down. “…You weren’t in that temple. You haven’t done any trespassing, so, technically, we can let you go! But, we can’t let those people you, er, hired, get away with that stone. Things are usually locked away for a reason.”
“You slagheads are really gonna go so far outta your way for a rock that wasn’t even yours to begin with? What are you gonna do with ice magic, anyway? You’ll hurt yourselves.”

“That ain’t your business, mermaid.”

“Look, I think I’m being reasonable. You don’t give small children knives, and you don’t give lava-people ice or water magic. That’s logic. We’re doing you a favor.”

Yasushi lifted him from the boulder, ready to smash him back against it, but Kaname’s frantic waving and “Ahp ahp ahp!” left him holding Kenji with dangling legs in the air, instead.

“Please! In either case, the stone wasn’t yours, or theirs. That temple was made for the gods, you know. Do you really want to anger a force like that?”

Kenji held onto Yasushi’s rocky hands, if only to make sure he didn’t slip from his grasp to the ground. “Did the gods put the stone in the temple?”

“I… er, well, no…”

“Did you guys put the stone in the temple?”

“Not us. None of us speak the language its guardian speaks. We don’t even know how to get in. But, our ancestors….”

“They did? Then, I’m gonna say, your gods probably don’t give a shit. You probably don’t even believe in them. What’d your people do, lock that rock away in there with that as an excuse so no one could use it against you?” When Kaname hesitated in his response, Kenji laughed. “Seriously? Hell, you guys are an easy read! And you’re afraid some shitty no-name pirates are gonna somehow do harm with that? Relax. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

Lev raised a fist and made a sound against Morisuke’s palm, and the latter tugged him down closer to his level.

“I don’t know about water gods.” Yasushi dropped Kenji back onto the boulder, and this time placed a big, rocky palm to his chest to keep him in place. “But there’s somethin’ on this island, and we don’t plan on pissin’ it off.”

“There’s a good chance whatever that something is, it’s gonna get pissed, soon. That’s why I’m trying to leave.” Kenji pried at the hand, and shot Kaname another ‘call him off already’ look.

“What if we agreed to let all of you go, free of struggle, if you just get them to hand it over?”

Yasushi looked over his shoulder. “They told us to bring ‘em all back!”

A helpless shrug. “We could drag him back and try to make him talk, but they could all be gone by then. Those pirates likely have a boat waiting around here, somewhere.”

“Then we find the boat and burn it.”

“You literally are a hothead, aren’tcha?” Kenji asked, and Yasushi snarled a heated snarl in his face. ‘I’m pretty sure they lost their boat. I keep tellin’ ya, stone or no stone, those guys aren’t a threat.”

Lev was practically vibrating with the need to leap out from the bushes and show them a real threat. Morisuke was desperately trying to keep him still and hidden, but that was growing
increasingly difficult when he could feel ice growing beneath them.

“You need to calm down,” he hissed between Lev’s fingers.

But Lev did not want to calm down. He wanted to beat up some fire people and get his damned treasure. Even so, he tried to stay quiet, but he had little control of the cold spreading among the grass and crawling up the branches around them.

“Lev!”

“I’m trying to stop it!”

Morisuke tugged Lev’s stone-wielding hand into his own, and ran a finger along the icy surface. “There’s gotta be a way to calm this thing, even if you can’t stay calm.”

“I’m being calm!”

“You are not!”

When Lev looked out through the leaves, he swore he saw Kenji make eye contact with him. That was silly, though. They were definitely hidden in the bushes, and they were being pretty quiet... relatively speaking. The angry rock guy holding the merman down was being way more loud than they were.

But, then, Lev wasn’t sure how good mermen hearing was. The lava people didn’t seem to notice them, anyhow.

He held his breath, and he was sure he felt Morisuke do the same. Then, he noticed the small trail of ice snaking out past their hiding place.

Shit.

“You know,” Kenji said, still staring them down through the bushes. Or staring the bushes down. Either way, he was facing them, and Lev did not like it one bit. “Their captain and the short one were just here. Went rolling right down this hill with us.”

“Sh--”

Lev had to cover Morisuke’s mouth, this time.

“If you weren’t so distracted by me, maybe you would’ve caught them, instead. Then you’d have your dumb rock.” Kenji rolled his eyes. “Well, the dumb rock that isn’t your dumb rock.” He leaned his head to look past Yasushi, to Kaname, again. “I can maybe guess where they went, but you have to tell me what this thing you guys are so afraid of is, if it’s not some scary gods.”

Yasushi grinned. “Or we can just bash your head into this here boulder on the count of five if ya don’t.”

“Well that sounds messy and pointless.”

Kaname was beside Yasushi, now, a steady hand on the latter’s shoulder. “We can hold off on the head bashing,” he offered, with a honest smile. “And that sounds fair, but I think it’s also fair that we don’t necessarily let you go until we actually find them.”

Kenji’s eyes wandered to the bushes again, and Lev was sure Kenji could see the tiny bits of ice forming beneath them, by now.
“Sure,” he said, clearly distracted, but Yasushi was too focused on keeping him pinned to the rock to follow his gaze.

“You know anythin’ about the serpent trio legends, Fish?”

“My name’s not ‘Fish,’ but yes, to an extent. I know the general stories.”

Yasushi held up the hand he wasn’t pinning Kenji down with, and raised three fingers. “There ain’t just a water snake. Gods or not, our people have seen somethin’ slitherin’ around up in the sky.”

Well, that seemed to snag Kenji’s attention a bit better.

“We don’t know if it’s even related or not, but we do know that it was, well… unhappy.”

“Pissed,” Yasushi laughed. “They say it comes and goes in flashes, no one gets to really see it for long, or they think they’re imagining it, but then there’re tornadoes, and tons of trees get blown over where it was seen.”

“Neither of us have seen it, but others in the village have. They say it looks like it’s searching for something.”

“So, y’see.” Yasushi pressed his hand harder against Kenji, allowing for a bit of unnecessary heat. “We’ve got enough to worry about without harmful magic let loose on this island.”

Kenji winced at the temperature rising against his flesh and scales. “Sorry to hear that,” he muttered, without sincerity. “But I’ve got a lot of problems, too, and a friend to track down, so, if you really wanna find your pirates--”

Ice spiked up from within the bushes with a sharp ring of magic, followed by swears and shaking leaves as Lev and Morisuke scrambled to their feet and ran from their hiding place.

“Well, there you go,” Kenji offered, just as Yasushi was letting him fall against the boulder to the grassy floor.

Both cherufe ran for the pirates, with Lev giving up on his efforts to restrain the magic altogether. Ice spiked up in his path in short walls, trailing him and Morisuke, and forcing the lava-people to navigate around the obstacles.

“I told you we should’ve ran before!”

“Like they wouldn’t have seen us then??”

Lev looked behind them. He’d expected Kenji to have ditched the second the two were distracted, but instead, he was throwing a stray clump of ice at the back of Kaname’s head. It melted and sizzled on contact, and Kaname yelped and fell to his face. Kenji’s bow was still in his hand, which explained a bit more.

Yasushi was still trailing them, though.

“Any plans, Captain?” Morisuke had to take twice as many steps to cover the same amount of distance as Lev. Lev knew it had irked him before, and it always did moreso when they were in situations like this.

He also knew that Morisuke was usually the one to come up with plans between the two of
them. If he ever asked Lev for advice, it was because he knew something more spontaneous was required.

And, so, he did the first thoughtless thing he could think-- or not-quite-think to do.

He threw his hand behind him, willing the ice to grow stronger. He could feel the freeze building up in his palm, and the walls that formed in their path grew taller in response.

The ice climbed high, curling into frozen waves that reached after Lev’s pursuers and left behind a violent, frozen ocean in their wake.

Not enough. Lev clenched his fist around the stone, and the next few walls shot up from the ground with less randomness in their patterns than the others, all in a straight row, one after another, forming layer after layer to create one, thicker barrier. More shot up beside that one, then behind it, and they curled into each other until they met at the center.

Lev skidded to a stop, kicking up dirt and leaves as he did, and gaped at the dome he’d unintentionally created.

Morisuke took a moment to notice what had transpired, and hadn’t ceased running until a moment later. He stopped between two palm trees only when he caught sight of Lev over his shoulder, standing still. The big hunk of ice caught his eye after that.

It wasn’t melting. Not yet. Lev wasn’t entirely sure how many layers he’d actually built up. It’d happened so fast. He could vaguely hear pounding from the inside, then it stopped.

“Lev…” Morisuke stepped up beside him, looking up at the dome with wide eyes. “Did you… Are all of them…?”

Lev had thought maybe it was just Yasushi trapped inside, at first, but he didn’t hear or see any signs of Kaname anymore. He squinted at the ice, trying to make out anything inside through the thickness. There were two shadows, he thought.

He didn’t need to question where the third went, because Kenji’s head came poking out from behind the icy structure with a horrified look about him.

The merman mouthed a “holy shit” and tip toed around the thing. There was another pounding noise, then something of a yelp. The shadow of what was presumably Yasushi withdrew from the inner wall, likely having come in contact with a melting layer.

They’d get out eventually, if they could navigate through the melted pool it’d leave. Still, Lev couldn’t contain the rush of excitement over his creation. He was grinning and he threw his arms up high with a victorious yell.

And then the merman they were supposed to be chasing whizzed right on by, bow reclaimed.

Lev slipped on his own ice beneath his feet, but quickly regained his footing and hurried after Kenji with Morisuke in tow.

“Would you two give it up and fuck off already?!” Kenji shot them a glare as he fished out his glowing stone. “What’re you even gonna do with gold when you losers don’t even have a ship to put it on?!”

The question was punctuated with an “oomph” as he smacked into something-- someone. Kenji was pinned to the floor a second later, this time by human hands instead of big, rocky ones.
“You’ve got to be shitting me,” he groaned, while Kanji grinned up at Lev and Morisuke.

“I caught one!” he announced, all too proudly.

Then, there were three pirates hovering over Kenji. Lev was absolutely beaming.

“So, what’s that glowy rock leadin’ ya to, again?”

Kenji only glared at him, but then Kanji was glancing here and there, in search of something.

“You guys weren’t being chased?”

Lev set his hands on his hips. “Not anymore!”

Kanji seemed… perplexed. “I expected to see you running from those flaming lizards this guy mentioned.”

Morisuke pouted, then glanced back to the frozen dome in the distance. “You did mention those, didn’t you? Where are they, then, if not with the cherufe…?”

The lizards were eating Akira's books.

Because things hadn't been shitty enough for him, already.

He'd cursed himself when he ran opposite Kenji from the cherufe, and cursed himself again when he'd stumbled across his campsite, only to find two oversized, fiery lizards raiding the place. One was curled up by the fire pit, now re-lit by the thing's own tail, while the other dug through his tent. He was surprised that hadn't gone up in flames.

Then, there was their owner. Or petsitter. In any case, the cherufe with the turnip-shaped head was there, trying to pry a book from the one salamander's mouths by the tent. He didn't seem to have very good control over them.

Akira's jaw hung open. He could just keep running. But, his books. But, also, his life. He didn't exactly have much to fend off fire creatures with, right now. But... his books. It'd taken him so long to find all of those, and to record all those findings in those journals, and these things were just treating them like chew toys.

The lava-person managed to rip the one book out from the salamander's teeth, but it was missing a large chunk, now, and it was charred at the edges of the bite.

The cherufe frowned at it, then opened to the first page, then set it aside to scold the creature for going after another pile.

Flaming lizards aside, this guy seemed far less threatening than the other two.

That may have even been an understatement. He seemed... harmless.

Akira's staring was noted when the cherufe yanked the next book from the salamander's jaws. This one was less crispy by the time he retrieved it, and he let it dangle from his rocky fingers as he stared at the merman across the campsite.
"Oh."

'Attack,' or 'After him, you useless lizards,' would have been a more proper response than 'Oh,' or, so Akira thought.

Yeah. Pretty harmless.

"Are these yours?" He held up the book.

Akira nodded, then pointed to the salamander nuzzled up by the fire. "Are these yours?"

"Well, I mean, for now, yeah." His fiery eyes darted this way and that in search of something. "Where's, uh, the tall loud guy that was with you?"

"Which one?"

"Oh. The one with the ice?"

Akira shrugged. "Not sure. Don't particularly care. Can you leave my stuff alone, now?"

The other frowned down at the salamander in the tent. "Look," he said, not to the lizard he was looking at, but to Akira, "They're kinda mad with you guys for trespassing--"

"Unless that temple was made for you people, you were trespassing, too."

He bent to pull the big, rocky reptile into his arms. "Okay, but, either way, they want that stone back where it was."

"Feeding my research to your pets isn't going to accomplish that."

The cherufe straightened, and the creature hung from its arms like a stuffed toy, back feet dangling while its front ones rested over his arms.

"That wasn't the plan! We were just looking."

"Well, have you looked enough?"

"I found you. So. Um. I guess I'm supposed to take you hostage again, or something."

Akira squinted at him, and wondered if they'd just hired this guy this morning, and then two much louder voices cut through the campsite.

"Oh, thank god, you found him!" Takahiro leaned forward, too close beside Akira's face for comfort. "We thought we'd lost you, Scholarly Type."

"You rocky guys sure are good at finding pesky mermen, huh?" Issei offered the cherufe a lazy grin, but it fell away when he saw the salamander hanging from his arms. He raised a brow in question, but didn’t actually vocalize it.

Takahiro let go of Akira’s shoulder, and smacked both hands to either side of the merman’s face, instead. He smushed his cheeks, much to Akira’s displeasure. “Well… we’d love to pay you back for tracking this one down, but we’re kinda broke. You guys took all our weapons, which was literally all we had left to our names, so… consider that payment?” He glanced up at the sky, as if
in thought, then nodded. “Yeah. That should work. You’re welcome, then. And, thanks again, for
finding him.”

With his next nod, he moved Akira’s head up and down to mimic the motion, all while the
merman glared a deadly glare at him.

He released his face only when Issei moved to scoop him up, tossing Akira over his shoulder
and offering the cherufe a salute. “We’ll be taking this back, then.”

“As you were,” Takahiro waved to the very confused lava-man.

Issei was already turning away from the campsite, with his captive just about thrashing over
his shoulder.

He demanded to be put down, with a punch to the pirate’s back, not that it seemed to bother
Issei. A few more punches, and Akira turned a foul face onto the cherufe. “You. Shouldn’t you be
stopping them?”

He looked too perplexed to properly respond, mouth agape and salamander squirming in his
arms.

Takahiro patted Akira’s cheek as he followed behind Issei. “Hey, we’re helping you, here. Be
a little respectful.”

