Summary

The ASL pirates are used to being accused of crimes they didn't commit. But when they're accused of destroying a small village in the New World, it sends them hurtling toward a deadly confrontation with the strongest man in the world, Whitebeard. The results are not what they were expecting.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The sun was just finishing its slow ascent into the cloudless sky as Jinbei neared his target, wooden sandals clacking against the uneven ground.

On either side of him was an ancient forest, enormous oak, hemlock, beech, and pine trees towering over him. Their lush leaves provided a thick canopy, almost blocking out the sky above entirely except for small glimpses of brilliant azure peeking through the leaves.

Ahead of him was a small clearing of tree stumps. To his left, a large cart was filled to the brim with logs, the once proud branches cut off from the ancient oaks. The branches were strewn carelessly in several haphazard piles a short distance away from the cart, the leaves already wilting in the midsummer heat of the island.

A snapping, crashing sound drew his eyes to his target, as the pirate kicked the tree near the base of the stump with enough force to fell the tree in one blow. The tree creaked and groaned as it fell to the ground, leaves shaking and rattling.

‘What monstrous strength for a human,’ Jinbei thought, watching as the pirate grabbed an axe from close by and began cutting away at the branches.

He finished quickly, swinging the axe downwards with ease and lodging it in a nearby stump. Bending down, he lifted one end of the log and dragged it over to the cart. With minimal effort, he wrapped his arms around the thick trunk and heaved it into the cart.

‘Phew,’ The pirate huffed, arms shooting up in the air to stretch. He arched his back and stretched his legs, then bent over to retie the shoelaces of his boots. When he was done, he stood up and turned towards Jinbei, his sharp grey eyes scrutinizing the fishman with guarded curiosity. ‘How long are you just going to stand there, Warlord-san?’

Jinbei’s first impression of the man standing before him was that he was not a man, not yet at least. He was just a boy. How old was he, nineteen, twenty? Jinbei had trouble differentiating age with humans, but he looked younger than that.

It wasn’t possible though. It had already been nineteen years. According to everything Jinbei knew, he had been born either directly before his father’s death, or immediately after.

Nineteen years, and the boy was already far more of a monster than his father had ever been.

“If you know who I am,” Jinbei said slowly, regarding the human cautiously. “Then you know why I am here. Gol D. Ace!”

Ace’s eyes hardened, body reflexively tensing as anger and resentment flashed in his eyes. He pulled down his orange cowboy hat, hiding his eyes as his mouth twisted into a scowl. “My last name is Portgas, not Gol. Let me guess, you’re here because the marines ordered you to take my head?”

“No,” Jinbei dropped into a fighting stance, spreading his feet apart and raising his arms in preparation. “The village you destroyed here was under the protection of the Yonko, Whitebeard. He is a great friend to me and my people and I cannot allow your actions to go unanswered!”

“Now, wait just a second—” Ace held out his hands in a placating gesture, frustration flashing in his eyes. “It’s true that I accidentally burnt down parts of the village, but that was because pirates were attacking it!”
“You’re a pirate!” Jinbei snapped, anger flaring through him. “You murdered the entire village!”

The pirate before him was a fool. Foolish and arrogant enough to think he could survive destroying a village under a Yonko’s protection.

This was a man who had razed entire towns to the ground for no reason. Murdered innocent women and children in cold blood. And Dawn Island. An entire country destroyed overnight. Nothing had been left. Forests had been incinerated, villages and towns reduced to nothing but ash. It was rumored that he had been just a boy when Goa Kingdom had been destroyed. His bounty at age ten had been over two million beli.

“Other pirates attacked. Not me and my crew,” Ace ran a hand through his hair, anger flaring to the surface. “And no one was murdered! We protected the village. I can take you to their camp right now and prove to you we didn’t kill anyone.”

“I will not listen to your lies!” Jinbei launched himself at Ace, determination blazing in his eyes as he raised his fist.

“Fine,” Ace muttered, his irritated expression morphing into a somewhat resigned smirk. His fists burst into flames as he threw himself toward Jinbei, meeting the warlord head on. “No one’s ever believed us anyways. Besides, it’s been a while since I’ve had a good fight!”
Awareness came back slowly to Jinbei. He was aware of the familiar, comforting sound of waves rolling and crashing. The fresh, salty smell of the ocean tingled in his nose as a soft wind brushed over him.

He was lying on a soft, slightly sandy blanket. The ground underneath him was firm and lumpy. He was still on the beach where his fight with Ace had ended. Bright bursts of laughter and the sound of voices drifted to him from somewhere nearby. He was almost content to fall back asleep, when one voice caught his attention and immediately had him on the alert.

“Stop it—get off! I haven’t eaten anything in five days! Stop trying to steal my food, idiot!” Ace shouted from somewhere past Jinbei’s head. Jinbei sat up almost immediately, feeling a twinge of pain from the various wounds and burns that covered his body. He pressed a hand to his ribs, knowing several must have been broken during the fight.

Shock rippled through him as he took stock of his body; white bandages had been wrapped around his arms, chest, and head. The burns and cuts the bandages covered still ached, but it was obvious they had been treated while he had been unconscious.

Jinbei was sitting on a large red, blue, and yellow patchwork quilt several yards away from where the fight had ended. An enormous meal was spread out on the quilt, empty plates, cups, and bowls piled in dangerously high stacks at the far edge of the blanket.

“Try not to move around too quickly; your body is still healing,” A blond haired teenager with a large scar around his left eye and googles dangling from his neck placed a hand on Jinbei’s shoulder to stop him from springing to his feet. “We treated your wounds, but you’ll still want to have an actual doctor look at them later. I’m not that familiar with fishmen biology, but I can’t imagine your body reacts well to burn wounds. I’m Sabo by the way. Co-captain and navigator of the ASL pirates.”

He wore a simple grey t-shirt and black pants that had been rolled up past his ankles, feet bare. A few feet away was a fine blue jacket and a small pile of obviously well cared for books. Perched on top of the books was an old top hat, a little worse for the wear.

On the edge of the blanket, Ace sat cross-legged, surrounded by a pile of food. A stack of plates next to him was tipping dangerously sideways, almost falling as he carelessly added another empty plate to the tittering tower. His cowboy hat was shoved back off his head, dangling by a string down his back. His chest was shirtless and covered in bandages. Any skin visible that wasn’t bandaged was covered in bruises and minor cuts and scrapes. With his shirt off, Jinbei noticed for the first time the word “Portgas” tattooed vertically on his left bicep.

Sitting next to him was a smaller boy, his back turned toward Jinbei as he devoured a whole watermelon by himself. On his head rested an old, worn straw hat. Jinbei turned his gaze back to Sabo and stared at him in disbelief. He struggled to his feet, ignoring the hands that tried to keep him from rising. “You treated my wounds?”
“That’s what Sabo just said,” Ace mumbled rather pointedly, mouth full of food. “Sit down and eat before Luffy inhales all the rest of the food.”

“You’re eating all the food!” The young boy complained, cheeks bulging from the large slice of watermelon in his mouth. “I haven’t even had fourths yet.”

“I haven’t eaten in five days!” Ace shouted again, roughly elbowing the boy. “I saw all of you eating normal meals and popcorn while I was fighting for my life!”

“Popcorn’s not very filling. Besides, I had to share it with everyone!” Luffy, exclaimed. He laughed suddenly. “It was a good idea to use your flame attacks to pop the popcorn though.”

Ace grabbed Luffy’s cheeks and stretched them further than what should have been possible. “And who’s idea was that?” he demanded, pinching and pulling Luffy’s cheeks even more.

Luffy’s dark brown eyes darted to the side and his face scrunched up, lips pouting. “Haru’s.”

“Liar!” Ace punched him lightly on the head. “Was it yours’ or Bam-Bam’s? Well? This is insubordination!”

“I’m not insubordinating! I’m the captain!” Luffy shouted, punching Ace in the ribs.

Ace doubled over in pain, instantly releasing his grip on Luffy. It hadn’t been a blow at full strength, but it was still enough to knock the wind out of him for a moment.

“You’re not the captain Lu. You can be the captain when you have your own crew.” Sabo scolded, grabbing the thirteen year old and dragging him away from Ace before the other teen could recover enough to retaliate.

“But you and Ace are both captains!” Luffy exclaimed, sticking his tongue out at Ace as the older boy glowered at him. “Oh, shark-guy, you’re awake!”

“You’re just now noticing?!” Ace snapped, shaking his head in exasperation.

Luffy sprang instantly to Jinbei’s side, eyes wide and sparkling with excitement. “Hey, shark-guy, can you poop?”

“Luffy! Don’t ask that kind of question!” Sabo slammed his fist into Luffy’s head, before whirling on Ace. “Stop laughing!”

Jinbei stared down at Luffy in shock as the boy asked more questions which were mostly ridiculous. The boy didn’t have an ounce of fear or reservation at being so close to him. The boy’s guileless eyes and bright smile was unlike anything Jinbei had encountered from a human before.

“You’re not afraid of me?” Jinbei asked almost disbelievingly, eyes wide as he stared down at the boy wonderment.

Luffy actually laughed and smiled even bigger, placing his arms on his hips. “Of course not. You’re a good guy!” He nodded sagely to himself.

“I attacked your captain!” Jinbei growled, wondering what game they were playing at. “Why did you treat my wounds? I’m a fishman! Why aren’t you frightened of me?”

“What does being a fishman have to do with anything?” Luffy asked, actually looking confused.

He felt his knees tremble. Hundreds of insults flooded his mind. Curses. He could remember the look
of fear and disgust on so many human faces. It made him sick. Fisher Tiger’s death and Queen Outohime’s death flashed through his mind as he stared down at the short human boy who didn’t see being a fishman as any reason to be afraid of him. To hate him.

Jinbei had wanted to believe in the world that Outohime had so desperately envisioned, but it had eluded him, clouded by his own pain and that of his peoples’. Whitebeard had been a great friend and a reminder that not all humans were evil, but he had been… an exception in Jinbei’s mind. Not the rule, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Staring down at the boy, for the first time in years Jinbei allowed himself to truly hope for the bright future his Queen had fought so hard to bring into reality, but would never see.