Akira smacked his hand away, but the pirate just made an amused huff.

“You friends with the fire people, now?”

He wasn’t friends with any of them, and he wanted his stuff to be left alone, dammit. He
glared past Takahiro, to where the salamander was leaping out from the cherufe’s arms. The
feeling of oncoming rage was replaced by something closer to relief when the thing charged after
Takahiro, rather than his tent.

It crawled across the site almost clumsily, its rear swinging from side to side with its tail and
leaving small, charred patches of ground in its wake. It opened its mouth with a hungry hiss and a
sizzle, heated spots of amber on its back igniting as it pounced after the pirate.

The sizzling and crackling gave it away, and Takahiro shoved Issei and Akira to one side, then
stumbled off to another himself. The salamander skidded between them, tail whipping and lighting
small patches of grass ablaze. It had its eyes set on Takahiro, now fallen into a bush and
desperately trying to unhook his shirt from a stubborn branch. He met its gaze with wide eyes, and
it flicked out a patchy, forked tongue at him, as if in warning.

Meanwhile, Akira tumbled to the floor, out of Issei’s grasp, dirt and twigs messing his skin
and clothes, but that was the least of his worries. He scrambled to his feet, unconcerned with
Takahiro’s problems, though Issei seemed busy throwing twigs at the creature to lure it away, with
poor results. Unless more fire was his intent.

Whatever. Not Akira’s problem.

He ran for the tent, trying to ignore the dryness in his throat from the growing heat of the
unwanted visitors. Or, maybe he was the real unwanted visitor in this case…?

Again, whatever.
He ran past the still-sleeping salamander by the fire pit. He’d grab as many things as he could carry. There were a few bags inside he could stuff them in. Grab them, and run. That was all he had to do. He could figure out where to run after he was clear of pirates and lava men. He couldn’t take a bunch of papers down to Eventide, but he knew of plenty of hiding spots on the island. He could toss it all in the cave. Tell the grindylows to attack whoever went after them. The grindylows liked him. They’d do it.

The cherufe was still standing by the tent, though, and that was a problem.

“Move,” Akira ordered, as if he had any actual power over the person standing in his way.

The cherufe drew in a deep breath, and smoke plumed out his nostrils on the exhale. His shoulders looked stiff—well, more stiff than the usual rocky-stiffness. Despite how much taller he was, how much of a physical advantage he had over Akira in both that and his species on land, he… seemed weirdly nervous.

“I can’t do that,” he said.

Akira leveled him with a flat stare, then pointed back to the two pirates trying to fend off the one salamander that was doing its job. Takahiro had gotten himself out from the bushes, apparently. “Look,” he said, “Those guys are the real pirates. They’re with the guy who has your stone—well, not your stone, but the stone you guys are fussing over, in any case. If you want your people to think you’ve done a good job, go after them, and you’ll have a better chance.”

He furrowed his rocky brows, glancing between Akira and the pirates. Akira thought him being distracted might be something of an opening, but when he tried to step past him, the man’s molten veins lit with a bright heat, and he outstretched his arms, blocking the path.

Akira cursed, not just because this guy was being such an inconvenience, but he swore, if he accidentally set his tent and all those findings on fire—

“Tell me what all this is, first.” He tilted his turnip-shaped rock of a head to the tent. More specifically, to the pile of books that had been raided inside.

Akira pursed his lips.

“They were suspicious of all those scrolls and things you had with you when we caught you guys.” His eyes were burning bright, determined to get something out of this. “And, I think that was you, not them.”

“A bunch of cherufe being possessive over a water temple is suspicious, but I’m not calling you guys out.”

He frowned. “But, you just did....”

Akira frowned right back. “Look, you—whatever your name is—”

“Yuutarou.”

Great. He didn’t actually care. He didn’t plan on introducing himself, either. “Okay. I don’t have time for this, alright? I need to get home. There are lives at stake, here.” Probably. Maybe. “I’m tired. I don’t like your island, or any landforms, for that matter. I’d very much like to leave, and since I’m not welcome here to begin with, I can’t see any of you having any qualms with that. So, please?” He gestured to the tent.
Yuutarou studied him, for a moment, then dropped his arms back to his sides. He snapped a finger, then, and it sparked with a popping sound. After some pause, the salamander by the fire stirred. Akira cursed under his breath.

“It’s just research,” he muttered.

“What could you be researching here? Stones that don’t belong to you?”

“I am not going to continue pointing out the hypocrisy of that question.” He could feel the heat of the lazier salamander inching up behind him. Still, Akira stood his ground. “It’s just stuff regarding temples and other legends around here. All I’m looking for is a compass.”

“You mentioned that.”

“I found things that said your people had it, at some point. Or, well, they hinted at it, anyway. It’s all vague, and most of them might just be stories, but we really need that compass.”

“We?” Yuutarou glanced to the pirates, and Akira sighed.

“They’re just help. Stupid, uninvolved help. We thought you guys might have the hourglass, but you don’t, so there’s no need for you to pester me, alright? I’ll be leaving you alone.”

“But the stone--”

“Deal with those guys! I don’t care! Just let me take my things, and you can do whatever you want with them!” He tried to move around the cherufe, into his tent, but he was caught by a hot, rocky hand. Akira hissed at the touch, and his scales suddenly felt twice as dry. They’d start to itch soon, if he wasn’t burned alive, first. Great.

Yuutarou grabbed Akira’s hand and held it high above his head, earning a glare from the merman. “You’re really determined with this, huh?”

“I really want to go home and sleep, yes. I am determined to do that.”

Cherufe may have been all rock and lava, the furthest thing from the sorts of people Akira was accustomed to, but they were still expressive. Maybe even moreso, with the way their veins and eyes lit with their thoughts. The way Yuutarou was watching him now almost seemed sympathetic. Really, with how unsure he looked, he probably wanted to be doing this job about as much as Akira wanted to do his own.

Maybe they’d both be better off ditching all this nonsense in favor of a nice, long nap.

Akira flexed his fingers, as a reminder to Yuutarou that his arm was still hostage. “If I show you the book with the compass, will you drop your suspicions and leave me out of this?”

Yuutarou contemplated that for a moment. “Only if I get to bring the book back with me.”

Of course he’d want more.

“...Fine.” The merman glared up at his wrist, then down at the salamander by his feet. The thing looked like it wanted a nap as much as him. He preferred that over the clumsy one chasing Issei and Takahiro around the pit.

Yuutarou released him, and Akira rubbed at the mark he’d left on his wrist as he wandered into the tent. He dug through piles until he found what he’d needed, and set the book down on his
makeshift table.

Most of it contained descriptions and locations of items he had no use for. A goblet that made anyone who drank from it tell the truth. A pair of die that could predict the weather. A coin that would change the properties of whatever liquid it was dropped into. All very interesting, and perhaps of use to someone else’s attempts at saving an underwater civilization, but not his.

When he found the page he was looking for, he shuffled out of Yuutarou’s way for him to see. It was a single page out of the entire book, with a faded water color picture of an hourglass tilted on its side, void of sand, and instead containing water in its upper chamber, collecting near the top of the glass. Abstract, snake-like designs surrounded the image.

That was all. No descriptions, no notes, no words whatsoever. Just the one picture, all by itself.

Yuutarou reached for the book and flipped through a few pages. The other items had more detailed sections.

“That’s it?”

Akira closed the book in Yuutarou’s hands and pushed it toward his chest. “That’s it. But that’s one item out of an entire book’s worth of magical mysteries. I’m sure you’ll find use for the others.”

“What do you need it for, though?”

This guy wasn’t as big a pain as he could have been, but, hell, how Akira wished he’d stop asking so many questions. “To find something for a friend.” Friend. Big, oversized sea snake guardian. Same difference. “You can keep it. That was the deal. Now you have to leave me alone.”

“But--”

“You don’t want to take visual proof of what your trespassers were after back to your people?”

“I mean, I think they’d want that, but--”

“You say this isn’t in your village, yes?”

“We did--”

“Then the fact that I’m after it is, therefore, causing you no threat, correct?”

“Well, sure--”

“Then, maybe you should be looking for that human with the stone, huh? Or go pester those two your pet is chasing around the fire.”

The second the words left his mouth, it became apparent that one of the two was no longer being chased around the fire. Takahiro latched onto one of Akira’s arms and yanked him back from the cherufe.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, not sounding sorry in the least, “but we really gotta get going. It’s been fun playing with your pet and all, really. He’s great. Give him a treat for us. We’ve got another merman to hassle and some leaves and gold waiting for us, though, so, if you’ll excuse us.”
Akira tried to pull his arm free with a grumble. “Do you even really need that healing plant?”

“What sort of question is that for a man who’s been shot?” Takahiro made a pained face, but Akira didn’t seem fazed.

“You seem fine to me.”

“We’re pirates, mate…” came Issei’s voice, followed by a clang as he smacked the salamander with a pan found among the mess of the camp. “…it’s not about needing anything.” He tossed the pan at the creature while it writhed by the fire. Yuutarou seemed conflicted as to whether he should help the thing or keep close to the others.

Takahiro gave Akira’s arm another tug away from the tent. “It’s about being pissed when we do a ton of work, and someone doesn’t hold up their end of the bargain.”

“You’re really just making this harder on yourselves, y’know.” Issei took a few cautious steps back from the salamander. It seemed more concerned with its aching head than with him now.

“Unless, hey…” He pointed a finger to Yuutarou. “You guys know where these magic healing plant-things are?”

Yuutarou opened his mouth, closed it, and looked between the three of them before opening it again. “I thought… you were looking for a compass…?”

“God fucking dammit,” Akira whispered.

“Well, yeah, but, fuck the compass.”


“Hour-ass,” Issei corrected himself with a nod. “Fuck the hour-ass. We want leaves.”

“And gold.”

Issei pointed at Takahiro with another nod.

The cherufe narrowed his fiery eyes on them all, then on Akira in particular. He held up the book. “You said it was just this.”

“That’s all I’m after.” Akira stomped down on Takahiro’s foot, and before the pirate could retaliate, elbowed him in his injured side for good measure. He stumbled out from his hold, but then Yuutarou was grabbing him by the shirt, instead. Akira could feel heat pooling from Yuutarou’s grip. He glared at the hand holding his shirt. It’d better not set fire, he thought. “Let. Me. Go.”

“Nuh uh, hand him over here, would ya?” Issei waved a hand toward himself. “We’ve got unfinished business. You lava-people should all just go home and relax. This ain’t got nothin’ to do with you anymore.”

Takahiro still seemed to be in mild pain from the jab. “Tell your folks your lizard pets ate us when you weren’t looking. Then we all go our separate ways in peace.”

Said lizard friends were circling behind them now.

Yuutarou’s veins glowed bright with molten heat, and he turned Akira so that they were facing each other again. He held up the book with a short huff of smoke. “Anything else in here
“you wanna mention? Magic plants? Some kinda wand that could drown a village?” He listed off a few nonsensical things, then flipped back to the page with the hourglass. He held it up in front of Akira’s face. “This is a compass, right? I don’t get how that works, but why did you think we’d have it, to begin with? There’s something in one of those other books about this, isn’t there?”

He looked so angry, with smoke rising off his body and all. Akira held back any comments about how constipated the guy’s expression looked. He didn’t even know if rock people experienced that, or if they even used the bathroom to begin with. Did they even eat? He’d have liked to have shoved something into the guy’s mouth to make him stop asking questions, in any case.

He didn’t answer him, because Yuutarou was looking back at the book again, all frustrated and focused on the image of the hourglass. He tapped a finger to a spot on the page, and Akira really, really wanted to scold him every time he came close to burning the book with those fiery hands.

“What are these?” Yuutarou asked, finger pressed to one of the serpentine designs surrounding the image. “Does this mean something? It looks familiar.”

“They’re snakes, anyone’d recognize ‘em,” Issei said, not quite as distracted by the salamanders stepping around them as Takahiro was. “But, hey, you can probably observe that thing easier if you let that little fish go, first.”

As much as Akira wanted to be let go, he found himself staring at the images, then at Yuutarou. “Familiar how?” He could barely hear his own voice upon the last word, as more voices filled the camp. It wasn’t Issei’s or Takahiro’s, not initially, though they did join into the shouting shortly after.

The salamanders scattered when spikes of ice grew across the ground, splitting the space between Issei and Takahiro, and sending the two stumbling. A thinner trail of ice snaked across the ground around the spikes, forming a path with a thin sheet, on which four bodies soon came sliding across.

Lev was the first that Akira could make out, arms shielding his face to brace himself from his own magic as he slid across the floor on his stomach. Morisuke bumped into him once he came closer to a stop, followed by Kanji, each collision resulting in a painful sounding “oomph.”

The fourth of them leapt over the pile that was their bodies like they were nothing more than an annoying bump in the road. Kenji was following the light of the crystal around his neck, but he stopped and sputtered once he saw Yuutarou with his tight grip on Akira’s shirt.


“The icy dome thing! It worked on the other two!”

Yuutarou looked more like a volcano than ever, albeit a very sad, perplexed volcano, with smoke puffing out the top of his rocky, pointed head. “The other two?”

Lev tried to do the icy dome thing again, he really did. Without the urgency he felt with the
others chasing them, however, the most he managed was something like an icy fence around Yuutarou and the salamanders.

One salamander tried to climb it, but hissed and retreated to curl around Yuutarou’s legs at the touch.

Akira raised a hand in not quite a wave beside the cherufe, as if to say, ‘Hey, I’m still here.’

“Close enough,” Kenji mumbled, and he approached the short wall of ice. “Your friends aren’t dead.” Probably. “And we can keep this all casualty free, if you let this one go.” He pointed a finger to Akira, who was trying to figure out how to pry Yuutarou from his shirt without burning himself.

Takahiro yawned. “All this negotiating is getting tiring.”

“Dump some water on him so we can run,” Issei suggested.

Yuutarou made a sputtering sort of noise, and Lev gave the stone on his palm a few experimental taps before more ice extended off the already-built walls of the fence. Thin blocks popped up from the wall, and more on top of those, rapidly growing into zig-zagging, squarish snakes that threatened Yuutarou’s personal space.

The ends of it were already melting, between the heat from himself and the salamanders. When a puddle gathered at his feet, he yelped and released Akira. The merman clumsily darted for a space between the icy snake pillars and climbed the fence. He fell on his side, onto the grass, then scrambled over to Kenji.

He whispered something into the taller merman’s ear, all while glaring at the frustrated cherufe trapped between the ice.

Kenji’s eyes went wide, and he moved closer to the wall, peering between the oddly shaped pillars. Yuutarou was still holding the book, and still trying to find dry spots to keep his footing in. He didn’t look up at Kenji until he spoke.

Akira had a feeling Kenji was just as unsure as he was. Stay on Ironfall, and risk whatever it was that had Eita so freaked? Or leave, when there was potentially something, or someone, that could help Eventide right under their noses?

“Hey, craterface,” Kenji said, after some pause of considering the options himself. When he spoke next, he sounded like he was already regretting his choice. “D’you remember where you recognize those serpent drawings from?”

Sunlight passed through the window of Daichi’s quarters, lighting the path for dust that hung in the air, and falling over Suga’s face as he stood before Daichi and his desk.

The second Suga had stepped inside, he'd gasped, "What is that?" in regards to the thing. "Your desk? That's not the desk, Daichi. What happened?"

A lot had happened. Whatever Suga hadn't been filled in on in the kitchen with the others, Daichi had filled him in on personally. Then he had declared "captain's orders" that Suga take a
nice, long nap in an actual bed.

The nice long nap had been about an hour-long one, and now he was standing before Daichi again, wearing that look that meant he was ready to argue something, and Daichi was certainly going to lose. Because Suga always won.

"Have you figured out a course, or are we still blindly following the wind?"

“Hollow Fang Point.” Daichi tapped at a list of their current cargo in front of him. He still had to see how much of it had been damaged during all of this. The fact that Keiji had told them, “I’m sorry about the barrels,” in regards to the matter was not promising. He only hadn’t checked yet because he was a little more concerned with getting away from the whole… pirate thing. “It wasn’t on either of our lists to hit, but Ironfall’s clearly out, and Morrigan’s Coast is…”

“Too obvious, if they’re still following us.”

“Your mother’s going to be worried sick.”

Suga hummed something soft and sad. He looked down to his feet. His bare feet, because all of his clothes were a wreck by now. The clothes he was wearing now were actually Tobio’s. The pants were too long, but Daichi’s were far too baggy, and Saeko had offered, but hers just looked silly on him. He decided to forfeit shoes until he had to set foot back on land. “I can have word sent to them when we make port. There’s an inn there that my family’s been friendly with for years.”

“On Hollow Fang. Really?”

That reaction was understandable. Hollow Fang Point was often equated to Kingston’s slums, if they’d taken up an entire island rather than a small portion of something much more flashy. Everything about it was rundown, and untrustworthy people tended to collect there.

Pirates would be among those untrustworthy people, but maybe that was just what they needed. A place the Black Swan would expect them to avoid. Hollow Fang was probably a second best choice after Eagle Head Isles. If you wanted pirate infestations, that was the real destination.

But Suga didn’t have contacts there, thankfully. Maybe if he hadn’t jumped off a burning ship with Daichi when he was a kid, he would have. That was always weird and uncomfortable to think about, though.

“They’re good people, Daichi,” Suga assured him. “There are still people trying to make decent livings for themselves there.”

“No, no, I know.” Daichi pushed the papers aside. “We’ve done trade there before. I’m sure we can pawn off some of the cargo we don’t already have set buyers on the other islands for. Whatever’s still in once piece, anyway…” His face went a little dark. It made Suga just as curious as to how much damage the mermen had done downstairs. “That island’s just… I feel like we catch a thief or stowaway every time we dock.”

“Well, you do seem to be growing quite the family, here.” Suga tipped his head. “Unless those two mermen are leaving once we reach land. In which case, you’ll have some cranky sailors to deal with. And, well, I’ll…”

Daichi groaned and leaned back in his seat. “This has nothing to do with us, Sugawara.”

“I can’t go back to sweeping floors at the inn when I know an entire island could be in danger,
Daichi!” Suga was leaning his hands on the desk before he even knew it. When had he walked up to the thing, anyway? “And, imagine if we could do something? Imagine if this could be stopped? And we had something to do with it? How many good deeds would that even count for?”

“That’s not how the Good Deeds Rule works.”

“Okay, well, does sitting on your ass ignoring it count as a bad deed, then? ‘Cause, then you’ll need to do three good ones anyway, right?”

“You are not using this against me.”

Suga stared him in the eyes, long and hard, until Daichi looked uncomfortable under his gaze. His own softened, then, and he let his hands fall to his sides as he stepped back from the desk. “Okay… I know, I’m not being fair. I’m not just asking this of you. It’d be your entire ship, your crew, and you all have your own lives mapped out.”

“You said you were done with adventures.”

“This is different, though!” Suga ran his hands back through his hair, which, by god, could use a good washing right about now. “This? This is the sort of adventure I would have wanted to be a part of. Helping people. Not being pressured into thievery and slicing up my crush’s face.”

That last part was not the part Daichi should have been focused on. Yet, still, he sputtered, “Your what?”

Suga dismissed him. “We’re addressing that later. That thing that happened when I jumped on this ship? Between us? Definitely addressing that later. But not now.”

“I feel like that should maybe be addressed sooner than later.”

“Soon, then! But, Daichi, I’m not sitting this one out. I love the Dockside, god, I love it there. I love that warm feeling when people tell me they’ve never felt so at home, or when I can offer shelter to some stowaway who got kicked off a ship-- don’t tell my mother about that. She doesn’t know I’ve been doing that.” He was walking in circles now, completely unaware of it. “But you know what else she doesn’t know? That I’ve kept a cutlass in my room ever since she retired from the inn. That I practice with it when I’m not making beds or cleaning halls. I love the inn, Daichi, but I love the feeling of a ship rocking, and of salt and wind making my hair stand up funny.” He was leaning on the desk again, this time with his face smushed against the surface, and he mumbled, “God, I missed this.”

“Is this not just about saving people, then?”

“I wanna save people, too.”

“…Okay.”

Silence, and Suga turned to watch him with one open eye. “You’re not gonna tell me I can’t save everyone?”

“I’m not.”

“You’re not gonna keep trying to talk me out of this?”

“I want to.” Daichi sighed, and stood from his seat, if only to lift Suga’s head from the desk. “I also want to help. I… I do. I don’t like ignoring this, either. But I didn’t sign up for this, and
neither did any of my men. What am I to do, Suga? If they aren’t all willing to go along with this? Kick them off the Corvus and tell them to find another job?"

Suga pouted. “That’s why I was gonna stop trying to talk you into it… But, Daichi. I think most of them are more open to a rescue mission than you think. You may be being a paranoid old man about nothing.”

“If I’m an old man, you’re an old man.”

“Fair enough.” Suga was leaning into Daichi’s hands cupping his face before he knew it. “You should talk to your crew.”

“I will.”

“About the Kingston thing.”

“I got it, I know, I know.”

“But don’t do anything you think you’ll regret, either.”

“Easier said than done.”

The noise Suga made was a small, affirmative one. His eyes were closed and he was still leaning into Daichi’s touch.

The captain coughed, but Suga only peeked one eye open. “So. The thing,” Daichi said, awkwardly.

Suga was quiet.

“The thing you said we would address.”

“You mean the mouth-to-mouth action that should have happened years ago under less hostile circumstances?”

The one eye that was open seemed to be searching Daichi for his reaction. The heat building in the man’s face was becoming more obvious by the second.

He closed his eyes again. “I shouldn’t have without asking, though. If you’d waited this long, it was probably with reason. I should have respected that and waited.” Then, both eyes were open, and Suga was peeling himself from Daichi’s hands. He wasn’t even sure if the man realized how long he’d been cupping his face. “Unless it was a dumb reason.”

“Well what’s your dumb reason for prolonging it?”

Suga’s jaw dropped, and Daichi’s followed at the realization of his words. Then, Suga was grinning.

“Daichi.”

“Please don’t look at me like that.”

But Suga continued to look at him like that. Daichi swore he saw stars in his eyes, and that was just one more of several reasons he found it difficult to tear his gaze away. “So, I was right to do that, then?” Suga beamed.
“Well, I’m not sure about the timing of it all, for one thing.”

“What of the timing, Daichi?” Suga looked far too amused for his own good. It was unfair. It was unfair on a regular basis, but it was especially unfair when Daichi suddenly realized how long he’d gone on missing that blinding smile.

Okay, well, maybe it was only… a couple of weeks, but it was a couple of weeks of not knowing whether or not Koushi Sugawara was even alive, and he was covered in still-healing bruises, and god, that face was still so ungodly unfair.

“The timing,” Daichi said, with a clear of the throat. “Everything about it.”

“Horrible in that it was in front of your entire crew, and a ship of pirates, or in that the event we are discussing should have gone on for a longer period of time?”

Unfair.

Daichi spoke too quickly, without thinking. “Both of those things.”

“Both…”

“Mostly the second thing.”

“The pirates?”

“No, the other second thing.”

“The third thing.”

“Yes. That one.”

“Daichi.”

Daichi’s eyes were caught in that starry stare again, and he wanted to do a number of things in the midst of drowning in them. Melt right through the cracks of the ship’s old wooden floors. Reach across the desk and pull Suga’s face close for a proper re-do of the event in question. Jump out the window. Climb back through the window, because while Suga was absolutely unfair in everything about his existence, it would be more unfair to drown and not bathe in that unfairness after all this wait--

“Daichi, there’s a lot of space between you and me, with this desk in the way.”

Daichi stared down at said desk, and immediately felt like an idiot for doing so, because surely there was something he was supposed to be catching, here.

“Are you going to fix that, or am I going to have to climb over this thing? Because, this desk is really boring compared to your old one, and I feel like climbing on it is an insult to past fantasies.”

“For the love of fuck, Sugawara, what are you talking about, now?”

“It was a nice desk, Daichi.”

“I’m trying not to mourn it, but thank you for reminding me. More importantly, what do you mean fantasies?”

Suga opened his mouth. Closed it. Seemed to think better of what he was going to say.
Seemed to realize that whatever he was going to say was more embarrassing than he’d realized, and his face was slowly growing more pink in color. “Nothing,” he settled on.

“What did you want to do on that desk, Suga?”

Suga averted his eyes, this time, completely contradicting the confidence he put into his voice when he said, “Call me Koushi, and I could elaborate.”

“Hell,” Daichi said, choking the word like he’d been deprived of water for months.

“I’m not one of your crewmates, you know. I’ve known you way longer than any of them, at that. It was cute when you were trying to be all official when we were kids, after the Spectre thing, but now, Daichi, really?”

“Everyone else calls you by your last name….”

“Customers at the inn do. It’s a weird thing that came with a weird family business. You’re not a customer, though, Daichi.”

Daichi made a strangled sort of sound.

“Oh my god.”

“Don’t ‘oh my god’ me like you aren’t doing this on purpose.” Daichi pushed himself back from the desk. “I’m lost. I’m so lost, here. We were talking about kissing, I thought, but you apparently want to do lewd things on my furniture.” Lewd things that involved him, he was pretty sure, though it was entirely possible Suga just really liked cherry wood, he supposed.

“I didn’t say I planned to do more than kiss on the furniture!”


“This is frustrating, Daichi. Am I climbing over your sorry replacement desk and ignoring merpeople wars for a few distracting moments, or not?”

“If I can’t stop you from getting involved in merpeople wars, I certainly can’t stop you from climbing over my desk.”

“That…” Suga chuckled, “That doesn’t make much sense, Daichi.”

Still, he approached the desk, fingers tracing it as he stepped around its side, and Daichi decided that it was a very good thing he hadn’t melted or jumped out the window.

Koutarou's arms were much thicker than Kuroo's.

Kenma didn't find this observation particularly important, but it was difficult to dismiss with one of the sailor's hands pressed against Kenma's back, keeping the merman from sliding off his shoulder.

Kuroo was grinning at him as he dangled over Koutarou's back. Kenma crossed his arms, if
only to keep from accidental and unwanted butt-brushes.

Koutarou was jabbering something with Keiji beside him, paying Kenma about as much mind as a sack of potatoes. At least he was a sack of potatoes he was mostly careful with.

"...so there's nothing to worry about! The wind and waves are dead still out there. The Corvus ain't goin' anywhere, so might as well get a swim outta it, right?"

Keiji didn't respond. Not vocally, anyway. Kenma felt Koutarou nudge or gently bop the other's arm, though.

"If we ain't gettin' anywhere out here, neither is the Black Swan!" Koutarou declared. "...Unless their ship has some kinda speedy magic thing. Do they have a speedy magic thing?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Spinel seemed unharmed, though."

"Spi-wha?"

"Eita's dragon."

Koutarou made a grumbly sound and hoisted Kenma from slipping down his shoulder. "We'll keep someone armed on deck, then."

"My 'relaxing' in the water comes with the risk of cannon fire, then?"

"Keiji!" Koutarou whined his name.

Kenma couldn't tell if Kuroo's amused look was at their banter or his own apparent suffering.

They made it up the stairs to the deck, where Shouyou and Tobio were still helping to clean the mess from the previous scuffle. Saeko was at the helm, arguing something with her brother. Through the glare of the sun, Kenma could vaguely make out Taketora's hair from up at the crow's nest.

The rowboat was already prepped for them. Near it, two figures were leaning over the rail, engaged in quiet conversation.

"Are you two bonding?" Koutarou shouted from across the deck. Kenma was pretty sure he heard Keiji snort.

The two looked over their shoulders, Hajime with a glower and Tooru with his tongue stuck out at them.

“More like scolding.” Tooru offered Hajime the mildest look of offense, which he then turned onto Kuroo. “Tetsu, you're second in command, yes? Tell your gunman to find someone else to lecture.”

Hajime turned back to the water, leaning his chin in his hand and mumbling into it. “Says the guy who insists on scolding me every time I confuse a will-o'-wisp with a hinkypunk.”

Tooru scoffed. “Those are the same thing.”

Without a word of response, Hajime gestured a hand to Tooru, his point proven.
Tooru rolled his eyes. “He’s complaining about my singing. *Again*. Jiji, defend me.”

“I’d rather not.”

“What kind of friend are you?” Tooru whined, and Keiji stepped up to the edge beside him to peer into the rowboat.

“I think your singing was great!”

At Koutarou’s words, Tooru absolutely lit up, and hopped around to his side. “*Someone* appreciates good help.”

“You practically sang yourself off the edge of the ship,” Hajime scolded. “Those pirates would’ve caught your passed out body in a fishing net and hauled you up as their replacement Suga.”

“If you’re expecting Tooru to thank you,” Keiji said, distractedly darting to catch Kenma by the hands when it looked like he was about to slip, “You’re going to have to demand it, Hajime.”

Both siren and gunner mouthed a “What?” in his direction, but Keiji didn’t seem to be paying them much mind. Kenma assured Keiji that he was (probably) fine, so that he would let go of his hands. It didn’t stop the other from watching him carefully as Koutarou lowered him into the rowboat.