“You could have attacked Ace from behind at one point during the fight and ended it. But you didn’t,” Sabo smiled at him. “That makes you a good guy in our book. The rest doesn’t matter.”

Ace caught Jinbei’s eyes and nodded firmly in agreement, before going back to eating. “Aren’t you hungry?”

His stomach growled in response.

“How did the three of you meet?” Jinbei asked curiously, trying to understand the strong connection between the trio.

Luffy launched into a convoluted tale of pirates, forests, and a scary grandpa who thought bandits would make an appropriate custodian for impressionable young boys. Ace and Sabo’s interjections only helped slightly. (“We weren’t really going to kill him.” “Speak for yourself, Sabo.”)

“…And then we drank sake and became brothers!” Luffy finished, a large, satisfied smile on his face.

Jinbei was silent as he digested all of what he had heard, a single question niggling at his mind. “What truly happened to Goa Kingdom?”

Ace, Sabo and Luffy all instantly stilled, a pained expression marring their previously smiling features.

Ace turned and threw himself onto his stomach on the sandy blanket, pulling down his cowboy hat over his face. Jinbei felt something cold wash over him when he saw the instantaneous change in demeanor. Ace obviously wanted no part in the coming conversation.
“The marines found out that some of the villagers on the island were helping to hide us,” Sabo’s fingers twisted into the quilt, clenching and unclenching distractedly. “They burned the whole place down. Not just the village, but everything. Blamed it on Ace.”

The warlord stared at Sabo in horror. He knew of many of the World Government’s atrocities first hand, but this… “How could they do such a thing?” He growled, question not directed at either of the boys beside him as old anger bubbled up from deep within.

“To the government, Ace and Luffy’s very existence is a crime. But, Ace is definitely the one they’re gunning for the most.” Sabo’s face darkened further, a hand stretching out to rest on Ace’s shoulder. Luffy wordlessly pressed himself closer to Ace, a hand reaching out and snagging the edge of Sabo’s t-shirt.

“They found Dadan and dragged her off to Impel Down. We’re not sure if anyone else survived,” Sabo paused for a moment in consideration. “We left the island. Ace and Luffy’s wanted posters were everywhere, even though we hadn’t even done anything. Dark King Rayleigh saw them and came to help us eventually. We would’ve been killed if he hadn’t found us.”

“How old were the three of you?” Jinbei asked, not surprised that Rayleigh had rushed off to save his captain’s son. It explained where he had disappeared to all those years ago before reappearing on Saboady six months ago.

“Ace and I were ten, Luffy was seven,” Sabo ruffled Luffy’s hair fondly, a far off look in his blue eyes. “We trained for six years with Rayleigh after that before setting off on our own. That was a year ago.”

Jinbei was silent for a moment after digesting everything he had just been told.

“Whitebeard has no doubt heard about the attack on the village by now.” He stated quietly, hoping the boys understood the gravity of the situation.

Ace twitched. Sabo stiffened, his eyes automatically glancing at Luffy.

“The villagers will tell them what really happened.” Sabo offered, his attempt at keeping his tone of voice hopeful falling somewhat flat.

“Is that Whitebeard guy strong?” Luffy asked somewhat dubiously.

“Whitebeard is the strongest man in the world,” Jinbei stared at Luffy incredulously. “Surely you’ve heard of him?”

Luffy tilted his head sideways and picked his nose disinterestedly. “No.”

Jinbei stared at Luffy in disbelief, forcing his mouth shut. ‘Is he being serious?!’

“People say that Whitebeard’s strength rivals his.” Ace’s hands clenched into fists as his eyes drifted past his brothers to the ocean. There was something strange in his voice that Jinbei couldn’t identify.

“You’re not fighting him, Ace,” Sabo hissed sharply, staring at his brother with a fiery intensity in his eyes. “We’ve already discussed this.”

“You want to fight Whitebeard?!” Jinbei stared at Ace in alarm.

“I want to see how strong he is,” Ace said with a shrug, trying to act like he was indifferent about it. But, there was a gleam in his eye that was almost predatory. “We’ll have to fight him eventually for
“Not until after Luffy turns seventeen,” Sabo stood up and dusted off the sand from his top hat. “Do you want to go to the villager’s camp now, Jinbei-san? I have to tell the others to get ready to set sail. We’ve stayed here far too long.”

“Yes, I need to speak to the mayor,” Jinbei stood up somewhat stiffly, one last question burning in his mind. “Why did you come to the New World?”

Ace smiled, the strange look that had come into his eyes when Whitebeard’s name was mentioned disappearing. “Do you want to show him, Luffy?”

“Yeah!” Luffy grinned hugely, sprang to his feet, and dashed towards the ocean.

He stopped just short of the receding waves and threw his head back, drawing in a huge breath. “COW-CHAN!!!!!” He shouted at the top at the top of his lungs.

“What is he--?”

“Just wait a minute and see.” Sabo interrupted Jinbei, fond smile growing broader.

At first, nothing happened. Then, as the seconds ticked by, a head appeared out of the water, looked around, and mooed inquisitively.

Jinbei’s jaw dropped. “That’s--” He had no words.

He watched, eyes wide, as Luffy laughed and stretched his arms out an impossible distance to gently rub the sea king calf’s head. The calf, whose face resembled a cow’s, leaned happily into the touch and mooed contentedly.

But that wasn’t what had Jinbei so astonished. Luffy was talking to the calf and unless Jinbei was extremely mistaken, understanding it.

“We found her as we were leaving Saboady. Luffy could communicate with her—we’re not really sure how. We were able to figure out that she was from the New World and—well, Luffy promised we’d take her back to her pod,” Sabo explained, studying Jinbei’s face carefully. “Fishmen can communicate with sea kings, right?”

“No,” Jinbei stared at Luffy in wonderment. “Not even King Neptune can communicate with them. There are legends of course—but for a human to actually be able to understand…”

“Ahhh…” Ace pressed his hands into his eyes wearily. “I figured it’d be something like this. Why did we pick such a weird little brother Sabo?”

“You know he picked us, Ace,” Sabo said with a rueful chuckle before growing more serious. “What legends are you talking about, Jinbei-san?”

“It is said that there was once a queen in the royal line that could communicate with them,” Jinbei paused, unable to move his eyes from Luffy and the calf. “I’ve also heard rumors that the late Pirate King could communicate with them as well.”

Ace’s entire body stiffened and he snorted derisively. “Of course he did.” He muttered under his breath.

“That doesn’t explain why Luffy can understand them though,” Sabo said thoughtfully, eyes darting
to the side to glance at Ace. “You haven’t been holding out on us, have you?”

“Just because he could doesn’t mean that I can!” Ace snapped, face growing red.

“I know that!” Sabo said in exasperation. He sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jinbei-san, we would both deeply appreciate it if you wouldn’t speak of this to anyone. If the marines or someone else were to find out--”

“I will speak of this to no one.” Jinbei promised, finally managing to tear his eyes away from Luffy to turn to Ace and Sabo.

He was quiet for a long moment before asking: “What is his dream?”

“It’s a miracle you haven’t heard him say what it is yet,” Ace stared at his brother for a moment before speaking. “He’s going to become King of the Pirates.”

* * *

It was near dusk. Sabo, Luffy, and Jinbei had set off to the village hours ago, reluctantly leaving Ace behind so he could sleep more.

Sabo had been against the idea, but had seen something in Ace’s eyes that made him bite back his various objections. After all the talk of Whitebeard and Ace’s father, Sabo knew that his brother needed some space.

After the three of them had left, Ace had laid back down on the quilt and shut his eyes, allowing the soft roar of the ocean to wash over him. He might have drifted off for a while, but he’d never truly be able to sleep by himself in such an exposed area.

He’d suffered too many attacks and betrayals to allow his guard to slip up. Especially when his brothers weren’t with him.

The fight with Jinbei had been utterly exhilarating and utterly exhausting. Ace was glad that Sabo had decided to treat the fishman’s wounds after they had both collapsed.

Jinbei was good and honorable, despite working for the World Government. And, he hadn’t truly seemed bothered by Ace’s parentage, or his status as one of the most wanted men in the world. The reason Jinbei had sought Ace out was because of the fishman’s respect and loyalty to Whitebeard.

It was too bad that they would have to fight Jinbei again someday.

Several of the seven warlords had already been ordered to take Ace and Luffy’s heads. They’d had numerous close calls, but so far they’d managed to either defeat or evade the warlords. Ace was too jaded to allow himself to hope that Jinbei wouldn’t be sent after them as well.

Coming to the New World was incredibly risky, especially with such a small crew and a ship that was rapidly wearing down. But Luffy had promised Cow-chan that they’d help her find her family and they couldn’t have waited—the longer she was separated from her family, the harder it would be to find them.

Ace rubbed his eyes tiredly. They had run into a G-5 warship almost immediately after arriving in the New World. Between the two of them, Ace and Sabo had been able to destroy the warship, but not before their caravel had taken heavy damage.

Sabo had been able to navigate them to the island they were currently on and they had unanimously
decided to stay until their ship could be repaired.

Since it was under Whitebeard’s protection, they had figured that the marines wouldn’t attack them while they made the repairs. Attacking an island under Whitebeard’s protection was an act of war, after all.

Sabo had been right about the marines at the very least.

They had just started repairing the ship when the village was attacked. The pirates had started killing the villagers—defenseless men, women, and children stabbed, bludgeoned, and shot. Remembering it made Ace’s blood boil.

Ace, Sabo, Luffy, and Wendy (the ship’s cook and the first crewmember that had joined them) had been out hunting for food to restock their supplies. They’d heard the screams and gunshots and hightailed it back to the village.

They had arrived just in time to see the captain of the pirates about to kill a man trying to protect his daughter, who had tripped while trying to flee for safety.

It was instinct. The captain was pointing a gun at the man, so Sabo and Ace had hurled Luffy at him. Luffy barely made it in time; the bullet hit him instead of the trembling man it had been aimed at.

Ace knew it looked bad, chucking their little brother in front of a speeding bullet. The first time they’d done it, Wendy had almost strangled them until she realized that Luffy was fine.

The bullet had harmlessly bounced off Luffy’s rubber body, not even leaving a bruise and gave Ace and Sabo the time they needed to reach the pirate captain and kick him hard in the face.

The man had gone flying, crashing into one of the buildings the pirates had set on fire. Almost instantly, the rest of the attacking pirates turned their full attention towards the ASL trio, buying the villagers precious time to escape.

The fight had been exhausting, but they had won, destroying half the village in the process.

Ace had no regrets about protecting the villagers, but apparently the newspapers had once again laid false blame on the ASL pirates. The newspaper they had received the following day announced the complete destruction of the village and the deaths of all the inhabitants, naming the ASL pirates as the culprits.

Now, they had a Yonko after them.

Huffing, Ace sat up and proceeded to shake out the quilt and fold it up. He glanced around the beach, catching sight of one of Sabo’s sketch books half buried under the sand a few feet away.

He dropped the folded quilt on the ground and began scavenging for the various things that Luffy had scattered across the beach.

It was starting to get a little chilly as Ace finished. A fog had rolled in while he had been resting, giving them the perfect cover to slip away from the island unnoticed. They even if all of the repairs to the ship weren’t finished they were leaving as soon as possible.

The area around the island was quite rocky, making it extremely difficult to navigate through. The rocks were razor sharp and difficult to detect, just barely protruding above the water.

Sabo would have no problem navigating around them though. He had become quite skilled as a
navigator through his constant studying of books and charts over the last couple of years.

Arms full with everything Luffy had somehow managed to fling across the beach, Ace began walking towards the forest when a chill ran down his spine.

The chill was the only warning he had.

“So,” A deep, commanding voice rang out, the authority in it stopping Ace in his tracks and rooting him to the spot. “You’re the fool who attacked one of the villages under my protection.”

Ace shut his eyes, hands clenching into fists. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, swallowing the terror he felt for his brothers, his crew. He dropped everything in his arms.

He allowed the fear and panic he felt for them to transform into determination, a fire building up inside him.

If Whitebeard and his crew found Sabo, Luffy, and the rest of the ASL crew before the Whitebeard pirates learned that the villagers were still alive, Ace had no doubt that they would be killed.

That one, terrible truth made his task very, very clear to him.

Ace turned around slowly, one hand reached into his short’s pocket for his mini telephone snail; the other clenched into a fist and ignited in flames.

“If you were trying to get my attention,” Whitebeard continued, jumping down from the Moby Dick and shattering the ground beneath his feet. “You’ve got it.”

Whitebeard and his crew would only reach Ace’s crew, his brothers, by crawling over his lifeless, smoldering corpse.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the reviews and kudos!
Here’s chapter two! This will probably be updated once a week or once every other week.
The title for this fic comes from ”To Build a Home” by the Cinematic Orchestra. Feedback is appreciated!
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ace watched as four of Whitebeard’s division commanders jumped from the massive ship out of the corner of his eyes. He knelt down and retrieved Sabo’s sketchbook from the pile of random items that he had dropped on the ground and stuffed it in one of his back pockets.

Straightening slowly, Ace leisurely walked towards the Yonko. He adjusted his hat and cracked his neck and knuckles. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but you shouldn’t believe everything you read in the newspaper. We weren’t the ones who attacked your village.”

Whitebeard regarded Ace in utter disdain, frown deepening. He slammed his bisento to the ground, shaking the earth and causing Ace to stumble. Ace felt like an ant trying to stand up to a mountain.

“So, this is Roger’s son,” Whitebeard scrutinized Ace, the corners of his eyes wrinkling. “You are an utter disgrace to your father’s legacy. Marco, Izo, Jozu, go take care of the crew. Thatch, take a group to search for survivors. I’ll join you when I’m done dealing with him. It shouldn’t take long.”

The four commanders started walking past him, completely disregarding Ace. That wouldn’t do at all.

He flung his arms out, flames erupting and spreading rapidly. The flames rose high above the tree tops with a roar and a crackle. It burst upward in brilliant, fiery swirls of orange and yellow to form a wall. It extended in a half circle from the forest edge to the ocean shore, water and fire colliding together in sporadic hisses and bursts of steam.

One of the commanders—a lean, muscular man with blond hair sighed heavily. “Exactly what is it you’re trying to do, yoi?” His unbuttoned purple jacket revealed his muscled chest and Whitebeard’s mark tattooed on his chest.

“Trying to run away, brat?” Whitebeard demanded, all traces of disgust and disdain gone.

There was something in his expression that Ace couldn’t identify. Something that unnerved him in a way hatred and scorn no longer could.

For a moment Ace found himself staring into dark, ancient eyes, and wondering what those old eyes had seen.

The click of the telephone snail connecting with Sabo broke his attention away from the intense gaze that had been burning into him, reminding him once again of the danger they were in.

“I’m letting my crew escape, Whitebeard,” Ace enunciated clearly, not wanting to tip the pirates off that he was warning his crew. “I’m not going to run away.” In his pocket, Ace could hear Sabo’s muffled voice shouting at him and cursing up a storm. Loudly. He grimaced and hissed: “Get them out of here.”

“Idiot! We’re not leaving without you--” Sabo shouted. Ace could hear Luffy shouting his agreement in the background.

“Warning your crew?” One of the commanders asked. Jozu, Ace guessed. He was massive, but still smaller than Whitebeard.
Ace wondered if the Whitebeard’s had some sort of minimum height requirement when they recruited.

“Sabo,” Ace grit his teeth, panic flaring up again. “Sabo, I’m counting on you to get everyone out of here. Do whatever it takes.”
He hung up. Fire flared up his hands and arms. “You’ll reach my crew over my dead body, old man.”

“Hmmph. So there is a bit of Roger in you after all.” Whitebeard said with a smirk, the dark aura surrounding the pirate lightening just barely.

“Don’t compare me to that man! You know nothing about me!” Ace shouted, launching himself forward and shooting a burst of flames straight at Whitebeard.

Whitebeard effortlessly deflected the flames with his bisento. With practiced ease, he swung the massive weapon downward. A blue burst of light cracked open the ground and surged straight towards Ace, leaving the ground split apart in its wake.

Ace leaped sideways, barely avoiding getting hit. He could feel the monstrous power from the attack in the shimmering air around him. He winced, the sheer force of it battering his body even though he had dodged it.

Flames engulfed Ace’s fists as he launched his famous attack that had earned him the moniker “fire fist”. Even as the flame attack sailed towards Whitebeard, he formed his next attack; small sparks of fire formed in front of him, almost resembling fireflies in the dimming light.

They floated towards Whitebeard even as the Yonko launched a second attack that shook the ground so badly that Ace nearly lost his balance. His eyes widened as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, barely rolling out of the way in time to avoid another devastating attack.

He stumbled again as the ground shook and something behind him exploded. Rocks, sand, and dust rained down on him as a large section of the flame wall flickered and died out, leaving a sizable hole.

Ace barely had time to register that the blond man and the other commanders tasked with finding his brothers and crew were moving before they rushed past him. He hastily reformed the wall completely and launched multiple attacks at the commanders in rapid succession. Desperation fought to settle itself deep in his bones as he tried to keep them occupied long enough for his brothers and crew to escape.

Two of the commanders were left singed and smoking as Ace twisted around and activated his Hidaruma attack, the small firefly like flames growing into fireballs and hurtling towards Whitebeard.

Whitebeard jerked in surprise just before the attack hit him. It exploded in a bright burst of blinding orange light.

For a moment Ace was actually hopeful that the attack had done some damage. However, as the smoke cleared Ace could clearly see that the giant pirate hadn’t even staggered backwards; he hadn’t moved his feet once since the fight had started.

The attack came so quickly he barely had time to register that Whitebeard had used his devil fruit ability before it hit him square on. His already fractured ribs broke as he was hurled backwards, hitting the sand hard enough to make his vision go dark for a second.

When his vision fully returned he was flat on his back, only a few feet away from the firewall he had erected. Grimacing, he stumbled to his feet as quickly as he could. His body was still trembling from
the force of the attack. His elbows, knees and shins were bloody, raw and covered in sand. Panting heavily, he gingerly touched his ribcage and winced. He could tell that he had broken at least two ribs.

Taking an unsteady step forward, Ace allowed himself to be thankful that at least he hadn’t broken an arm or a leg. He could still stand and fight.

Breathing in deeply despite the pain in his chest, Ace glanced at the four division commanders. They were standing near the firewall, expressions indecipherable as they watched the fight with obvious interest.

Whitebeard meanwhile, had finally moved. He was walking toward Ace, footsteps shaking the earth.

Taking another large gulp of air, Ace charged recklessly at the Yonko, forming a massive fireball in his wake. He leaped into the air and the fireball grew even bigger, so bright it almost echoed the sun in its intensity. It was large enough to threaten even the massive Moby Dick a short distance behind where Whitebeard was standing.

Ace couldn’t see what Whitebeard did exactly, but one minute the enormous fireball was hurtling towards the Yonko, massive enough to make even the giant pirate look small in comparison— the next Ace watched as the fireball split apart as if it had been cut in two, missing Whitebeard and the Moby Dick completely.

The flames hit the ocean with a terrible hissing noise, showering the Moby Dick and everyone on the beach with boiling hot water. It rained on them for a good minute as Whitebeard leaped forward, heading directly towards Ace.

Ace leaped up to meet him, but was batted away as if he was nothing but a gnat compared to the giant pirate. Sand filled his nose and mouth as he rolled and skidded across the beach, landing in a tangled, smoking heap. He choked and spat, head spinning as he forced himself to his feet.

His vision was going double as Whitebeard approached him, bisento raised to strike again.

“So this is the strength that rivaled his…” Ace muttered, wiping blood from his face.

Sabo had been right to insist that they wait until Luffy was ready to set off on his own before they tried taking on Whitebeard, or any of the other Yonko. None of Ace’s attacks had done anything except slightly singe his white captain’s coat.

Whitebeard paused in front of him, weapon poised to strike. But something stopped him. Ace stared up into the Yonko’s eyes and saw… regret?