Kenma’s tail hit the wood with a wet, fishy squish, and he righted himself into a more comfortable position. The closest thing to sitting a merman could accomplish. He then proceeded to glare at the boat with the realization that the last time he’d been in one of these tiny things, the following events hadn’t been all that great.

Koutarou plopped himself down on the bench across from him, then Kuroo beside him, where his fin allowed for space. Both men turned to Keiji with expectant looks, then.

He frowned at them all, and did nothing more than that for a long moment. Eventually, however, he caved, and was crawling into the rowboat beside Koutarou.

Kuroo locked gazes with Tooru and raised a brow. “Ain’t you coming, too?”

The siren stared down into the lack of waves, then turned his nose up to the sky. “I’ll sit this one out.”

“But you’re a fish, too.”

Putting aside the being called simply ‘fish,’ Keiji spoke for the too-stubborn one. “Tooru is complicated,” was his defense, to which Tooru huffed.

And, to which, Kuroo said, “No, I know *that*, but why isn’t he in the boat?”

Hajime tried and failed to suppress his laugh.

The siren shot the group a collective glare, but his eyes found themselves settling on Kenma alone when he caught his knowing gaze. Another huff, and he turned away from them all completely, with a wave over his shoulder. “Don’t waste your time up here. There’s no telling when the winds will pick up again.”

With that advice taken to heart, they lowered the boat into the water. Even just the slosh of
the liquid against the boat was so very welcome. And, yet, it made him so very uneasy, just the same.

“Shouldn’t you be more excited to get outta that dumb box?” Koutarou folded his arms and grinned at Kenma. “The ocean’s like… the biggest box of water out there! You don’t look so impressed, though.”

“Koutarou, us being impressed by the ocean is the equivalent of you being impressed by a pile of dirt.” Keiji was already stripping free of his shirt.

“No,” Koutarou said, defensively. Then he paused for too long a moment to appreciate the little specks of scales revealed by the lack of shirt. “…It’s more like me being impressed by a dining hall full of beef and pork after nothing but bread crumbs for weeks.”

“Or soup,” Keiji mumbled, though Koutarou didn’t seem to catch it.

Kenma wasn’t sure how soup was relevant, and he didn’t care much to find out, either. He leaned over the edge of the boat, staring down into the blue-green waters. A dive without a pirate invasion or sea monster or traumatic loss of loved ones would be nice, for a change.

“You okay there?” Kuroo’s voice broke through whatever second thoughts Kenma was having. “You need help getting out?”

Maybe, but that wasn’t the problem. Tooru was right, they had no idea when the winds would pick up again, and the moment they did, it would probably be wisest to hurry back aboard the Corvus and set sail for wherever they were going next. Kenma wasn’t sure they knew where that was. No one had told him otherwise, and he had a feeling this crew just sort of went with the flow when it came to magical nonsense that humans weren’t typically accustomed to. But, then, he was also tucked away in a barrel or a crate during most of their nonsense, so what did he know, really?

“Tail,” he said, finally pulling himself up over the edge of the boat. Kuroo complied, helping to guide Kenma’s fin over the side as the merman flopped into the icy-cold sea.

The chill, the vast, open space… it was all just as welcoming and refreshing as the last time. At least, for a moment, before his eyes were popping open, and Kenma was scanning the area for immediate threats. He hadn’t been able to see the Catfish Calamity back then, though, with their weird, invisible magic trick.

He made it out of that alive, though. Even with two pirate attacks since he’d wound up with these sailors, there hadn’t been any losses at all, so… he supposed he could relax, a little.

He probably wasn’t being nearly as paranoid as Keiji, in any case.

A splash sounded the other’s arrival. Kenma watched the trail of bubbles that arced in Keiji’s path. When his dive slowed to a calmer float in the open space, they found each other’s gazes. Keiji didn’t keep still for too long, though. He huffed bubbles out his nose, then dove deeper. Kenma covered his ears, just in case there was a chance at hearing the sickening crackling sounds of the shift.

Just thinking about that alone made this a whole lot less relaxing. Different communities were different, he knew that. Petal Reef had never been big on encouraging the act of shifting. Eventide was, apparently, very, very different in that aspect.

He thought he heard a pained sort of grunt, and he pressed his hands harder to his ears with a disgusted sound of his own.
He only peeked his eyes open when he felt a disturbance in the water beside him. Keiji was in sight again, now without a hint of legs, and a flowing, black and white tail. Kenma wasn’t sure what to make of Keiji’s tail, or what he had expected. It suited him. He didn’t want to use the word ‘dazzling,’ but it was the first to come to mind. The sort of thing people back home would have ogled over, even with its lack of bright colors. The remnants of red lingering from the shift didn’t count.

He lowered his hands from his ears, watching as Keiji gave his tail little flicks, readjusting himself to the body part.

“Seems like a pain.”

Keiji offered his fin a displeased look. “This wasn’t nearly as bad as the last time I shifted.”

“If you’re going to do it at all, it’s supposed to be frequently, so you stay used to it.”

Keiji mouthed something like “I know,” with a guilty look about him. He shook his fin a few more times, then turned to Kenma, who hadn’t realized he’d been idly floating upside down until Keiji was staring at him. Keiji didn’t seem to care. “You’ve never shifted, have you?”

Kenma shook his head.

“Don’t you think it’d be better than being holed up in a crate?”

“Seems like a pain,” he said, again.

That, apparently, wasn’t worth arguing. Keiji just nodded, and pulled his attention to the surface above. Someone was poking at the water and leaning close enough to risk falling in. Koutarou, probably.

Or, definitely, judging by the way Keiji sunk himself a little deeper in response.

“You’re the one he saw, right?”

Keiji turned to him again, but Kenma averted his gaze.

“...When we were going to Owl Roost. He came shouting into Shouyou’s cabin about a black and white mermaid.”

“That would have been me, yes…”

Kenma tried to think of a way to properly pose the question, but that in itself was exhausting, and he was here to relax. Maybe he’d be better tuning Keiji out and floating mindlessly for a while, instead of asking questions.

But, Keiji seemed to have figured out the question, anyhow.

“You want to know why I was so close to the surface.”

Kenma nodded.

“I’d gone to another island. There’s this huge library, and... I don’t know, I was hoping to find something useful. I didn’t know Eventide was hiring outside help, at the time. Pirates weren’t that sort of concern, as long as my scales were hidden, but I was still trying to hide from people from home.” He started swimming small, slow circles. Hovering still seemed like a waste, now that they were down there. “On the way back, I saw other merfolk. I don’t even know who they
were, or where they were from, but I just sort of… panicked, I guess? There was no need to go all the way to the surface to avoid them. I could have gone literally anywhere else. The thought occurred by the time I was already up there.”

“And Koutarou saw you.”

“Thankfully, it was only him.”

Kenma glanced up, and was pretty sure he caught a glimpse of Koutarou’s face submerged in the water for a moment, then it was pulled back out.

“And now he’s being nosy,” Keiji sighed, stilling in his circle.

“He was really excited about seeing a mermaid, when he saw you.”

Keiji offered a confused stare.

“I am one. I’m aware. Maybe he doesn’t like yellow.”

“Kuroo seems to.”

Kenma scrunched his face at nothing in particular.

He scrunched it even more when Koutarou’s voice came loud and distorted by the water, yelling, “You guys aren’t dead down there right?!?”

Kenma could vaguely make out the shadow of Kuroo shoving him in the boat.

They exchanged looks, but Keiji shook his head and curled into his tail. “I want to make sure there’s no blood left before I go up there.”

Kenma nodded, then flicked his fin and swam back to the surface. His head came up from the water with a small, barely noticeable splish, and he was greeted by Koutarou’s over-excited face, which quickly turned to something less thrilled.

*Sorry to disappoint,* Kenma had thought to say, but instead, he re-submerged and made to the other end of the rowboat, where Kuroo had sat down on the floor to lounge back against the bench.

“Welcome back,” he said with a lazy grin. “Where’s Mr. Paranoid?”

“Being paranoid,” Kenma supplied. His hair was sticking to his face in wet clumps, but he didn’t make any effort to fix it, aside from a few strands that had found themselves directly in his eyes.

“No scary sea monsters down there?”

Kenma did not look impressed.

“No. Okay, that wasn’t supposed to be a joke, I was legitimately…” He sighed, and sat up a little straighter. “You’d obviously be more freaked out if there were. Right. Sorry. How are you feeling?”

“You sound more stressed than me, right now.”

Kuroo leaned an elbow on the edge. “Nah. Just tired. Pirates and shit.” He pointed a thumb from Koutarou to himself. “We should probably be up there, helping Daichi. He’s probably doing a
ton of important captainy stuff that we should be helping with.” He blew a bit of hair away from his face, not that it seemed to do much to fix its usual mess. “This is about as much a break for us as it is for you two.”

“I’m not sure if ‘break’ is the right word, in my case. I’m just getting a stretch in.”

“That was the second pirate attack since you’ve been here!” Koutarou chimed in. He was still desperately peering through the water. “It’s definitely a break!”

Kenma folded his arms over the edge to rest his chin on. “Yes, and I was cooped up in a crate through the whole thing.”

Kuroo winced. “Yikes. Shit, I’m sorry. You were probably so scared, just hearing all that chaos, not knowing what was going on.”

“I can’t pretend I was surprised to hear any chaos, with you guys. It was less scary than being up there with swords and gunfire in my face, I suppose.”

The whole boat gave a sudden violent rock as Koutarou scrambled to the far end. The far end wasn’t very far, being that it was a small boat, but that was all the more reason for his enthusiastic near-leap to be completely unnecessary. He leaned far over the edge, grinning at the sight of Keiji popping up from beneath the surface. His curls had disappeared, wet hair falling flat against his head. He wiped a hand beneath his eye, smearing away some of the makeup that coated the patch of scales.

“How do you feel?!” Koutarou shouted, even though Keiji wasn’t quite far enough from the boat to warrant a raised voice.

It was cute, though, that he was still concerned when it had seemed like he only wanted to take a peek at Keiji’s shifted form all this time.

“I feel fine, Koutarou,” Keiji assured him.

Koutarou nodded way too many times. It was clear to everyone that he wanted to ask the other oh-so-important thing on his mind.

Keiji’s response to said unspoken question was a sigh and a flick of the tail that just barely revealed the tips of the fin over the water.

Kenma was quite certain Koutarou was close to falling off the edge of their boat.

“Hey, owl-head, could you keep the fish fetish somewhere where it won’t tip our boat over? Doc says I still shouldn’t get my shoulder too wet.”

Kuroo absolutely heard Kuroo’s comment, because his face scrunched in something unpleasant, and he backflipped his way beneath the surface.

And, that may have been a mistake, because his tail splashed up with the motion, and just about every inch of black and white could be seen in a short moment that had Koutarou’s hand slipping from the edge. He caught himself before he could fall, but the boat shook again, and Kuroo kicked him in the leg.

“Calm the fuck down. You’re acting like you’ve just stepped into your first brothel.”

“Quit making it sound like a gross thing, Kuroo!”
“You sure make it seem like a gross thing.”

“It’s just pretty!” Koutarou whined, only before whining Keiji’s name, all long and drawn out in hopes of getting the merman to resurface again.

When he did, it was with a tiny glare, and Kenma couldn’t even tell if it was directed at Koutarou or Kuroo.

“It’s not a fetish thing!” Koutarou announced, and then the glare was definitely settled on him. Kuroo’s following bark of laughter was so loud that Kenma nearly slipped from the edge, himself.

“If it was,” Koutarou continued, with a finger pointed at Kenma, “I’d just be ogling at Kenma, instead!”

“Gross,” Kenma supplied, and made a point to duck the end of his own tail beneath the water.

“But I’m not!” he added, for extra defense. “Can I please just see it? I don’t even have to touch it or anything! Unless you’d be okay with that, but I don’t wanna make it weird, I just wanna see what you look like! Because your tail looks like it’s probably really pretty! And, I mean, it’s gotta be, ‘cause you’re really pretty, and--”

His face was incredibly red. Keiji’s was getting there, too. Kenma felt very strongly compelled to dive back down just to avoid being a part of whatever this was.

Keiji’s tail flicked above the water again, just as he was turning his face away from them all.

“Is he teasing you?” Kuroo asked, just as Koutarou was whispering a very desperate sort of curse.

Keiji offered a flat look and a splash as he hid his fin again. “I can hear you.”

“But you totally are.” Kuroo pointed to where his tail had just been visible.

“You’re all making this experience much less relaxing than it’s supposed to be. Perhaps you should go back to the ship, or-- Koutarou, why are you stripping your shirt?”

Koutarou’s shirt found itself in the pile along with Keiji’s clothes.

“I’m gonna go for a swim!” he announced, then sat himself down to peel off his shoes. “S’that okay? I mean, you don’t own the ocean or anything. And I promise I won’t touch!”

“That is not the point.”

He dropped one shoe in the boat with a heavy clop. “Then I can’t swim?”

“Are you asking me if you’re capable?” The last word barely made it out before Keiji was pressing his lips together tight, like parting them again would release more words that could be misconstrued as teasing. Because that’s what all of this was. Several misunderstandings, because that was just the norm with this ship. There couldn’t possibly be anything else to the dusting of pink over Keiji’s cheeks. That was just sunburn. Obviously.

Kenma was not convinced, nor did he think anyone else was.

Another plop of a shoe in the boat, and then a splash as Koutarou ditched the thing in favor of a nicer view. Kuroo clutched the side of the boat as it shook from the dive.
“Fuck, he’s really doing it,” he said. “That’s not a thing, is it? For you guys to be all private over your tails? It’s not like how being naked is to us humans, right? Should I stop him?”

“Do you plan to stop him?”

Kuroo watched Koutarou swim further from the boat. “If I had to, I guess.”

Kenma shook his head. “I think it’s fine.”

“I guess. Keiji’s kinda blunt when he isn’t being a secretive shit. He’d say something.”

“You would know better than me.”

“Me? I don’t really talk to him that much, though— oh.” Kuroo frowned down at Kenma, who was just gazing off at the outstretch of sea with an expression he couldn’t quite make out. “We haven’t forgotten, you know. We’re still going to find you a new home. Somehow.”

He only got a small grunt of a response.

“Unless you… don’t want that?”

Kenma’s face scrunched in thought. “It’s just… frustrating, here.”

“Well, yeah. I know the crate was a step up, but you’re still kinda….” Kuroo didn’t want to use the word ‘trapped,’ but it seemed so fitting, even if Kenma could leave any time he asked.

“It feels wrong, if I stay without doing anything to help. You guys keep running into this crazy stuff, but I’m just hiding away in a crate or barrel.”