Ace stared at the old man in open confusion for a moment before it transformed into white hot anger. He blindly attacked, but was once again blocked, a massive fist swinging down and punching him in the stomach.

He blacked out for a moment. When he was finally able to open his eyes, Whitebeard’s bisento was pointed at his neck. He tried to lift his arms, but wasn’t even able to lift them more than a few inches.

Ace closed his eyes, waiting for the finishing blow.

Sabo would have gotten everyone to safety by now. He could die knowing that his brothers and crew were safe. Once Whitebeard realized that the villagers were alive after all, he’d have no reason to continue chasing after his brothers and crew.
After a few moments, he opened his gray eyes again and saw Whitebeard staring down at him, face indecipherable. Rage bubbled up from deep within him.

“Why are you hesitating?!?” Ace demanded, fury filling him and giving him a burst of energy to push himself into a mostly upright position. “No one else would! You’d be doing the world a favor by getting rid of me. Don’t you know? My very existence is a sin!”

Whitebeard studied him a moment, a deep sighing echoing from his massive chest. For a moment he truly looked like a weary old man. “The only sin is that you were allowed to grow up believing such a thing.”

Ace felt his mouth drop open, but no words came out. Was the Yonko being serious?!

“I don’t care who your father is,” Whitebeard paused before continuing, as if reminding himself of something. He sounded almost sad. “However, you destroyed the village and murdered the villagers under my protection. That is a crime that cannot go unanswered.”

This was it. Ace tried once more to move, to do something, but his body wasn’t cooperating. He didn’t flinch as the bisento came down towards his head.

Something blue burst through blazing flame wall, leaping in front of Ace just as the bisento swung down and blocked the deadly blade from hitting Ace.

Ace’s eyes widened in disbelief. “S-Sabo!”

Sabo stood in front of him, dark blue trench coat and top hat on fire as he trembled from the weight of Whitebeard’s bisento. Both hands were covered in haki and gripping the blade, preventing it from lowering any further.

Whitebeard stared down at Sabo for a moment in surprise. Then, he actually laughed. “Cheeky brat! That was quite the dramatic entrance.”

“Sabo, what are you doing here?!?” Ace demanded angrily, staring at his brother in incredulity.

Blood dripped down from his left shoulder, the edge of the bisento’s blade slicing into Sabo’s skin. Ace could see blood oozing from his hands as well. “Honestly. This is what happens when I leave you alone for more than five minutes.”

“I told you to run!” Ace hissed, reaching out to grip Sabo’s coattail. The tiny flames still burning on his coat and hat flickered and disappeared. “Why don’t you ever listen to me?!”

“I’m your co-captain. I don’t have to follow your orders,” Sabo laughed breathily, eyes staring at Whitebeard intently. “Besides, as if we’d ever leave you alone.”

Ace felt his heart leap out of his chest. “We?”

Not answering, Sabo dove to the ground suddenly and rolled out from under the mighty weapon, blade still dripping with his blood. He leaped upward suddenly, landed on the bisento’s long pole, and stomped on one of Whitebeard’s massive hands gripping the pole. He then used the added height standing on the pole gave him to punch Whitebeard on the face with a blow reinforced with haki.

Whitebeard wheeled backwards, more surprised than hurt from the strike, though it definitely smarted.
“Luffy, now!!” Sabo shouted, falling to the sandy ground. He landed with a small roll and wrapped both arms around Ace’s shoulders, pulling the dark haired teen upright.

“Luffy’s here too?!” Ace shouted, stumbling as Sabo made a mad dash closer to the flame wall and the forest that lay beyond.

“Gomu, gomu….” Luffy’s voice rang clearly through the air, but it came from the other side of the flame wall. “ROCKET!!!”

“Ahh!” Ace watched in astonishment as his little, thirteen year old brother burst through the flame wall, went sailing over the heads of the division commanders, and literally rocketed straight towards his older brothers.

Whitebeard and his commanders all watched in astonishment and disbelief as Sabo leapt into the air with Ace just in time to collide with the flying thirteen year old. Luffy stretched his arms and wrapped them around his brothers twice to make sure that he had a secure grip.

Even with the midair collision, he still managed to sail through the air with his brothers and burst through the far side of the flame wall. They careened a good twenty feet before they finally crashed to the ground in a smoldering, tangled heap.

Ace was the first to recover. He was on his feet in an instant, almost tripping over one of Luffy’s arms that hadn’t snapped back to its normal length yet. “What--- what--?!” He sputtered, angry beyond words at the same time he was stupidly, incandescently happy that they hadn’t really left him.

“You can yell at us later,” Sabo panted, pulling Luffy up with him as he staggered to his feet. “Right now we run!”

He grabbed Ace with his free arm and started dragging him forward. They broke into an uneven run as Luffy burst out laughing.

“Did you see the look on their faces?” Luffy grinned brightly at Ace, naturally falling in between his two older brothers.

Ace tried to imagine what their mad, ridiculous escape must have looked like to Whitebeard and he cringed. “We never speak of this again.” He decided, glaring at Sabo as he joined in on Luffy’s laughter.

“His—Whitebeard’s face! You should have seen it Ace.” Sabo choked out as he started to wheeze because he was running and laughing at the same time.

“It’s not funny!” Ace snapped, though after a few moments he burst out laughing as well. He felt a broad smile as wide and bright as Luffy’s spread across his face. “Where are we running?”

They had left the beach and were running uphill. But they were headed away from the village, and Ace honestly had no idea what was ahead. They’d done a great deal of exploring on the small island, but he didn’t recognize any of his surroundings.

“The ship!” Luffy declared cheerfully as they reached the top of the hill and stumbled to a halt at the edge of a cliff.

Ace’s breath caught in his throat.

Beyond the cliff was the sea. And just coming into sight was the Romance Dawn, the caravel’s main
sail and flag atop its crow’s nest proudly bearing the ASL pirates’ jolly roger. It fluttered in the breeze, almost identical to the flag that had once adorned their childhood treehouse so long ago.

“Think you can get us there Luffy?” Sabo asked with a smile, already knowing what the answer would be.

“Of course!” Luffy replied happily, backing up slightly and actually taking a second to calculate the distance between them and the ship sailing closer.

They weren’t out of danger yet. They’d still be in big trouble if the Whitebeard pirates piled back into their ship and chased them. But at the moment, with Sabo and Luffy by his side, Ace knew that somehow, they’d be alright.

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For a moment no one moved as they tried to process what had just happened in stunned silence.

“What… just what--what?” Thatch asked incoherently, trying to comprehend what he had just seen. He moved to stand next to his adoptive father, scratching his head.

“Did you see the way that kid’s arm stretched? Must be a devil fruit user. What did he call out? Gomu, gomu?” Izo asked no one in particular, utterly baffled and amused at the same time.

“What do you think, Pops?” Marco asked, coughing slightly to cover a chuckle.

Seeing the three boys flying through the air would undoubtedly be seared into his memory for a very, very long time. He wished they could have recorded it.

“He doesn’t have the eyes of a killer…” Whitebeard said slowly, staring off at where the three boys had disappeared. “Thatch, I want you to go to the village and verify what really happened if possible. If the boy was telling the truth there should be survivors.”

“Too bad they ran off before we could get some answers out of them.” Jozu huffed, knowing that Whitebeard hadn’t intended to kill Ace. Not without at least confirming whether or not the pirate was telling the truth about the village.

Marco launched into the air, arms transforming into fiery, brilliant azure wings. With a single flap, he extinguished the flame wall. “Better get—Jinbei! Mayor-san!”

Whitebeard turned and sighed in relief at the sight of Jinbei and the village’s mayor running frantically towards them. The mayor didn’t even have a single scratch on him, though Jinbei was definitely looking slightly worse for wear.

“Captain Whitebeard! We came as soon as we found out you arrived,” The mayor staggered slightly as his feet hit the sandy beach, panting heavily. His glanced around the beach before bursting into tears and collapsing onto his knees when he didn’t see Ace. “We came too late!” he wailed.

“If you’re looking for Ace, he got rescued by his crew, yoi,” Marco said, relief flooding him. “He was telling the truth then?”

The mayor quickly explained everything that had happened. How they had been attacked and how the ASL pirates had saved them. How Ace and the others had stayed to help start rebuilding the village at a different location that was away from the harbor to help make it more difficult for pirates to attack in the future. That was why the Whitebeards hadn’t seen any sign of them when they had circled the island.
Whitebeard listened to the mayor intently without interrupting. When the mayor was finally done speaking, he turned towards Jinbei. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Jinbei nodded and took a step forward. “After the fight ended Sabo and the others treated my wounds.” He told them everything he had learned, unable to keep the admiration he felt for the three boys out of his voice.

“Heh, what cheeky brats.” Whitebeard said after Jinbei had finished talking, a slow smile curving upwards.

Marco smiled as well, but his mind was troubled. If what Jinbei had told them was true, then was any part of Ace’s reputation true? Even his wanted poster looked wrong; Ace appeared much, much younger in person than he did in any of the dark depictions that had been spread throughout the world.

Was the World Government really that determined to kill the Pirate King’s son? Not even Whitebeard had been slandered so violently.

Before anything else could be said, a shout from the Moby Dick rang out with words that sent an icy chill down Marco’s spine. “Pops, three marine warships are attacking the ASL pirates. Admiral Akainu is on board!”

The smile disappeared from Whitebeard’s face. Beside him, Jinbei blanched.

All eyes turned toward Whitebeard, silently waiting for his response.

“It would appear,” Whitebeard said slowly, flexing his grip on his bisento. “That we owe the ASL pirates a debt of gratitude.”

Jinbei’s shoulders slumped, a relieved smile spreading across his face. Marco wondered what the three boys had done in a single day to earn such concern and obvious respect from the warlord.

“Everyone back on board,” Whitebeard’s determined words rang through the air, a battle cry alerting his children to prepare for a fight. “We have some brats to save.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's chapter 2 a day early! Thank you all so much for the incredible reviews!
Sabo staggered as a bullet hit his left shoulder, almost falling to the deck of the marine warship. Sucking in a deep breathe, he slammed his metal pipe into the nearest marine’s stomach and plowed on.