“Kenma, you can’t help that.” Kuroo paused, then looked out after Keiji. “…Right? Can all of you guys shift, or…?”

Kenma groaned, and sunk into the water a little more, head beginning to slip from his arms. “It’s dangerous. I’d rather not mess with the risks.”

“Risks like what? Stubborn silence and a knack for attracting danger?”

“I may already be subject to those symptoms.”

Kuroo stared at him for such a long period of silence that Kenma had to look up to see what had distracted him. He was staring at him, though. He looked shocked, almost, but then he grinned, almost concerningly wide.

“Was that a joke, Kenma?”

Kenma pouted. “It wasn’t.”

“It was.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You’re a liar. Just like you lied about the tallies.”

Kenma just stared up at him.

“You said you were keeping tally between me and Shorty. You lied, I checked the barrel
when we took it outta there. I didn’t find a single mark inside that thing.”

The look Kenma gave Kuroo was the sort of look typically reserved for when someone asks how you’re doing, when you clearly have a very large knife stuck in your chest. Minus the pain. The judgement was about the same, though.

“You checked.”

Kuroo watched at him, as if he didn’t understand how utterly ridiculous of a thing that was to do.

“What did you think I would be marking it with? My teeth?”

“I don’t know! Tooru has claws or something, right?”

“Tooru is a siren, and I was keeping mental count.”

“Count of what, though?”

Kenma shrugged.

“Don’t give me that.” Despite his words, Kuroo looked all too amused. “What risks are you talking about, then?”

Kenma hummed, and turned to where Keiji and Koutarou were swimming. The latter seemed to be respecting the other’s space pretty well. “I don’t know if they want you guys to know.”

“Fucking hell, more secrets.”

“Not island-threatening or pirate-luring secrets,” Kenma huffed. “Just. Merfolk things. I have a feeling he doesn’t want to cause extra worry.”

“No shit. Shifting has really bad side effects then, huh?”

Kenma gave a slow nod, eyes still lingering on the two out there. “But… even if I don’t shift, and it’s hard to think of much I can do to help when I’m imobile up there…” He lowered his head, just a little, so that his still-drying hair fell in his face in small clumps. “…I’d still like to stay.”

Kuroo swallowed. “Even with the crate?”

Another pout. “...If I can keep doing this, the crate isn’t so bad.” He tapped his finger along the boat’s edge. “Maybe I can help with scouting threats from below. Maybe Keiji could teach me to fight, while he’s still here.”

“That’s… asking a bit much of you, I think.”

“I said the crate isn’t so bad, but I want to do something, Kuroo.”

“You want to do something that requires effort, and isn’t checkers?”

“Out of obligation and… morals, or something, I guess. I’d much rather just play checkers, though.”

Kuroo snorted. “Hell, I think we all would.”

“We should… do that. Later.”
Kuroo smiled something soft and content. He mumbled a “Yeah,” as Kenma idly moved his fin back and forth in the water. After some comfortable silence, he uttered the merman’s name to regain his attention. When Kenma looked back up at him, he pushed a bit of damp hair from his face. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Kenma watched him, searched him with wide eyes. With a small hum of acknowledgement, he thought, he did feel a little better, after all.

While Keiji and Kenma relaxed in the water, flicking their fins and floating about, Tooru remained up on the deck, watching the two while fighting back some ugly part of him that could only think petty, jealous thoughts.

"Doc’s freaking out, you know."

Hajime had been gone for a short while, now. Something about making sure the cannons were still in good condition after the whole pirate ordeal or... whatever. Tooru had only been half-listening when he’d left.

Now, he was back, and setting down a mug on the railing beside Tooru.

It was a large mug. Not your average drinking glass. Still, the contents just looked like plain old water.

"He says if you’re not going to get in the water, you should at least drink it."

Tooru continued to watch Keiji, who had settled into what looked like comfortable conversation with Koutarou. "Hmm... Playing errand boy, now?"

Hajime tried to steady himself with a long breath, the type that made everything in his posture scream, ‘Don’t kill the fish. Don’t kill the fish.’

Thankfully, Tooru still wasn’t looking at him, but that might not have made much of a difference.

“Your doctor is sweet,” Tooru said, and he sounded genuine, “but he should spend less time pretending he knows how to fix us, and more on patching up the rest of you.”

“Keiji passed out on us, once. Before he blessed us with your presence.” Hajime was interrupted by a snort of laughter. He brushed it off. “He seemed better after the doctor had him drink some.”

Words aside, Tooru still picked up the cup. “Keiji passed out because he’d been avoiding the water, I’d assume. I’m not. I was just in it, fighting off a pest and his dragon pet. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“I just saved your unconscious ass from falling off the ship,” Hajime reminded him. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

Tooru waved him off. “In any case, my situation’s a bit different from his, and I’d thank you
not to pry so much.” When he tilted his head, finally taking his attention from those actually in the water, he was eyeing Hajime with the most unpleasant of smirks. “Not that you worrying yourself over me isn’t endearing!”

Hajime shoved the cup and splashed sea water in Tooru’s face.

Tooru made an offended noise, partially at the spillage, and partially at the rim of the cup hitting his face. When he put the thing back down, there was a small red line across his nose from it. “I take it back. You’re far from endearing.”

“And you’re far from charming, which I’m pretty sure sirens are supposed to be good at.”

“I’m as charming as it gets!” The red mark on his face, and the way he kept scrunching his nose to get rid of the sensation really helped his case. “You just have horrible judgement.”

“Yeah, well, I did save you, after all.”

Tooru turned his nose up to the sky. “I suppose we’re even, then.”

Hajime leaned over the rail, setting his sights on those below. “I’m pretty sure you still owe us for the whole ‘accidentally luring you into a serpent’ thing.”

Tooru, pulled back from the ship’s side. “You come out here, offer me a drink, throw it in my face, and then you bring that up again?” It was worth noting, that Hajime had, in fact, willingly used the word ‘accidentally’ in his statement this time. That acknowledgement, even if still a bit off, was something, but still frustrating nonetheless. “When are you going to drop that? Would you like me to bow down and kiss your filthy boots while apologizing? Do I need to kill the next sea monster that comes after this ship with my own, bare hands to settle this? Fine. Next oversized snake that shows itself? Wham--!” He slammed the mug down on the rail, only for the handle to slip from his fingers. It fell off the side, and he was sure he heard a thunk, and someone yell, but he didn’t dare to look down. He just stared at some vague point past Hajime’s shoulder with wide, maybe guilty eyes.

Hajime, however, was back to staring down at the others, looking about as horrified as Tooru up until they heard Kuroo’s shout of “That coulda killed me!”

He slumped against the rail, failing to hide a snicker in his arms. Tooru leaned over the edge, and met Kuroo’s glare with an innocent wave of the hand.

“And you’re still trying to kill us.”

“You’re laughing, though.”

Hajime pointed downward, to where the cup had fallen beside the rowboat. Kenma was out of sight now, presumably to retrieve it. “It that how you’re gonna fight off the monsters? Should I just ditch the cannons?”

“Yes.” Tooru set his palms on the rail and splayed his fingers. He tilted his head back and rocked on his toes. “No more cannons. No more guns. It’s just cups and swords, from here on out.”

Hajime let the arm he’d been pointing with dangle alongside the ship. “Actual swords, or your weird water things?”

Tooru laughed, loud and short. “I can’t expect you humans to be good with those. You can keep your boring, metal swords.”
“Sounds like a pretty shitty defense, to me. What do we do the next time pirates attack? Throw our swords at them?”

“No. Are you even paying attention? You throw the cups.”

Hajime shifted the leg that had been bitten during the scuffle. Beneath his pant leg, he was covered in bandages. “Should’ve been throwing cups at that hyena thing.”

“Crocotta,” Torru corrected.

“Whatever.” Hajime rested his chin on his arm, while he idly tapped against the side of the ship. “Those things aren’t poisonous or something weird, are they? I’d like to keep my leg.”

Tooru hummed. “You won’t notice any signs right away. If you get the wound wet for too long, it might start to turn purple, though. Might start bubbling a little. Then we’ll have to cut it off.”

Whether the look Hajime gave him then was legitimate fear or not, he wasn’t sure, but it was hard to keep a straight face, himself. He turned his head away before Hajime kicked him with the side of his good leg.

“Don’t make shit up. I’m being serious.”

“I know more about these things than you. Maybe you’ll be losing that leg, soon. You don’t know. This is the reason I’m having to tutor you, after all.”

Hajime’s tapping ceased, and his eyes drifted away from Tooru. “Speaking of that…. His expression became complicated. “Maybe we should direct those lessons at explaining the weird shit they’ve got on the Black Swan. I assume it’s more than just the croc… the hyena thing.”

“Crocotta.” He was getting tired of correcting him. “It’s not a hyena. It’s its own species, and they can imitate other people’s voices, but that one didn’t seem to be doing much of it when we saw it. More intent on tearing up some limbs, I guess.” He turned away, linking his hands behind his back as he started back toward his room. “And more on that during tonight’s lesson! I’ll get you caught up on redcaps, too. They’re vile. That’ll be a fun one to explain.”

Vaguely, he heard Hajime ask himself, quietly, “Aren’t those just mushrooms?”

He had so much to learn. He’d also likely be ditching Tooru again to tend to his precious weapons, or whatever it was he did on this ship, and Tooru wasn’t so keen on sticking around to watch those who could enjoy their fins splash about below any longer. The longer he watched, the more his own legs ached, and the louder the ocean’s sounds crashed against his ears.

Not that curling up in a bed he couldn’t sleep on was a much better alternative.

It’d do for now, though.

“It’s so long.”

With a flat look at Koutarou’s remark, Keiji dipped the translucent end of his tail back beneath the water.
Koutarou’s initial response to that was disappointment. They were finally in a situation where he could see Keiji’s tail, without said merman having to be a paranoid butt over whether or not someone else spotted it. And, yet, there he was, hiding the damned thing beneath the water again.

The follow up response was something like a gasp, of which he did a very good job of keeping in his head, and not out his mouth. Were merpeople sensitive about their tail lengths? Was it like humans being sensitive about the length of their dicks?

No, no, it was probably more like being sensitive over one’s height. That would make more sense. He kind of pointed out the length in a way that maybe sounded like he was comparing Keiji’s tail to a human cock, though, so maybe him hiding it was a little more understandable, then.

“I just meant it’s really pretty!” he amended. “It’s like, uh… a really long, sparkly ribbon, or something.” He’d actually told him that already, about five times since he got in the water. He also noted that his tail only sparkled when the sun hit it just right, but it was still pretty even when it wasn’t sparkly!

He’d also referred to Keiji’s pelvic fins as ‘the soft mini tails,’ and was corrected on his word choice for that, too. He would still call them that in his head, though. He hadn’t touched them, so he didn’t know if they were actually soft, or if a fishy thing could be soft in general, but they just looked so… delicate, compared to the rest of him.

God, he was beautiful.

And he needed to stop looking, before Keiji could decide to risk a runin with those Eventide guys by diving to the nearest mer-town in order to avoid Koutarou’s constant staring.

_But he was so pretty._

He realized, then, that maybe he should have at least said _something_ amongst all of the staring. Keiji had already ducked his head beneath the water, either to further enjoy the sea while he could, or to escape Koutarou’s gaze. Probably that second thing. He was actually pretty sure it was that second thing.

He glanced over at the boat, where Kenma was floating near the side, talking to Kuroo. Kenma wasn’t even hiding himself. Kenma, of all people. Yet, Keiji was, because Koutarou was being insensitive about mermaid tails or some shit he didn’t even understand.

“Is that not okay?!” he blurted, once Keiji had resurfaced. The merman retreated in the water, just slightly, his eyes a tiny bit wider than usual at the outburst. “Is it not okay to talk about tail lengths or something? I said it looked like a ribbon. Is that some kinda mermaid insult? Shit, Keiji, I’m sorry--”

_Breathe,_” Keiji interrupted. When Koutarou snapped his mouth shut, Keiji relaxed a bit again, allowing the end of his tail to make ripples along the surface. “You haven’t offended me. You’re just…”

Koutarou looked like he was holding his breath. The exact opposite of what Keiji had told him to do.

“...I don’t quite understand, I suppose. You’ve seen Kenma’s tail plenty of times. You saw Tooru’s, during that fiasco that had Hajime so worked up, didn’t you? There’s no need for you to stare mine down the way you are.”

Koutarou was breathing again, if only because breathing was a thing you had to do in order to
talk. “I barely saw Tooru’s! It was storming! Have you ever seen the ocean during a bad storm?”
The flat look told him that Keiji had, in fact, witnessed the ocean in such a state. “He was really far away, and we were kinda trying to keep everyone alive, y’know? Hajime got a better look. He was the one shooting at him.”

“And now they’ve saved each other’s lives.”

“They’re growing up fast. I’m proud of them.” Koutarou nodded, and strained to see what was maybe the start of a smile forcing Keiji’s lips. “But, from what I could tell, he looked all… spiky? Maybe prickly is a better word. He kinda looked like one of those poisonous fuckers your dad tells you not to touch when you go swimming out to the reef for the first time. Then you prick yourself on some weird spiny plant thing instead, and he says ‘I warned you, Koutarou,’ but he’s still wrong, because you didn’t touch the damned fish at all.”

“...Lion fish,” Keiji said after some quiet pause, something akin to confusion contorting his face. “And that was incredibly specific.”

“Lion fish!” Koutarou smacked a fist to his palm, splashing water everywhere. “Yeah! He looks kinda like one, doesn’t he?”

Keiji nodded. “I can see it.” His attention wandered up toward the ship, where said siren and Hajime had been hanging around earlier. Neither were within sight, now.

“You’re not all spiky, though. You’re all… flowy and graceful. Kenma’s just kinda yellow.”

That was too much to react to. The compliments were a bit… much. He wound up offering another flat stare at the latter remark, instead of focusing on those. “I’m sure there are descriptors other than ‘kinda yellow’ you could use.”

“You’re not yellow, is my point!”

“Is yellow… an insult?”

“No.” Koutarou groaned, long and frustrated. “I’m just saying that you guys are all different! Just because I’ve seen Kenma’s tail a bunch of times, doesn’t mean I’ve fulfilled some sorta merman-staring quota for life!”

Keiji didn’t sound shocked or offended when he said, simply, “Wow.”

Koutarou’s face went red. “I could’ve worded that better.”

Keiji nodded, as if in understanding. “Just how many tails do you need to ogle to meet this quota?”

“There’s no quota!”

“I see. Your thirst for merman rear has no limitations, then.”

The red had reached Koutarou’s ears. He gaped at Keiji, who looked all too calm, given the subject matter. Maybe it was a ruse?

Was he fucking with him?

“It’s not-- I wouldn’t-- I don’t stare at Kenma!”

“Ah. Yellow isn’t your type, I gather.” The end of his tail flicked at the surface.
“Keiji!” This was outright unfair. “You’re making it sound weird!”

“The term ‘mermaid-staring quota’ is actually what made this weird. Those were your words, not mine.” His tail went under, and he dipped his head back, wetting his hair.

He’d done that a few times. Maybe merpeople didn’t like having dry hair? Koutarou took note of that. What use he had for such information, he could consider at another time.

Koutarou swallowed. “Look, I’ve got legs, okay? Tails are just really fascinating when you’ve only had legs your whole life! Most humans would be amazed by you guys! So, even if I did stare at Kenma, which I don’t, it wouldn’t be weird. Maybe kinda an invasion of personal space, but still not weird! I think. I mean, that’s why I’m trying to give you space, even though you keep flipping your tail at me, and it’s really hard not to stare when you do that, ‘cause I don’t think you’re actually teasing me, but it kinda feels like it?”

Keiji said nothing, but he went very still, his head still tilted with his hair in the water, staring wide-eyed at the clouds.

Koutarou needed to fill that silence, and more word-vomit seemed like the easiest way to do so. Leaving might have been a better option. He could swim back to the boat.

He did not swim back to the boat.

“It’s just. You’re different? Not because you’re not yellow or spiky, but even just… your face? Wait, no, that sounds weird too.”

“Koutarou.”

“Not that your face isn’t nice! It is!”

“Koutarou.”

“Or, you know, not that Tooru’s or Kenma’s faces aren’t nice, either--”

“Koutarou.”

“It’s just ‘cause it’s you, okay?”

He hadn’t noticed when Keiji had started looking at him again, with his wet hair flat against his head, and his eyes wide and focused on Koutarou with something unexpected.

Koutarou realized there was nothing he could say at this point that wouldn’t sound weird.

“So, okay, there’s the whole mysterious angle, right? You’re all secretive, and I really wanted to know more about you because of that, I guess? But now I know more about you, but it’s… not enough? Tooru’s been pretty sneaky with all this too, and Kenma’s really quiet, so maybe that’s not it?” He was very purposely avoiding Keiji’s gaze. Considering diving underwater himself, even. “You seemed all cold, but you keep trying to save people and shit, and that’s really amazing?” He needed to stop wording his compliments like questions. “And even though you were all cold, I felt like I could trust you really fast? And then you turn out to be some kinda secret hero! So I was right to trust you!”

“Stop.”

Koutarou dared to look back at him. Keiji did not look pleased by his praise.
“You’ve conjured some imaginary version of me, and you need to stop.”

“Don’t give me that ‘I’m selfish’ crap, Keiji! You’re trying to stop an island from being destroyed!” Koutarou paddled a little closer, but still kept a decent amount of space between them. “When you were explaining all that stuff to us, back in the kitchen? You said you didn’t want to feel guilty for letting anything happen. A selfish person wouldn’t worry about shit like that!”

“There are different ways to be selfish.” Despite the space between them, Keiji widened it by pushing back through the water.

“Yeah, well, trying to save the world sounds pretty heroic, to me.”

“‘The world’ is exaggerating the situation.”

“Saving some cities, then! That’s still a big deal!” Koutarou ran his hands through his wet, but still messy hair. “Even if you think it’s selfish, you’re trying to do something good, Keiji. You’re actually this really cool, really good guy, and I don’t get why you don’t get that? I wouldn’t like seeing you so much if you were half the ass you think you are.”

Keiji opened his mouth about halfway, and Koutarou couldn’t tell if he still looked angry, or just confused. His cheeks looked a little pinkish, but he might have been imagining that.

Koutarou felt confused, too. Partly in trying to figure out what Keiji was thinking, and partly in trying to make sense of the words that just dropped out his own stupid mouth.

He liked seeing Keiji.

He didn’t just like the rare sighting of some pretty fishy parts. He just. Liked seeing him.

Fuck.

His ears were all red again, and his thoughts were very quickly becoming more and more jumbled.

His saving grace came in the form of Ryuu’s voice from the Corvus. The sailor was leaning over the side of the ship, hands cupped around his mouth as he yelled, “Hey, fishheads! The wind’s startin’ to pick up! Get up here or we’re sailin’ off without ya!”

Koutarou had never swam so fast.

Not that it mattered. There was only one boat, and they’d have to share it to get back on the ship. At the very least, Koutarou had a bit of breathing time while Keiji stayed back to regain his legs. That was, when Kuroo wasn’t pestering him about why he seemed so worked up.

When Keiji returned, it was with two legs and sea-soaked pants, of which he drew up toward himself and very pointedly did not say another word to Koutarou. The two sat in silence as the rowboat was lifted up to the deck. In turn, Kuroo and Kenma also sat in silence. Kuroo was doing a terrible job in trying not to stare too much. Kenma was a little less nosy, but anyone with a pair of eyes could see that something had happened.

Koutarou didn’t know if that something was a good or bad something. It didn’t feel like either. It just felt confusing, and Keiji looking confused about it all just confused him more.

They climbed out from the boat, and Koutarou hoisted Kenma back over his shoulder as before. Ther merman didn’t look too bothered at this point, as if being lifted around by sailors was
becoming a normal routine.

When he braved a glance at Keiji, he was already being whisked away by Suga, who was whispering something to Keiji with an air of urgency. Koutarou was equal parts curious and worried, but the worry had less to do with Suga, and more with other… stuff.

Maybe what he said didn’t sound as bad as he thought. Maybe Keiji wouldn’t think it was flirting. ‘Cause it wasn’t flirting. Right? He wasn’t flirting. He was just telling Keiji he was really cool. And also that he liked his face and liked seeing him and--

“Fuck!” he said, out loud this time, when they were already halfway down the stairs, and came very close to forgetting that the thing on his shoulder was not a thing at all, and was actually one very much alive Kenma. He would have thrown him on the ground in frustration, otherwise.

He couldn’t see the wide-eyed look on Kenma’s face, but he did vaguely hear Kuroo scolding him for almost dropping the merman down the stairs.

He kept from dropping him on the way down, thankfully, but the embarrassing string of words he’d already managed today continued to run on repeat in the back of his mind.

He’d have to face Keiji about this again sooner or later.

It was a good thing Eita knew better than to believe the horrible things people said about the Pirate King Wakatoshi, because he’d otherwise have to be very worried about the consequences of letting his dragon take up the entirety of said captain’s bathtub.

Spinel’s face was completely submerged, huffing out occasional bubbles, and thumping his big, scaly tail on the floor. He was getting water everywhere, but Wakatoshi was probably just as guilty of doing so on a regular basis, Eita figured, so he didn’t feel too guilty.

“Can’t that thing stay in the water?” Kenjirou was sitting on the edge of that damned magic table again, exactly where he shouldn’t have been sitting. With the setting of the sun, he’d returned to his human form, ruining all of the hard work Eita had put into wrapping up his injured wing.

Now, he just had one wounded arm, of which Alisa had already bandaged up nicely for him. They’d have to fix him up again come morning, when he changed back. It made Eita a little thankful that he at least had some control over his shifting, even if he didn’t want to keep legs over his tail, at the moment.

Eita looked over his dragon from where he sat at the edge of Wakatoshi’s bed. Spinel seemed content to stay where he was, for the time being. “He needs rest too. I’m not gonna make him follow the ship around the whole time.”

Kenjirou played with a feather that stuck out from his bandages, only offering the dragon a short glance from the corners of his eyes. “Doesn’t he usually just rest somewhere below and come when you whistle?”

“I want him close, for now.”

“Because you went and got your legs fucked over?”
Eita huffed out his nose. His pants were rolled up now, exposing the fresh bandages that had since replaced the sloppy ones Alisa had given him before he went after the Corvus. “I can still walk. I can still fight. They’re burned, not broken.”

Kenjirou idly swung his legs from the table. Eita wished he wouldn’t. The damned bird had minimal sense of shame, with clothing that may as well have been nothing but sheer drapery, leaving little it left to the imagination. Swans didn’t have any need for clothing, and Eita understood that, to an extent. He didn’t exactly feel a need to cover anything as a merman, but human anatomy was so weird that he still went out of his way to wear pants when he shifted.

Granted, Kenjirou was wearing clothes, and had made a point to ask for them when they’d arrived before. He just didn’t wear… much.

“You can still fight, yet Wakatoshi insists you stay here.”

“Wakatoshi’s being stupidly protective,” Eita grumbled. “What’s the point in being known as the most ruthless pirates among the islands if you’re gonna run away every time that table points to danger?”

Kenjirou leaned back to peer at the spinning piece of orichalcum. “The world’s full of danger. Don’t you think it’s strange that it would only point to one place at a time?” He twisted, pulling one leg up onto the table’s edge while he leaned out over the shallow dip of water. He gently plucked the metal from the surface and turned it in his hand. “Even if it’s just focused on the islands in this region, don’t you think this thing would be zipping all over the map?” He set it back down over another spot, near Morrigan’s Coast, but it only spun its way back to Ironfall.

Eita stretched his legs out from the bed and spread his toes apart. He thought he heard a thump from somewhere in the room, but ignored it. “How would I know?” he asked, choosing to focus on his toes instead of Kenjirou and his nearly see-through clothes. “I just figured it pointed to whatever place was the most dangerous at the moment. Where’d he even get this thing?”

“Some shady witch. I don’t know. I think Satori talked him into it.” Kenjirou flicked the orichalcum, and watched it wiggle out of place, then adjust itself. He continued to do this as he spoke. “We thought it was like that, too. Just pointing to whatever place is the most dangerous. Sometimes I wonder if it’s specific to its owner, though.”

Eita kept flexing his toes, but he offered Kenjirou a curious, maybe confused, look. “Do you mean whoever made the thing, or its current owner?”

“Current,” Kenjirou said, then elaborated, “Wakatoshi. Or maybe it’s the Black Swan, since it’s the thing’s… home, or something. It just seems very specific to places that could affect us, past events considered.”

“Past events,” Eita repeated, squinting a little at him, now. He’d assumed they’d just always avoided whatever the map pointed to, given how strongly Wakatoshi seemed to feel about it.

Kenjirou dismissed his curiosity with a flat, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Eita noted to ask Satori about it later. Or maybe Wakatoshi. Wakatoshi wouldn’t over embellish the details.

“Those are just my theories, anyway. If it’s true, the fact that all of this Eventide stuff affects Wakatoshi could still mean that your friends from there are still in danger.”

“Great.” Eita went back to glaring at his feet. “And you guys are too afraid to help me go after
them.”

“Ruthless doesn’t have to mean suicidal.”

Eita huffed. He could vaguely hear Kenji in the back of his head, chewing him out for never catching up like he’d promised. He’d been hearing that little voice a lot since making it to the ship, to begin with, and kept searching out little distractions to make it go away. As much as he wanted to dive into the sea and head for Ironfall, there was still some reasonable part of him that knew Wakatoshi was right, that he’d probably just get his already-injured self killed.

This conversation was not a good distraction, however. It just made him more antsy.

A new distraction came in the form of another thump, this one louder than the others, and certainly not from his dragon. It was loud enough that he finally realized it hadn’t come from below, but from the side of the ship.

Kenjirou was already staring out the window, brows furrowed. He gave the orichalcum one last flick before hopping down from the table, and Eita averted his eyes when the thin fabric whooshed with Kenjirou’s movements.

He stepped up to the glass and squinted out into the darkness. There was a pause, then he was looking back at Spinel in the bathtub, then he was staring outside, again.

Eita frowned and slipped off from the bed, only wincing slightly as he made his way over to Kenjirou’s side.

“I really hope you were expecting company,” Kenjirou said. Whatever he was looking at, he didn’t seem too happy about it.

At first, Eita couldn’t quite make it out himself. The water rippled unnaturally in the moonlight, so he knew something was down there. It wasn’t until he saw two small, yellow dots of light appear that he put together what that something was.

Yuuji stood with his arms crossed, a glowing crystal dangling against scaly skin from each wrist. Below him, a golden dragon, much longer than Spinel, supported him as he peered up through their window.

Eita cursed, and soon he was leaving Wakatoshi’s room, ignoring a snide comment from Kenjirou regarding his legs.

Once up on deck, he found some rope and secured it tight before tossing it over the edge. He leaned over it, then, and whistled, catching the dragon’s attention before he even got Yuuji’s.

It zigged and zagged through the water with almost snake-like movements. It was a different breed than his own or Kenji’s, with a lack of legs, but greater speed. When Yuuji ascended the rope, the dragon remained submerged, moving in slow circles beside the ship as it awaited its rider’s return.

“The fuck’r you doin’ here?” came Yuuji’s greeting. It was one that halted his ascent, while he quirked a brow up at Eita.

He, very briefly, considered undoing the rope. “I’m quarantined. What’s your excuse?”

“What? You catch something?”
“Yeah. The whole ship is diseased now. Still wanna come up here?” His tone gave away his sarcasm, and Yuuji rolled his eyes and pulled himself up the rest of the way.

He shook some excess water out of his hair, but his clothes were, again, completely soaked. Water pooled around his feet on the deck, and Eita wondered if he’d ridden his dragon like that, or if he’d changed on its back while waiting for someone to notice his arrival.

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You spend a weird amount of time hanging out with these freaks.” Yuuji wrung the ends of his sleeves out. “Was I interruptin’ a date or somethin’?”

“What?”

Yuuji blinked at him, almost innocently. “Is that… not what you do when you come here?”

It was dark, so there was a chance that maybe Yuuji didn’t see the slight trace of red crossing Eita’s nose and cheeks. But, then, Yuuji was of the sea, too, and their night vision was a little better than any human’s.

“I come here because I’m playing messenger for us!”

“Dude, you come here even when we don’t need anything from Waka. No one’s buying that.” Yuuji shook his legs, next, but it didn’t do much to spare his pants the extra weight. “I ain’t gonna judge you, if it’s Waka, y’know. I might if it’s that redcap guy, though.”

“Oh my god.”

“If it’s not a date-thing, is it a sex-thing? Eh, whatever. This works out great!” Yuuji grinned. “I can just ask you for help, instead of going right to Waka. I never really know how to talk to that guy. Weren’t exactly close, back home.” He slung a drenched arm around Eita’s shoulders. “So, Eita, my man, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“Make it quick, because I’ve got one for you, too.”

Yuuji’s grin fell impressively fast.