He had jumped over to the marine warship the moment it had come in range of the Romance Dawn, completely by himself. Normally he would have had Bam Bam or Haru to watch his back, but they were currently occupied trying to keep the Dawn from being immolated by Akainu.

Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the flames slowly spreading across the main deck of the caravel, the acidic smell of smoke filling his nose and causing his thoughts to jumble together. The last time he’d smelled so much smoke—

*Don’t go there.* Sabo thought desperately, reaching the main mast of the ship. Focus.

He clenched his hand into a fist. Taking in a deep breath, he shut his eyes for just an instant before plunging his fist down onto the deck of the ship.

There was a sickening, shattering crack from the hull. It resounded piercingly as the power from his blow surged through the ship’s numerous decks, fracturing the ship in half.

The marines shouted and cursed, trying to reach him and stop him but it was too late—the warship’s two halves trembled as the ocean surged into its hull, filling it with water and dragging it down to the murky deeps.

Sabo used the chaos to his advantage and shoved his way past the panicking marines. He sprang across the deck and dove into the ocean to escape the sinking mammoth.

In some ways, the ocean was almost more dangerous than standing on the deck of a warship full of marines had been. The ocean was ablaze as Akainu’s attacks plummeted into the water unpredictably, tinting the waters a brilliant orange.

The water sizzled and bubbled, Akainu’s magma so powerful that even the ocean was unable to quench the molten rock. It was scorching, so hot that Sabo thought he was being boiled alive.

He swam quickly to the second of the three warships that was currently swinging around the Dawn for a second broadside. He pulled himself on top of one of the thin, razor sharp rocks that surrounded the island and leaped high in the air.

Sabo’s left shoulder hit the deck hard, knocking the wind out of him, but he was on his feet in an instant, once again running towards the center of the ship.

Shouts rang out all around him. He sensed the bullets coming and was able to dodge most of them; one grazed right leg, but he kept going.

A wall of marines appeared in front of him, guns loaded and pointed right at him. They had seen what he had done to the other ship and were determined to keep him from a repeat performance.

Sabo smirked. Haki covered his fist as he punched the deck, splintering the hull and the wooden
planks beneath his feet. The ship wasn’t broken cleanly in half, but it didn’t matter. The warship was sinking.

Mission accomplished, Sabo staggered to the ship’s railing. It was quickly becoming an uphill battle as the section of the warship he was standing on was dragged beneath the waves.

His legs felt like jelly. His haki was strong, but destroying two large warships while wounded was grueling. He reached the railing and stumbled over it, letting himself fall into the searing water below.

Flinching as he hit the ocean, he started swimming towards the Romance Dawn. He left a trail of blood in his wake and he cringed, left arm screaming with every stroke.

All of the fish had fled the area as the waters continued to overheat. He was sure he was going to have blisters all over his body by the time he reached the Dawn.

_I hope Cow-chan left the area as well._ Sabo thought fervently, surfacing a few feet away from the Dawn.

He swam quickly to the side of the ship and climbed up a rope ladder that one of the crewmembers must have tossed down for him. As he neared the top deck, Sabo could see that someone had readied the small rowboat they had in case they needed to abandon the Dawn.

If they were unable to escape Akainu, or put out the fires on the deck, the rowboat was ready to be lowered down. Though Sabo doubted they’d actually be able to escape if it came to that. There was no way they’d be able to elude the navy in a rowboat.

Sabo froze when he finally reached the top deck, eyes reflecting the blazing fire that was slowly eating away at the main mast. It was almost entirely engulfed by magma, large globules falling to the deck and burning a hole to the floors below. The sails were alight as well, dissolving like burning paper.

As he watched, the mast began tilting dangerously sideways, utterly ruined.

He clambered onto the deck and staggered as a second explosion of magma hit the poop deck, sending dangerous flecks of magma flying everywhere.

“Wendy!” He shouted, seeing their cook scream in agony as a fleck of magma the size of a plate hit her square on her back.

Rushing towards her, he shrugged off his still dripping coat and used it to fling the magma off her scorched, blistered back. “Are you okay?!” he questioned in alarm, hissing when he saw the terrible burns on her back.

She gripped his arm, half her reddish-brown braid completely burnt off. All that was left of her once long, luxurious locks was a scorched stub. She wrapped her hands around his arm and gripped him hard enough to leave a bruise as she pulled herself up slightly to look Sabo in the eyes, expression frantic. “Ace is in trouble.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Sabo promised, worry increasing when he didn’t see Ace anywhere on the deck. “We have to abandon ship. Haru, Bam Bam! Get Wendy to the row boat. We’ll have to make a break for the island.”

Bam Bam and Haru quickly gave up trying to put out the molten flames and ran to his side. Haru’s red cape had multiple holes and was badly singed. Ash blotted the black tuxedo and his left coat tail
Bam Bam, like always, was imperturbable. Her clothes were completely unharmed and she didn’t have a scratch on her, but her face was slightly smudged with ash and soot. Her black hair was still neatly fastened in buns on either side of her head, not a single hair out of place.

She regarded him with a sad, knowing look. She said something to him, but the words were lost to the wind, spoken so softly he couldn’t hear them. Somehow he knew what she meant to say.

He carefully handed Wendy over to Haru, knowing that the magician would take care of her. “Where’s Luffy?” He asked, not seeing the hyperactive thirteen year old anywhere on deck.

“He went below deck to get something, but he wouldn’t say what,” Haru responded, eyes flashing with obvious concern. “Ace--”

“Can hold his own for a few more minutes,” Sabo stated firmly, praying that he was right. “Get to the row boat. I’m going to get Luffy. Wait for us as long as you can, but don’t hesitate to go if it gets too dangerous.”

“We’re just going to abandon the Dawn?” Wendy panted, tears forming in her eyes. “We can’t just leave her!”

It felt like a betrayal to leave. But the magma had already eaten through parts of the main deck and was now spreading throughout the lower levels. There was no saving her.

“I don’t have time to argue about this,” Sabo huffed, glancing at the burning inferno that had been their home for a year. “Get to the boat. I have to find Luffy and then go help Ace.”

He stood and raced for the door that would lead him below deck. The inside of the ship reeked of burning wood, making him feel nauseous. Memories of seven years ago when the tiny boat he had stolen had exploded rose to his mind unbidden.

Sabo almost collided with Luffy as he turned a corner. The boy was holding a small knapsack in his arms like it was precious treasure. “Luffy, come on! We have to get out of here.”

“Sabo, you’re bleeding!” Luffy’s eyes widened as Sabo grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him back the way the older teen had just come.

“I have to go help Ace,” Sabo stumbled as the ship shook, heart rate increasing as the hair on his neck pricked. “Hurry!”

As they raced back down the hallway, the ship was rocked by a massive explosion, sending Sabo and Luffy staggering. Magma poured in from the stairs that they needed to climb and burst through the side of the ship, spraying the two brothers with scathing hot flecks.

Sabo twisted quickly, using his body to shield Luffy. He bodily shoved his brother away from the rapidly encroaching magma and punched the hull of the ship with all his might.

The hull was obliterated by his blow, shattering outwards. Sabo caught a glimpse of ocean and fire flashing in the air before he and Luffy were plunging down to the ocean.

He managed to gasp in a quick breathe of air before they hit the water, his hands automatically grasping onto the back of Luffy’s shirt.

It took him longer than before to swim to the surface with Luffy’s dead weight. What he saw once he
reached the surface was surreal; it couldn’t be happening.

Behind them, the Romance Dawn was completely ablaze. Sinking.

In front of them, Akainu had one hand wrapped around Ace’s throat, lifting him off the ground. The other hand was posed to strike Ace with a fatal blow.

“ACCCEEE!!!” Luffy’s scream reverberated through the air and echoed through the water as he stared at Ace in horror, completely helpless to do anything to save his brother.

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Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw that the Romance Dawn was sinking. The ship that had become a safe haven in a world that wanted him dead—that cursed his very existence was disappearing, and he was helpless to do anything.

His eyes fell on Sabo and Luffy in the boiling waters, faces shadowed in orange light by the Dawn’s fiery carcass. Sabo was having trouble swimming with Luffy in his arms, their little brother completely helpless in the ocean.

Lastly, he looked at Akainu. The admiral’s fist was drawn back, magma spurting from his shoulders, arms and back like blood. The air around the admiral shimmered from the immense heat as magma flowed from the admiral’s body. The temperature was hot enough that the soles of Ace’s boots were melting.

“You won’t be alone for long,” Akainu hissed, their faces mere inches apart, face twisted with fury and hatred. “Your crew will join you in death shortly.”

Ace’s vision filled with red as something in him snapped. Fire bubbled up deep within him. His hair burst into flames, skin transforming into white, scorching fire.

Fire exploded from his very being, shattering the deck under his feet. It burst through the ship, deck after deck until it breached the hull and slammed into the ocean. Flames shot upwards as well, hitting the left side of one of the masts and bursting up into the air like a fiery beacon.

Jutting his hands out, he concentrated with all his might and coated them with haki. He slammed his right fist into Akainu’s face, hitting the man hard enough to send him stumbling backwards. Ace then rammed a foot into the admiral’s stomach, with enough force to send him flying across the deck.

“I won’t let you touch them!” Ace snarled, slowly advancing as the fire surging from his body intensified. The wood blackened and warped under his feet, dark red embers flickering into the air. In that moment, he truly was living fire, his eyes glowing with the white flames.

As the ship shuddered and groaned, Akainu picked himself up from where he had crashed into the deck and wiped blood from his face. A cruel smirk spread across his face. “Time to finish this.”

Ace watched in horror as Akainu leaped into the air, completely ignoring Ace as he honed in on Luffy and Sabo. Ace knew with terrible certainty that he wasn’t going to make it in time to stop him. “Sabo, get out of there!!” He screamed hoarsely, eyes burning from the growing billows of smoke as he tried desperately to reach them, to stop Akainu, to do something.

The ship trembled and buckled under his feet. Water was rapidly pouring into the ship and starting to drag it under.