“You like action more than I do. It’ll probably be fun, for you,” Eita suggested. Yuuji didn’t seem to be falling for it. Understandably so. “Just tell me what you want first, Yuuji.”

“So, I just got back from visiting my witchy friends at Owl Roost. We were thinkin’ more of those magic papers would be handy, right?” He started to awkwardly tug and fish around in the bag hanging by his side, all while still leaving his arm over Eita’s shoulders. He jostled him a bit as he continued rambling. “They gave me a couple, but they want something specific before I can have any more. And, you said it yourself, we want more.”

Eita pried his arm off. “I’m not getting you another damned knife.”

“It’s not a knife this time!” Yuuji pulled out a small, glass bottle with a slip of paper inside, much like the one he wore around his neck. “I do need your help again, though. You can keep this one as compensation.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“I know. You’re welcome,” Yuuji said as he shoved the bottle into Eita’s hands. “I’ve only got two more. I figure we can use one for contact with Akira.”
Eita turned the bottle over in his palm. It was shorter than his thumb, but the glass seemed thick enough that it wouldn’t shatter too easily. The paper inside was curled up like a tiny scroll. He had no idea how he was even supposed to use it. “So, to get more of these, you need what, now?”

Yuuji slung his arm over Eita’s shoulders again, earning a small grunt in response. “Witchy friend wants something from this here ship. They know we’ve got ties with Waka’s and his crew, but I don’t really know how to negotiate with the guy, y’know? Like I said, was never really close with him. You, on the other hand…."

“What do you need, Yuuji?”

“Two things.” He wiggled his index and middle finger beside Eita’s face. “One, some feathers. They say there’s a swan maiden on this ship. S’that true?”

Eita snorted. “Don’t let him hear you calling him that.”

“Okay, a swan… guy? Person? Whatever. I just need some damned feathers from them. Probably for a potion or something. Didn’t ask for details. They gave me a bag, so we just gotta fill that up with ‘em.”

“And you’re going to get them back to Owl Roost, how? Under water?”

Yuuji opened his mouth, like he maybe had a response at the ready, but it was quickly abandoned in favor of an, “Oh, fuck. Maybe he used some kind waterproof magic on the bag he gave me… he had to’ve known.”

Eita tapped his foot. “The second thing, then?”

“Something about wanting a stolen table back.”

Eita stopped tapping his foot about as quickly as he’d started. His head went blank, for a moment, while he stared off at no particular spot among the waters.

“I dunno how I’m gonna get a table back there. They said that would take a lot of negotiating. What are the odds of you getting Waka to politely sail on over to Owl Roost and deliver some kinda magic table thing?”

“…Zero,” Eita replied, but not without a long, contemplative pause. He was fairly certain that Wakatoshī only had one magical table on board, and he was also fairly certain that he was not going to give it up, no matter how much Eita pleaded. “Was the table stolen from your friend?”

Yuuji nodded, then stopped and furrowed his brows. “He said it was stolen. I assumed that meant from him.”

“You’re phenomenal at gathering information, you know that?”

“Excuse me? Who found the siren and Keiji first?” He released Eita, again, to point at himself with two thumbs and a proud grin. “What’s important is, they want this dumb table. Or, if we could even just get Waka to met up with them and bargain something out, that’d probably work, too.”

“This is all for those dumb papers. Aren’t the feathers enough?”

“If I just bring the feathers, I get like… a handful of papers. If they get the table, I get as many as I want.” Yuuji clenched his fists and drew them close to himself with a thrilled, wide-eyed
look. “Eita, we could have an army at our disposal with this shit. Forget possessing a few toys. I wanna try this out on big ol’ statues. Suits of armor. *Think about it.*”

Eita thought about it, but he also thought about the bloody results that could come of Yuuji doing so much as taking a step near that table. He winced. Actually, physically, winced.

Yuuji didn’t notice. He turned toward the ocean and threw his arms out to his sides. “All this bribing pirates and all those other weirdos? Fuck ‘em. We could just send an entire army after that big, dumb land snake and get Gandril that heart without even having to leave Eventide!”

“The pirates and other weirdos you’ve bribed won’t be too happy if you turn your backs on them, now.”

Eita stiffened at the new voice. Without looking, he could feel Kenjirou’s glare on him.

Yuuji looked over his shoulder, then turned around to fully face the swan-person. He studied the feathers poking out from Kenjirou’s skin, beneath the thin, draping clothes. He seemed disappointed. Eita was sure he’d much rather have gotten to see a pretty bird-girl, instead.

Kenjirou paid his staring no mind. “Sorry for interrupting.” He didn’t sound sorry. “I only caught the last bit of your conversation. You want to do what with our table, now?”


Rather than answering, Yuuji looked to Eita. A silent cry for help.

Now both Yuuji and Kenjirou were staring at him, and jumping off the side of the ship would have seemed to appealing if Wakatoshi hadn’t already been warning him about his damned legs.

Well, the ship wasn’t without hiding places, he still had other options….

Yuuji’s gaze continued to flicker from him to Kenjirou, and back.

Maybe hiding wasn’t going to help.

“Give us a moment,” Eita mumbled. He abandoned Kenjirou’s side for all of half a second, before the swan tugged him back by the wrist.

Eita met his gaze without any intent in doing so. The last thing he wanted right now was Kenjirou’s judgemental glare, all full of suspicion and something threatening.

“Wakatoshi trusts you, you know,” he said, voice low. Definitely threatening. “More than some of his own crew. You know that, right?”

Hell, now Eita was getting pissed. He didn’t need anyone to tell him that, and he sure as hell didn’t need anyone questioning his loyalty to his friends.

He yanked his arm from Kenjirou’s hold, and dragged Yuuji a ways away from the swan. “I’ll see what I can do, alright?” he said, once he felt the swan was out of earshot. “I think you should leave and let me handle this, though.” He held up the bottle, pinched between his fingers. “We can keep in touch with these things, right? So, you can move on with what I need you to do, and I’ll try to get something worked out from here.”

Yuuji groaned. “The hell d’you want me to do?”

“I’m supposed to be with Kenji right now, on Ironfall, but I can’t be there, because I’m stuck
here.” He tugged at his pant leg, revealing the bandages beneath. “You want to give one of those slips to Akira anyway, right? Find him and Kenji. Make sure they’re alright.”

Yuují waved his hands and shook his head. “Slow down! The hell are you talkin’ about? Why wouldn’t they be alright?” He looked down at the bandages, then. “The hell happened to you?”

Eita bit his lip. “That’s… also part of what I need you to do. I’ve got a message for you to deliver.”

“Sounds boring.”

“There might be some dangerous shit going down on that island. It might not be so boring.” That seemed to be the right choice of words, because Yuují’s eyes lit up, just a little. He’d be less enthused when he realized it meant more legs, less fin, but Eita would take the moment while he could. “So, first, I need you to tell them Ironfall might still be in danger. Second…” He let his pant leg drop over the burns. “Let them know we found Keiji and the siren.”

Yuují’s face really lit up, then. “Are you guys tailing ‘em?!” he asked, too loudly.

Eita hushed him, but nodded. “I’ll work on the table thing. Somehow. I’m pretty sure I can get the feathers, at least.” If Kenjirou didn’t snap his hands off for trying. “I’ll keep you updated, but making sure Akira and Kenji are off that island first is kinda…”

“Priority. I got it, I got it.” Yuují nodded, and started searching for something in his bag again. He withdrew a much smaller bag, with deep purple, glass beads hanging from each end of the drawstring. It was a little longer than Eita’s hand, and Yuují shoved it into his free hand. “For the feathers.”

Eita took the bag, and after a bit more explaining of the situation, including the fact that he really had no idea where on the island Kenji was, Yuují dove back into the sea, leaving Eita alone with Kenjirou’s ever unkind presence.

His unkindness often felt like more of a show than anything. Right now, however, it felt very much genuine.

“I’m not gonna do anything to betray Wakatoshi,” he tried assuring him. All that he got was a noncommittal grunt in response, so he continued, “I’m going to tell him what’s going on, and I don’t expect him to actually agree to anything, so… I don’t know. I’ll worry about it later. You didn’t mention that table was stolen, though.”

“I told you I was fuzzy on the details. Complain to Satori about it.”

Another question he’d probably save for Wakatoshi, instead.

He watched out over the water, as Yuují and his dragon vanished from sight beneath the surface. “So… what are the odds of you lending me a few of your feathers?”

“Fuck off, Eita.”

It was a very good thing that Hajime had good reflexes, or else the sudden swinging open of
his cabin door might have resulted in a bit more blood than he’d have liked.

He just about slammed the knife he’d been sharpening down on his nightstand, which he knew was a better reaction than accidentally cutting his hand, but wasn’t sure if it was a better or worse decision as opposed to throwing the thing at the goddamned musical salmon standing in his doorway.

Tooru had changed clothes since he’d seen him earlier, with a low cut, draping shirt that probably didn’t aggravate the mess of cuts among his bandaged chest quite as much as the last. He was still dripping with silver things, though, and Hajime had to wonder just how much jewelry this shithead brought onto their ship with him.

He’d washed off most of the makeup, and the bangle-like necklaces he usually covered his neck with had been replaced with a few thin chains, instead. Stripes of white and reddish brown scales crawled up his throat and the sides of his face. He could make them out in spots along his shoulders and arms, too.

He stood with one of those arms keeping the door open, and a twist in his face like he’d smelled something rotten.

“How are we going to Hollow Fang?” Tooru snapped. He was storming into the room, letting the door close behind him, despite clearly being uninvited.

“Why are you in my room?” Hajime asked, when maybe he should have been more concerned about why Daichi was apparently close to death or… whatever.

“Why are you in my room?” Tooru snapped. He was storming into the room, letting the door close behind him, despite clearly being uninvited.

“Why are you in my room?” Hajime repeated. He knew they had plans to meet up tonight, but the whole routine of Tooru schooling him on magic and monsters while simultaneously picking fun at his artwork usually took place in Tooru’s room. Not his. He’d never let the siren set foot in here.

And, yet, he wasn’t exactly doing much to throw him out, now.

“Did you know that’s where we’re headed now?” Tooru continued to ignore his question. He likely figured his ranting alone was enough of an answer. “Your pretty bruised-up ex-pirate friend told Jiji that we’ve already set course. Do you know a single thing about that island, Hajimean?”

“I know that I have a knife and pretty good aim, which can be put to good use if you don’t drop that nickname soon.” He’d, honestly, rather be called something silly like Jiji. He didn’t want to admit that it was mostly because of the grammatical inconsistencies of “mean” having a very different pronunciation than the “me” in his name. If he was going to be referred to by a bad pun, it should at least have been a bad pun that made sense.

And here this snot was picking on him for uncreative insults such as “fish breath.”

“Will you stop nitpicking? This is serious.” Tooru marched on past him and glared out through the porthole. “Hollow Fang is a nothing but a giant hotspot for total lowlifes. Why would we go there, when we’re trying to avoid pirates?”

His hands were on his hips, and Hajime wasn’t sure if he was being overdramatic, or if he thought glaring out the window enough would somehow change their course.

“I mean… we’re trying to avoid a very specific group of pirates, and I don’t think they’ll be checking there, first.” Hajime watched as Tooru began tapping his fingers against his hips. “I trust
Daichi’s judgement. And Suga’s, I guess.” As much as the whole ‘ex-pirate’ thing was still throwing him off. “Are you sure you’re not just annoyed because you hate pirates?”

Tooru huffed, loud and unnecessary. “I can handle myself just fine. Trash holes like Hollow Fang are ideal for picking up gossip and all that. It’s perfect for me.” He waved a hand, then pointed it between Hajime’s eyes. “It’s you weak, brainless humans I’m worried about.”

He could point out, again, that he saved Tooru from falling off the ship. Instead, he pushed Tooru’s hand away from his face. “Is there something on this island we should know about? Some deep, dark mermaid secret that could potentially kill us all?”

“No,” Tooru said, defensively, then he took a moment to really mull it over. He said, again, with a bit more confidence, “No. It’s all just generic pirate-related bad news, is all.” He sighed, then sat himself down on the bed, with as much space between himself and Hajime as possible. “We’ll have to be careful everywhere we go, since we don’t know who’s working for Eventide and who isn’t. On top of that, this is the sort of place you have to be careful of on a daily basis, so it’s kind of…” he trailed off into a grumpy groan of sorts.

“We’ll be fine. You said yourself that it’s a good place for gathering information, right? Maybe this is what we need.”

Tooru grumbled something, then flopped onto his back. “I know a few places I could try to get some dirt from. There’s a library, too. A big one. We can find some reliable sources for you to replace your laughable fantasy books with.”

“We could find a library on any island.”

“No this one. It’s got private floors, inaccessible to humans.” He turned his head, and he looked annoyingly smug. “Unless they’ve got an escort.”

Apprehension flashed across Hajime’s features, but Tooru was still smirking away.

“It’s not dangerous,” Tooru insisted. “But you’ll be able to find a lot more reliable literature there than anywhere else. Enough magic types gather there that I could probably dig up some useful info, too.”

“So, you’re not angry about going to Hollow Fang, then,” Hajime said, more an observation than a question.

*That* managed to wipe Tooru’s smirk away. He stuck his tongue out, then turned to the ceiling. “I absolutely *am*. I’m just finding a silver lining, is all.”

Silver. Of course.

Hajime tugged the top drawer of his nightstand and pulled out the ink pen and his journal. He flipped it open to his most recent page. This one had a poorly drawn depiction of Eita’s dragon. He hadn’t exactly gotten a close enough look when it was slamming against their ship, so it was even less detailed than his other drawings, which wasn’t saying… a lot.

This page had yet to be vandalized by anyone else’s handwriting, though. Prior pages had side notes from Kuroo (of which Hajime had yet to catch him in the act of adding), and scribbles and corrections that Tooru had added since they’d started these sessions of theirs.

“What was that thing you called ‘vile’ earlier today?” he asked, flipping to the next, empty page.
Tooru’s eyes were closed when Hajime looked down at him. He hadn’t been paying so much attention before, maybe because his scales were visible and distracting, but the bags beneath Tooru’s eyes were heavy. They had been, for a while, but now that he wasn’t wearing makeup to hide everything, they were dark, and all the more noticeable.

He hummed out a lazy response. “Redcaps.”

“And that’s… not a mushroom, then?”

Tooru snorted, and Hajime tried not to regret asking. “You’re not wrong. That is a kind of mushroom. You could probably call that redheaded freak a fungus, too.”

Hajime recalled the crazed pirate with the wild hair shouting from the Black Swan. The same that Suga had been fighting, and that Eita had dove off into the sea with.

“They’re bloodthirsty. You know what a vampire is, right?”