Akainu pulled his fist back, a massive amount of magma gathered around it as he prepared to strike.
But something in the sea below caught his eyes, causing him to falter. His eyes widened in shock as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing.

All around the ship, on all sides, colossal shapes were emerging from the waters. Hundreds of creatures arose, water streaming off them so heavily it sounded like a thundering waterfall.

For a moment it was impossible to tell what they were—all Ace could see was gleaming eyes as the creatures rose until they were absolutely towering over the sinking ship.

A strange, unearthly shrill rose up in the air, so loud that Ace flinched as the noise reached a crescendo, the other creatures joining in on the strangely familiar cry.

Shivers rolled down his spine. He was rooted in place, mouth agape as he tried to comprehend what was happening.

All around him, all around the smoldering remains of the Dawn, all around the entire area for several miles were sea kings.

Ace had never seen anything like it in his entire life. And he had lived in the Calm Belt for six years.

It took him a moment to spot Cow-chan, but she stood out amongst the horde as the smallest. Ace watched in dawning comprehension as she swam over to Sabo and Luffy and allowed them to climb on her back.

Her family had come for her. And apparently they didn’t appreciate someone trying to kill her new friends.

Akainu fell to the deck as half a dozen massive eyes zeroed in on him. He barely had time to react when they surged forward to attack.

Ace watched in frozen fascination as the sea kings slammed themselves onto the ship. They utterly ignored Akainu’s desperate attempt to keep them away even as magma burned their skin. The sound and smell of sizzling flesh churned Ace’s stomach as they bodily rammed themselves into the ship.

The force of five sea kings crashing into the ship sent it lurching. Ace’s side of the ship lurched upwards as the ship was cracked in half—sending him and everyone nearby unable to grab onto something hurtling down the deck towards the fiery waters below.

Ace struggled to grab on to something as he slid downward. His back and arms scraped roughly against the deck as he clawed desperately for a purchase. His fingers started to bleed.

He hit the water hard enough to knock the wind out of him, any amount of energy he had left sapped instantly.

He hadn’t truly understood the effect that water had on devil fruit users until he’d eaten the mera mera fruit. Ace couldn’t move his arms or his legs at all. It felt like he was trapped in his own body—not unlike the cataplexy he sometimes suffered from thanks to his narcolepsy, but this was worse somehow.

It was all he could do to keep his eyes open. Just before everything slipped away, he felt arms wrap around his shoulders and start to tug him upwards.

Sabo.

Ace allowed himself to relax internally. Sabo would never let him drown.
He would never know if it was lack of oxygen or pure exhaustion that finally stole consciousness from him.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is!
Once again, thank you for all of the amazing reviews!! You're all seriously amazing!
Chapter Four

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Marco stood on Whitebeard’s right as the Moby Dick pursued the Romance Dawn. They had been hampered by abnormally high sea king activity for the area—the creatures swarmed around the ship and almost seemed to be trying to block their way.

It didn’t help that they had to carefully navigate around the jagged rocks that surrounded most of the island. Even the Moby Dick would have been damaged by some of the larger ones.

Several times various commanders had to destroy the rocks blocking their path before they could continue safely. It only slowed them down even more, since they had to ensure that the razor sharp rocks were destroyed low enough beneath the waves that the Moby Dick could pass over them safely.

Bursts of conqueror’s haki had sent the encroaching sea kings scurrying back to a safe distance, but they still lurked watchfully just above the surface of the water.

“What could have them so riled up?” Thatch muttered. His shoulders were taut as he leaned against the railing and squinted at the skulking creatures.

“Perhaps it has something to do with the calf the boys rescued,” Jinbei reasoned thoughtfully. “But this amount of activity…”

“I’ve seen this before,” Whitebeard’s voice rumbled, eyes growing distant. “Someone’s gone and pissed them off.”

Marco arched an eyebrow, but anything he might have said was instantly forgotten when a pillar of fire spiraled high into the air.

“They’re still alive.” Jinbei sighed in relief, one hand clenching around the ship’s railing hard enough to crack it.

The source of the pillar was hidden from sight, but they were close. As soon as the Moby Dick circled around the other side of the inlet they’d be in sight.

“Looks like they’re putting up quite a fight,” Thatch said, frowning as the pillar disappeared in one last torrent of flames. “As expected from the kids gutsy enough to face Pops.”

Whitebeard’s brows furrowed slightly, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Something’s happening.” He murmured.

They reached the other side of the inlet just as a terrible, ear piercing shrill reverberated through the air. Stefan’s pained howls could be heard from somewhere below deck, only adding to the din.

Covering his ears, Marco squinted as he struggled to discern what the massive shapes emerging from the water were. He felt his mouth drop momentarily in shock when realization struck.

No one spoke as the sea kings’ cries dissipated and they attacked the warship. The sea kings bodily slammed into the warship with frenzied recklessness. A deafening cracking and splintering noise rose from the warship as the deck was pulverized under the heavy assault from the behemoth creatures.
The Whitebeard pirates watched on in stunned fascination as the warship was torn in half by the sea kings.

It sunk beneath the ocean in a matter of minutes.

A strange still settled over the Moby Dick the moment the warship vanished from sight. Even the more seasoned pirates were left stunned by what they had seen.

It was Whitebeard who finally broke the silence. “Isn’t that the brats’ ship?”

Marco’s gaze shifted to the blazing caravel as she slowly began her last voyage, bow dipping into the ocean. Something heavy settled at the button of his stomach. “I’m going ahead to look for them.”

“Thatch, alert Namur to gather the best swimmers and have the medical staff prepare for casualties.” Whitebeard ordered, nodding at Marco to go search for survivors from the Dawn.

Marco launched himself into the air, transforming completely into his phoenix form. He sped on ahead of the Moby Dick, sharp eyes searching the waters for any sign of survivors.

As he drew closer to the carnage, he could see that not one, but three marine warships had sunk in the fight. The marines were already swimming frantically to shore, ignored by the gathered sea kings for the most part. It only added to their bizarre behavior; it should have been a massacre, considering how blood thirsty they had been just minutes ago.

The sea itself seemed as if it was on fire, Akainu’s magma still sizzling below the surface. A few sections of the ocean were actually steaming, swirls of white vapor climbing high into the air.

He might not have spotted them if it weren’t for the anguished cry. He zeroed in on the noise and swooped down to get a closer look. What he saw made him swallow hard and grit his teeth.

Ace, Luffy and Sabo were on the back of a sea king calf. Cow-chan, Marco guessed. Ace was motionless next to Luffy, pale and covered in burns and bruises.

It was the blond that was the cause of Luffy’s obvious distress—he was limp and deathly pale in the boy’s arms, left shoulder covered in blood.

Marco started to swoop downwards for a better look, but found himself face to face with a disgruntled sea king. He swerved, barely avoiding the creature’s enormous mouth trying to snatch him out of the air.

Quickly putting some elevation between himself and the sea king, Marco started circling the boys. He didn’t see any sign of the rest of the ASL pirates and the waters were teeming with marines and sea kings. This wouldn’t be an easy rescue.

He glanced down again as Luffy tugged Ace closer until he was able to wrap his arms around both of the unconscious pirates.

Marco wasn’t certain, but it looked like he was also trying to apply pressure to Sabo’s shoulder wound, which was good. He couldn’t tell for certain, but he didn’t think Sabo would bleed out before they were able to reach them.

He flew back to the Moby Dick and landed on the deck by Whitebeard’s feet. “Ace, Sabo, and Luffy are safe for the moment, but they’re badly hurt, yoi. I didn’t see any sign of the rest of their crew.”
“I don’t think we’ll be able to get any closer than this, Pops,” Izo announced as he walked towards them, eyes fixed on the ocean. “The sea kings are starting to circle us again.”

“Have divisions one and three prepare to fend off a sea king attack. Jinbei, I want you to go with Namur and the others to rescue the boys,” Whitebeard ordered, knowing a familiar face would make the rescue easier. “Marco, circle around again and find the rest of their crew.”

“Got it, Pops.” Marco took off immediately, soaring high into the air. He was a bright beacon of light in the growing dusk, sparks of azure fire left in his wake.

***

“Sabo!” Luffy’s panicked voice reached Ace distantly, pulling him from the murky depths of unconsciousness.

There were hands on him, brushing his hair away from his face and running down his chest. His hands felt like they were on fire and the rest of him wasn’t much better.

He blinked, eyes unfocused as he struggled to make sense of his surroundings.

Ace saw Luffy, wrapped in a thick towel next to Sabo. He was soaking wet and crying, hands curled into fists.

Something defensive awoke in Ace, bringing him closer to lucidly. Why was Luffy crying…?

His vision dimmed for a moment, but when he opened them again he saw red. Sabo was flat on his back, pale and utterly still. Strangers were crowding around him, blocking Ace’s view. There were people with needles next to his brother and he didn’t know who they were.

Ace jerked as he lost sight of Sabo, his brother swallowed in a sea of pink. He fought against the hands that were trying to hold him down and forced himself onto his feet.

Flames burst from his shoulders, back, and legs as he panted heavily, unable to catch his breath. “Get away.” He snarled, stumbling closer to Luffy and Sabo.

One nurse leapt back in alarm, but the others simply glanced at him before turning back to Sabo and trying to staunch the bleeding from his shoulder.

A muscled, tattooed chest appeared in front of Ace’s limited, blurred vision, blocking him from his brothers. Ace vaguely realized that it was the first division commander of the Whitebeard pirates standing in front of him, but all he could truly comprehend was that someone was standing between him and his brothers.

“Get away…” Ace wheezed with a half lidded glare. “…From my brothers.”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise. He held his hands up in a placating gesture. “We’re not going to hurt your brothers, yoi. He was badly hurt and we’re trying to help him.”

Ace!” Luffy suddenly rammed into Ace with enough force to knock him over. He stared down at his brother sheepishly and scratched his head. “Oopps.”

Ace’s vision went black when his bottom hit the floor, pain exploding in his chest. A firm pair of hands quickly grabbed his shoulders and stopped him from falling backwards and hitting his head on the deck.

The world sounded like it was coming from underwater when he finally regained some awareness,
but it quickly slipped from his grasp like quick sand.

“--- you hear me?”

“--- need stretchers.”

“Get them both to the infirmary.”

“Everything will be alright, Ace. You and your brothers are safe.” The last thing he heard was Whitebeard’s voice.

***

Wakefulness was slow in returning. He was comfortable, warm, and not in pain. The first few times he surfaced to awareness, he could hear Luffy’s voice nearby. Ace felt no urgency to wake up, so he allowed himself to drift.

When Ace finally opened his eyes, it took him several moments to process what exactly he was seeing.

He was in an infirmary; much, much larger than the Dawn’s and obviously better equipped. He was on soft, comfortable bed with a clean white sheet pulled over his chest. His hands and arms were heavily bandaged heavily and he had several smaller bandages on his chest and legs.

An IV protruded from his right arm. Ace felt himself shudder uncontrollably, chills racing down his spine.

Ace forced himself into a sitting position and ruthlessly tore the IV from his arm with a grunt. He glanced around, catching sight of Sabo in the bed next to him when his gaze snapped to the three figures huddled around a small table.

Luffy, the first division commander of the Whitebeards, and Whitebeard himself, were all sitting around a square table playing cards. Their attention was fixed on the cards in their hands, but Ace had no doubt that Luffy was the only one oblivious to the fact that he was awake.

Whitebeard utterly dwarfed the table. He was having trouble holding the tiny cards in his giant fingers, squinting down at them with a look of deep concentration on his face. He had several IVs and a number of other medical apparatuses attached to his body that Ace didn’t know the names of. Was he sick?

“Do you have any threes, pineapple head?” Luffy asked, legs swinging up and down absently.

“You just asked that, yoi. Go fish,” the first division commander drawled slowly, eyeing Luffy in mild irritation. “And my name is Marco.”

“Oh.” Luffy pouted and adjusted his grip on the large number of cards in his hands to grab another one. He definitely had the most out of the three players.

“Pops, do you have any eights?” Marco asked innocently, smirking slightly at the baleful stare his father directed at him.

“Marco…” Whitebeard said slowly, handing over three eight cards with a little fumbling to the man sitting across from him. “Are you cheating?”

“Cheating?” Marco repeated, sounding mildly offended as he collected the cards and laid down a
fourth eight on the table. “It’s Go Fish. How exactly am I cheating?”
Whitebeard’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I’m not sure. But, I’m sure you’d find a way.”

“I don’t cheat, yoi. I’ve been falsely accused of cheating at poker, but that’s just because some of your sons are sore losers.” Marco huffed indignantly, adjusting the three remaining cards in his hands.

“Hmm…” Whitebeard stared at Marco a moment. He glanced down at the cards in his hands for a moment, lips twitching upwards. “Luffy, do you have any threes?”

“What?! How did you know?” Luffy demanded in genuine shock, handing over two cards as Whitebeard and Marco chuckled.

“You’ve been asking for threes the last five turns, knuckle-brain,” Marco said fondly, reaching over to ruffle Luffy’s hair. “Stop asking us for the same card every turn, yoi.”

Luffy resumed pouting and struggled to adjust the absurd amount of cards in his hands. Several of the cards were facing the wrong direction, but he either didn’t care or didn’t notice. Knowing Luffy, it was probably both.

Ace could only stare. Whitebeard, the first division commander, and Luffy were playing Go Fish. It sounded like the start of a bad joke.

He shifted slightly and hissed as the movement jostled just about all of his injuries.

“ACE!!!” Luffy shouted, launching himself at Ace and clambering onto the bed. “You’re finally awake! Jinbei had to leave while you were asleep!”

“Stop shouting so loud,” Ace winced at Luffy’s volume even as his arms automatically tugged him closer and wrapped around him. “You okay?”

Luffy had a few bandages around his arms and a band aid on his forehead, but otherwise seemed perfectly fine. The only thing amiss was the absence of his precious straw hat.

He was completely at ease with Whitebeard and Marco which meant that they had been treating him well while Ace had been unconscious. Ace glanced at them and reluctantly categorized them as non-threatening, at least for the moment.

Ace wondered idly how Luffy had roped Whitebeard and Marco into playing Go Fish with him.

Luffy nodded his head vigorously at Ace’s question. “Yup! You’ve been asleep for sooo long. Wendy, Haru, and Bam-Bam were here earlier, but they left. I forget why.”

Blinking, Ace glanced at Marco, who had turned in his chair to watch the two brothers. “Why… why are we…?” he trailed off, staring in confusion at Whitebeard.

“Jinbei told us what happened at the village,” Whitebeard said simply, sitting back in his oversized chair. He almost knocked the table over with his massive knee, but Marco swiftly tugged it out of the way. “You have my thanks for protecting the village in my stead.”

“But why are we here?” Ace asked in bewilderment, glancing down at Luffy and over at Sabo. “Why did you help us?”

Whitebeard arched an eyebrow, but it was Marco who answered. “Why wouldn’t we, yoi?”

Half a dozen bitter retorts sprang to mind, but his mouth felt dry. Luffy snuggled closer and buried
his face into Ace’s chest. “No one else would.” He said at last, gently stroking Luffy’s hair.

“I can think of a few people who would, yoi,” Marco replied, gazing steadily at Ace. “Your ship sank, so you’re stuck with us for a while.”

Ace felt his shoulders sag slightly, but the news didn’t come as a surprise. Despite his best efforts to protect the ship, Akainu had still managed to hit the Dawn multiple times. “Is Sabo okay?”

Sabo was as pale as the sheets that covered him. The IV protruding from his arm made Ace want to leap out of bed and yank it out of his arm, but he managed to restrain himself.

“His left shoulder was injured from Pop’s bisanto and he was also shot.” A nurse declared as she walked towards them, eyes focused on a clipboard. “Thankfully it went clean through. He has burns all over his body and some bruising that looks a few days old. I assume he got them in a fight?”

“He got a little banged up fighting one of the pirates attacking the village,” Ace answered with a grimace, flicking Luffy’s nose absently. “Will the burns leave scars?” Sabo already had more than his fair share of burn scars scattered across his body.

“Most of them shouldn’t.” The nurse answered, pausing in front of Ace’s bed. “I’m Jules, head nurse of the Moby Dick. How are you feeling?”

“Uh, fine overall. I’ve had worse.” Ace answered as Jules scowled at the IV that Ace had torn out. She picked it up from where it had been dripping onto the floor for the past ten minutes. “I’m going to reininsert the IV--”

“No,” Ace snapped sharply, drawing his arms away from the grumbling nurse and squishing Luffy against him in the process. “I’m fine.”

“You were unconscious for three days,” Jules answered, shutting off the IV drip. “Your body is exhausted; you have four broken ribs, numerous burns, bruises, and a concussion--”

“Like I said,” Ace put in, defensiveness creeping into his tone as he cut the nurse off before she could continue ranting. “I’ve had worse.”

Whitebeard and Marco exchanged glances, settling back in their seats and watching with poorly concealed amusement.

“Are you a medical expert?” Jules asked sharply, pausing just long enough for Ace to shake his head. “A nurse? Doctor? Then, while you’re in my infirmary you’ll do as I say, understand?” She jabbed a finger in Ace’s face to accentuate each point, managing to look much more menacing than should have been possible with her short stature.

Ace’s shoulders stiffened as Luffy snickered in his arms. But, the moment Jules inched closer to insert the IV, both Ace and Luffy shrank back slightly without seeming to notice, mistrust clearly written on their faces.

“Jules.” Whitebeard called out, voice softer than normal. He had been watching Ace since he had woken up and had noticed the boy’s obvious discomfort at the sight of the IV that had been in his arm and the one still in Sabo.

The nurse glanced at him, eyes flickering with understanding. After a moment of silent conversation with the old pirate she deflated. “Fine. I won’t put the IV back in for now. But you’ll do as I say, understand?”
Ace nodded, relief clearly written all over his face.

“Luffy, come back over here so we can finish the game, yoi,” Marco glanced at Whitebeard and flashed him a mischievous grin. “I’m about to beat everyone.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's chapter 4!!
Thank you again for all of the amazing comments! The response to this has been amazing and I love each and every comment that you've left :D
Chapter Five

Jules spent the next twenty minutes grilling Ace on how he was feeling and checking him over. She was gentler than normal, easily picking up on the way Ace unconsciously tensed every time she touched him to check his numerous injuries.

When she was done with Ace, she checked over Luffy and Sabo before leaving with a stern warning to Whitebeard not to drink in her infirmary.

The moment she was out of sight, Whitebeard pulled out a large jug of sake from underneath his chair. He took a swig from the jug and pointedly ignored the mildly disapproving headshake from Marco. “I like living dangerously.” He said with a chuckle.

“If she catches you drinking in the infirmary you might not make it out alive, yoi,” Marco said, pointedly not looking at Whitebeard and staring at the two remaining cards in his hands. “I won’t come to your rescue this time.”

Whitebeard huffed, accidentally dropping one of his cards as he struggled to rearrange them with his oversized fingers. “I can always count on you, son.” He said with a booming laugh, shoulders shaking in amusement.

“Pineapple’s your son, old man?” Luffy tilted his head sideways, gaze darting between the two pirates curiously.

“Anyone who takes Pop’s mark and joins the crew becomes his son or daughter,” Marco answered, eyes flickering toward Ace. “We’re all his children, yoi. It doesn’t matter that we’re not related by blood. We’re a family.”

“Oh. Just like me, Ace and Sabo.” Luffy contemplated Whitebeard for a moment before positively beaming up at him. “You’re a good guy, old man.”

Whitebeard’s laughter rumbled like far off thunder. “What a gutsy little brat. Bet you cause lots of trouble for your brothers.”

“You have nooo idea.” Ace grunted, slumping down slightly so that he was in a more comfortable position. He crossed his arms over his chest, eyes watchful for any threatening movement from the pirates. Just because the pirates had rescued them didn’t mean that he trusted them. Not by a long shot.

If they had been planning on just killing them, they would have done it by now. What kind of game were they playing?

Luffy stood up on his chair suddenly, sniffing and the air and starting to drool. “Food!”