“Everyone fucking knows about vampires,” Hajime mumbled as he dipped the pen into some ink and tried to sketch out the pirate’s form from memory.

“Imagine that, but instead of drinking it, they just… have to keep it on their heads.”

Hajime’s pen stilled, and he leveled him with a dumb stare and a flat, “What?”

Tooru opened his eyes and scrunched his nose. “It’s sort of like… they have to absorb it. Through their head.” He seemed to realize how silly the explanation sounded, once the words were out. “They have to keep it wet, usually. A lot of stories say they have to wear hats, and if the hat dries out, they die.” He waved that idea away with a lazy hand. “That’s another twisted misconception. Some of them wear headgear to keep the blood from drying out, and they might soak that in it, but it’s not like the hat itself is the problem. It’s more like… they get really sick if they aren’t soaking it in. Through their head. Then they die.”

“Vampires sound cooler.”

“Redcaps are vicious.” He closed his eyes again and yawned. “Not that vampires aren’t. A vampire could resort to just biting, though, ye’know? A redcap? They’ll tear you apart, whether it’s necessary or not. I’m pretty sure Wakatoshi’s friend isn’t a full blooded one, though. A pure blood would probably be more… well, they’d have less control, I guess.”

Hajime considered the absolutely sadistic vibes he got off of Satori, from how little he saw of him. The face he gave his drawing of him was even less flattering than his portrayals of Tooru. “That guy isn’t crazy enough, is what you’re telling me?”

“Frightening, I know. The good news is, it’s not like you need anything special to fight him off with. He’d die the same ways any human would. You just have to worry about the whole, ye’know, scary bloodthirst thing.”

“What about the croc…” Hajime’s face pinched. Luckily, he could stop himself before accidentally saying the word ‘crocodile.’ “Crocotta?”

Tooru offered a small applause, and Hajime smacked his hands.

“You said they can imitate voices,” Hajime recalled. “So, what, it’s just some talking dog… thing? Are hyenas dogs?”
“It’s not a hyena,” Tooru groaned. “And I don’t think they get along with dogs.” He squinted up at the ceiling. “Or maybe they eat them?”

“You’re an incredible teacher.”

Tooru waved a hand. “Okay, so I need a refresher on some subjects. It’s not a dog, or a hyena, though. It’s just… it’s a crocotta.”

“Are hyenas dogs, though?” Hajime had wound up with a scribble of a creature somewhere between a hyena and a wolf, with the words ‘dog?’ and ‘not a hyena (probably)’ written on either side of it. “Maybe it’s more of a feline thing…”

“I’m glad we’re focusing on all the right things. All of Kingston’s really gonna be thanking us when you use your vast dog versus cat knowledge to protect it from-- ack!”

Hajime went back to drawing only after whacking Tooru in the arm with the journal.

Really, it was more of another pat than a whack, but still, Tooru dramatically threw up his arms to shield himself. “You would assault your injured guest?” he mock-cried, as if Hajime had never legitimately tried to shoot him before.

“I didn’t hit your chest.” Hajime added a few more notes, regarding the supposed ability to copy voices, despite that not being a thing he’d witnessed at all during their fight. Maybe the Black Swan’s crocotta’s powers just didn’t work. Too bad he couldn’t say the same for Tooru’s.

He chuckled to himself at that thought. He didn’t mean it. Tooru’s singing had helped them, so he had to give him some credit.

But, then that thought was less amusing, because being impressed by or grateful to the siren was the last thing he expected, or wanted, to feel.

He cleared his throat when he registered that Tooru was staring at him. “So, uh, what other things do they have on that ship?”

Tooru was quiet, for a moment, while he compiled a mental list. He told Hajime some things he already knew. He knew that Eita was a merman, and thanks to Keiji’s stories, and he knew the same of Wakatoshi. Then there was the swan, who changed forms with the time of day. He wasn’t a familiar, like Asahi, but Tooru couldn’t supply much more information than that.

He said he swore there had been a naga with them, at some point, but he didn’t recall seeing him during their attack on the Corvus. The guy that had been fighting alongside the crocotta was, presumably, human, and as for the rest of the crew… well, even Tooru didn’t unlimited information on them, it seemed. He’d only seen so many of them, in the past, when Wakatoshi had asked for his cooperation (an event of which Tooru recounted with an outright terrifying sneer).

Hajime wound up with a few extra pages, with vague notes and doodles of swans and such. He didn’t bother Tooru with questions about nagas, because Kuroo had already added in enough about those already.

He tapped his pen against the paper while he racked his mind for more information he might need. He found himself staring at the flickering of the lantern light against his paper, and the tapping eventually came to a stop. He looked out the porthole, where all he could see was the black of night and the specks of starlight here and there among it.

He was contemplating turning in, when he saw Tooru staring out the window as well, with the
exhausted look of someone who’d given up after a night of tossing and turning in search of sleep.

Except, there was never any tossing or turning, and when Tooru caught his gaze, his face lit back up with that annoying, mocking smile of his.

“Don’t stare too long, Hajime. Everyone would laugh at you if you fell for a siren’s charm now.”

He couldn’t even be thankful that he hadn’t used that godawful nickname. “Should I add something about weird sleep habits to the siren entry?” he asked, already turning the page.

Tooru scoffed and turned onto his side, away from him. “That’s not a siren trait,” he grumbled.

“Is it just a ‘I’m dumb and won’t go in the water’ trait?”

He’d expected a sharp glare over the shoulder, at the very least, but he got nothing. Tooru just went strangely, uncomfortably quiet.

Hajime didn’t know how to react to that. He hadn’t once, not once, gotten away with a single jab at Tooru since they’d met in Kingston. Now, when he didn’t get so much as a bratty huff, he began to wonder if the guy was even still breathing.

Because Keiji would absolutely believe him if he walked out of his room with the siren’s corpse and said, ‘I don’t know, he just did this, all on his own,’ after a history of pointing guns at the guy’s head.

“I told you not to pry,” Tooru said, like he was trying to snap at him, but it just came out forced and tired. Still, Hajime was relieved to find that he wasn’t, in fact, dead.

He’d worry about that change of heart at a later time. “Right. Yeah. Sure.”

More quiet, and then Tooru was pushing himself up from the bed. The first few steps were wobbly, and they reminded Hajime of when Keiji had passed out on them.

Tooru, however, did not collapse like Keiji had. He found his footing before he made it to the door, regaining a straight back and confidence that Hajime was beginning to question.

“Put the books down and go to sleep, Mr. Sailor. You’ll have plenty of studying to do once we make it to Hollow Fang,” Tooru sang.

He sang, and Hajime didn’t want to punch him for it.

Satori was certain his head was going to split in two.

He kept gripping at it. Kept running his fingers through his hair, bloodied by freshly caught fish, because his wounded crewmates refused to let him anywhere near them while Alisa treated their injuries.

That was fair. On a better day, he’d have been more understanding, but right now, his head was pounding, and the fish just wasn’t cutting it. Thoughts of ‘more, more, more,’ echoed through
his head, loud enough that he could have sworn some long lost twin of himself was hiding behind the walls, taunting him out loud with the promise of blood.

That imaginary, long lost twin also, on occasion, muttered things like ‘Should’ve just offed Koushi.’ ‘Why were you playing like a child when you could have been tearing his throat open?’

He always had a colorful imagination. It got worse when he was like this, though.

Eita had helped, but the merman’s dried-up blood was no longer serving to do anything but dirty his— well, Wakatoshi’s bandana. He didn’t understand. He made it by on wounded and dead animals all the time. Having a bloodied cloth on his head should have soothed him for far longer than this.

The only difference he could pinpoint was the siren’s song.

He was quiet certain that some stupid song shouldn’t have had any effect on his bloodlust, but Tooru’s ear-grating wailing did make his head throb like crazy, and the rest of the crew had attested to experiencing the same thing. It was just that, being a redcap, Satori’s go-to solution to head pains was to drench himself in blood as soon as possible.

And, when that didn’t work, the logical reasoning of ‘Maybe this isn’t the problem’ was usually replaced by ‘Needs more blood, probably.’

He was rubbing his temples when he found Wakatoshi up on deck, at the helm. With everyone else suffering their own injuries, it was probably for the best that Wakatoshi was steering the ship.

Satori draped himself over the railing in front of the wheel, still working his temples and still groaning at the sensation. “Lucky you’re immune to that guy’s voice,” he said, almost bitterly.

“You seemed to have recovered, earlier.” If Wakatoshi spared him a glance, he didn’t notice.

“I thought the merman blood was helping. ‘Guess it wasn’t long term.’” At least their talking wasn’t making things worse. If anything, Wakatoshi’s voice was a little comforting amongst all the throbbing. “Poor Eita. He was so generous this time, too.” He ran his hands back from his temples through his bloodied hair. Most of him wanted to let Eita rest, but a small part of him wanted to see how much begging it would take to get a little more blood out of him.

“If you are still uncomfortable, perhaps you should return to bed.”

Satori rolled against the rail, leaning his back against it while he tilted his head “If only!” he cried, putting his hands up in the air all dramatically. “It’s tough to think of rest when I can’t stop thinking of how much more sound my sleep would be if I only had some nice, rich, warm blood to soak my aching head in!”

Wakatoshi was stoic as ever as he looked out to the moon reflecting in the ocean. “When I experience discomfort, I find that soaking in sea water helps.”

Satori dropped his hands with a snort. “Thanks, I’ll remember that when I grow gills.” He lifted his head just enough to find Wakatoshi watching him. One brow was very close to being raised, he thought.

“I do not believe redcaps are capable of developing such an organ.”

Satori tipped his head back again, and mouthed a silent, “God, you’re perfect,” and then
pulled himself away from the railing. He stumbled to Wakatoshi’s side, threw an arm over his shoulder, and eyed the shimmering, rippling circle that was the moon’s reflection. “A joke, Waka. Helps to distract from the cravings.”

Wakatoshi nodded, if only in semi-understanding. He knew what Satori meant by ‘cravings,’ but his humor was still often lost on him, despite how long they’d known each other.

Satori waved a hand as he changed the subject. “Jokes aside, what’s our game plan, now that Mr. Not-So-Neutral will just induce your entire crew with, well…” Satori rolled his eyes back and made a pained gurgling noise that didn’t quite fit the imagery one would associate with a bad headache.

“The plan remains the same. We are to track down their ship once again, but this time we will be better prepared.” While barely noticeable, Wakatoshi might have almost been glaring as he said, “We will have to deal with the siren, first and foremost.”

“Ain’t you worried about whatever’s going down at Ironfall?” Satori yawned and slumped against Wakatoshi a little.

“The threat at Ironfall is an unknown one. Keiji Akaashi, however, is an absolute obstacle to our goal.”

Satori nodded against him. The slight pressure of Wakatoshi’s shoulder against his head felt kind of nice.

“The siren stands in the way of getting to him, however. It was foolish, not to take precautions in advance, when Eita had warned us that he may have been with them from the start. I may have been blinded by the urgency of it all. Or perhaps we put too much faith in our hostage.”

“Y’know a good way to take care of the siren problem?” Satori’s tongue lolled out his mouth, and he brought two fingers to it with a snipping motion.

Wakatoshi gave a short, considering grunt at that. “That would be effective, but it will be difficult for us to manage to immobilize him long enough to follow through.”

Satori dropped his hand and barked out a laugh. “Okay, okay. Pour boiling hot water down his throat, then.”

“I fail to see how that would be any less challenging. If our problem is already that he’s moving, then it risks one of us being splashed by boiling water.”

“Hm. Yeah. Less blood that way, too. Was a bad idea from the start.” Satori tapped his chin. “Stitching his lips together would be a big hassle, too…”

“I am surprised you have not simply suggested to kill him.”

“I’m trying to be creative here, Wakatoshi.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Y’think earplugs would be enough to help us out?”

Wakatoshi nodded, short and slow. “Judging by the humans among them that were still mobile during the song, I would say so. I cannot guarantee any less of a headache, however.”
“Can’t be any worse than this!” Satori went limp against Wakatoshi, barely hanging on by the arm over his shoulder, while he swung the other at his side like a ragdoll. “It’s so bad, Waka. If we pass any other sad saps before we find your little traitor, you’ll have to let me stir up a little trouble.”

“We cannot afford more distractions,” Wakatoshi said. “We will have to find sustenance for you that will not require making a stop.”

“In the ocean, Waka?” He continued fidgeting and slumping against him, but Wakatoshi didn’t seem fazed. “Look, if this gets any worse, I can’t promise I won’t go for the first person on this ship who drops a little blood.”

“Give it time,” Wakatoshi suggested, calm as ever. “The cravings may subside once the effects of the siren’s song wear off.”

“And if they don’t?” Satori mumbled, with his face smushed pathetically against Wakatoshi’s side, somewhere under his armpit.

Wakatoshi was quiet for a moment as he pondered this. “I suppose I will offer some of my own, should the symptoms persist.”

“Blood?” Satori’s voice raised a pitch and he bumped his head against the underside of his captain’s arm. “Your blood? Really?” His eyes were nearly sparkling with excitement, despite all the head pains, as he righted himself.

When Wakatoshi offered a short “Hm” sound as confirmation, Satori was back to throwing himself around the man’s shoulders.

“You are too good for this world, d’ya know that, Wakatoshi?” He graced the merman with a big kiss on the cheek, complete with a loud “Mwah” as thanks. “My captain. So brave. So strong. So thoughtful. I’m almost healed, already!”

“Ah. In that case, I suppose I may retract my offer.”

“No,” Satori hissed. He peeled himself from Wakatoshi’s side, finally allowing the man to steer the ship in peace. “I mean, if you’re willing. I think Eita will throw me overboard if I ask him one more time, since he’s already injured and all, so….”

“We will see,” Wakatoshi supplied, and Satori would take that. “In the meantime, please, try to rest.”

Satori wasn’t one to disobey his captain’s orders. He looked out to the moon and its reflection, and wondered if they’d be any closer to the Corvus come morning. Stopping to tend to those who had been wounded was a minor hiccup, and one that Wakatoshi would not have risked if he hadn’t been absolutely concerned for his crew’s safety.

Still, it was minor, and he couldn’t imagine Daichi’s ship getting too much further from them. But, they had no way of tracking which way they went, with Eita and Kenjirou both stuck onboard. Wakatoshi could certainly ride Spinel out, but if he wouldn’t abandon them during that fight, he certainly wasn’t about to now.

All they could really do was guess.
I draw a lot of concept art and rant about junk for this fic on my tumblr, so feel free to check that out! I'd love to chat about this AU and anything Haikyuu!! related while you're there, too!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!