Ace sighed in relief when he saw Wendy, Haru, and Bam Bam walking toward them, healthy and smiling. They all looked a little banged up, but they were alive. Ace felt a knot in his stomach loosen. “You idiots okay?”

“You’re awake!” Wendy exclaimed, smiling brightly at Ace as she balanced three trays crammed full of food in her arms precariously. “We brought lunch.”
“Is one of the other commanders joining us for lunch, Thatch?” Marco asked, eyeing the huge amount of food in confusion.

“Nope! Apparently Ace has missed—” Thatch paused and glanced at Wendy, setting down a large tray full of food in front of Whitebeard and another with a more normal portion size for Marco.

“24 meals.” Luffy and Wendy responded at the same time, sharing a grin.

“24?” Ace asked in confusion, mentally counting the meals he had missed during his fight with Jinbei. “How long was I asleep?”

“Two days,” Wendy answered, handing Ace one of the trays and setting the other by his bed. “This should be enough to tide you over until dinner.”

“Until dinner?” Marco asked incredulously. “That’s enough for five people, yoi.”

“More like seven.” Thatch grunted, pulling up a chair next to the table and setting his own meal down.

Luffy took a whole tray for himself and sat down on the bed to Ace’s left, already stuffing his face. “Mmmhf hhmmf haaaa nrreff mhf?” He mumbled unintelligibly.

“Yes, this tray is yours too,” Wendy answered, setting it on the bed for him. “Stop talking with your mouth full.”

Bam Bam settled herself on the edge of Luffy’s bed and started eating her food slowly and mechanically with chopsticks. Her hair was pulled into twin buns atop her head with red ribbons to secure them in place. The ends of the ribbons dangled down and brushed against the nape of her neck. Her mouth opened and she started speaking, but her words were spoken so softly it was impossible to distinguish what she was saying.

Marco felt his eyebrow arching as he glanced at Thatch, who just shrugged. The ASL pirates were certainly a unique bunch. “What are all of your roles on the crew?”

“Ace and Sabo are co-captains. Sabo’s also our navigator. I’m the cook,” Wendy answered happily since everyone else was too busy stuffing their faces with food. “Bam Bam is our explosives expert. She’s also pretty much a ninja. Haru over here is our escape artist and thief.”

“And magician extraordinaire,” Haru added quickly, giving a flamboyant bow. “I was a stage magician with the Starlett Circus for six years before I left to join the crew.”

“How does a circus magician become a pirate?” Thatch asked, digging into his own meal.

“I was arres— er, detained,” Haru cleared his throat, shooting Ace a glare when he snickered. “By the marines and ended up in prison at the same time Ace was there.”

“How did you get caught?” Whitebeard asked Ace, already halfway finished with his meal. Ace shrugged. “Ate and ran at the wrong restaurant.”

Thatch choked and sputtered. He jerked out of his seat suddenly as the back of his chair shattered when Whitebeard tried to gently pat him on the back to keep him from choking. Luffy burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” Whitebeard said sheepishly, lifting the broken chair up and setting it down behind him.
“You can sit here.”

Thatch sat on Whitebeard’s massive knee and resumed eating. “Please continue.” He said, nodding at Haru, completely oblivious to the perplexed look he was receiving from Ace.

“Anyways, I was placed in the same prison cell as Ace and together we tried to escape,” Haru face hardened slightly, hands clenching into fists. “But they managed to catch us and decided that a “swift execution” was the only course of action.” He all but spat the words, face twisted in anger.

Wendy gently shoved Luffy over so she could sit next to him on the bed, their shoulders brushing against each other. “Almost gave Sabo a heart attack.”

“But not you, Luffy?” Marco asked, glancing at the boy.

“Sabo and I wouldn’t let him die.” Luffy declared with absolute confidence, starting to work on his second tray.

“As if I’d die and leave you and Sabo on your own.” Ace scoffed, rubbing his eyes absently as lethargy flooded his body. A moment later, his head slammed down onto his half empty plate.

Marco, Thatch, and Whitebeard all tensed in concern, but none of the ASL pirates seemed worried. Luffy and Bam Bam instantly abandoned their food and pulled out markers from somewhere and began doodling on his face.

“He’s going to kill you when he wakes up.” Wendy huffed, stacking the empty plates back on one of the trays. “He’s just tired.” She added, glancing at Whitebeard, unease flickering across her face.

“Finishing with the story,” Haru said, eager to distract the older pirates from Ace. “We were both about to be executed. I managed to pick the locks on my handcuffs just as Sabo, Luffy, and Wendy arrived to rescue him. I got him out of the sea stone cuffs the marines had on him and we escaped together. The rest is, as they say, history.”

“What about you, Bam Bam?” Marco asked, eyeing the small girl curiously. There was something about her that made Marco’s guard rise up, when he actually remembered she was in the room. She was strangely silent and solemn compared to the rest of her crewmates.

She mouthed something, but her words were inaudible. After a second attempt at speaking she turned to Wendy, brow quirked slightly in frustration.

“Bam Bam just appeared on the ship one day last year and never left,” Wendy explained at last with a shrug. “Ace and Sabo tried getting rid of her a few times, but she just kept coming back. They gave up eventually and here she is!”

“They tried for five months,” Haru snorted, shaking his head. “But she’s quite persistent. She saved Luffy’s life and continued to earn their trust until they finally gave up.”

There were a number of things that Marco wanted to ask after that not so informative explanation, but Ace jerked awake with a grasp. He accidentally head-butted Luffy, who hadn’t managed to move out of the way quickly enough, unlike Bam Bam. Luffy fell backwards off the mattress and hit his head on the other bed with a grunt, landing on the floor in a tangled heap.

Ace leaned over the edge of the bed as Luffy sat up, rubbing his head. His eyes zeroed in on the marker still clutched in Luffy’s hands. “Luffy…”

Whitebeard, Marco, and Thatch burst out laughing at the sight of Ace’s face. They had drawn a
mustache on his face not unlike Whitebeard’s, a pair of glasses, and played connect the dots with his freckles. The word “idiot” had been written on his forehead in large letters to complete their masterpiece.

“Luffy, Bam Bam, I think the three of us are going to get along famously.” Thatch said with an excited grin, already imagining the various pranks he could pull off on his unsuspecting brothers with two fresh faces.

“Just leave me out of it, yoi.” Marco drawled, watching in amusement as Ace dragged Luffy into a headlock, uttering insults and muffled curses as he wrestled with the boy.

Luffy shouted and struggled to get away with his head caught firmly in Ace’s arms. His neck stretched impossibly as his legs scrambled away from Ace. His torso blindly rammed into the opposite bed and then made a beeline straight toward Marco.

Marco stopped Luffy’s squirming body before the boy could crash into him. “Devil fruit?” He asked curiously as he poked the boy’s neck, causing Luffy to choke out a laugh.

“I ate the gomu gomu fruit and became a rubber man!” Luffy exclaimed as his body snapped back, slamming into Ace and knocking him off the bed.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Wendy scolded, lifting Luffy up off his dazed brother and carrying him back to his bed. “Ace is still wounded, so no monkeying around.”

Ace staggered to his feet and flopped onto the bed with a scowl. His glare intensified when Thatch snickered again. “At least tell me the two of you didn’t use permanent marker.”

“We did!” Luffy exclaimed, laughing.

“You little--” Ace groaned, covering his face in his hands. “Wendy, whhhyyy….”

“Bam Bam bit me the last time I tried to stop them.” Wendy answered, clutching Haru’s arm and sticking her tongue out at Bam Bam before ducking back behind Haru.

“Stop using me as a human shield.” Haru grumbled, shaking his head at the two girls on either side of him.

“It’s actually almost… artistic,” Thatch offered, shrinking back in his chair at the glare he received from Ace. “I’m surprised they managed to do so much so quickly.”

“Practice.” Bam Bam uttered softly, the first clear word they’d heard from her the entire two days she’d been on the ship.

“I’ll go get something for you to try and scrub that off.” Marco offered, standing up and stretching. He patted Whitebeard on the shoulder as he passed.

“Thatch, why don’t you take some of these plates back to the kitchen.” Whitebeard suggested, before taking a long drink of sake.

“Sure thing, Pops,” Thatch stood and stacked as many plates on two of the trays as he could. He saluted Luffy and Bam Bam on his way out, darting one last look at Ace. He was chuckling under his breath as he left the infirmary.

A tense silence stretched out as Ace scrubbed his face absently. He eyed Whitebeard wearily as if he expected the Yonko to suddenly attack them at any moment. Maybe he did.
Whitebeard took another sip of sake before speaking, weighing his words carefully. “I have a proposition for you.” He said at last, gazing steadily at Ace.

Ace squirmed slightly under the gaze, wishing the old pirate was easier to read. “What?”

“Your ship was destroyed and you’re stranded in the New World without any money and no allies. You can’t buy a ship and you can’t take any of the normal transportation routes back to Shabaody,” Whitebeard paused, allowing his words to sink in. “Your options are very limited.”

“You can leave us on the next island,” Ace responded, gritting his teeth. He didn’t need the reminder that they were alone in the most dangerous place in the entire world, friendless, without a ship, and utterly penniless. “We’re grateful for what you’ve already done for us.”

“It’s at least half our fault you ran into the marines in the first place. You might have been able to elude them if we hadn’t detained you,” Whitebeard responded, scratching his chin. “In any case, you don’t want to be dropped off on the next island—”

“You don’t owe us anything,” Ace interrupted sharply, eager to part ways with the strange pirate as soon as possible. “The next island—”

“Is the operations base of a Cipher Pol team,” Whitebeard continued, choosing to ignore Ace’s outburst. “Considering the injuries you’ve sustained, I think we can agree that it would be best not to risk encountering them at the moment.”

“Ugh… Cipher Pol is bad news,” Haru shuddered, reaching to draw his cape closer around himself before realizing that he didn’t have it. It had been too badly damaged to be salvaged. “We’re not going there, right?”

“…You said you had a proposal for us?” Ace said at last, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“My proposition is this; stay on the Moby Dick for the next three to six months and we will take you back to Paradise.”

“You want us to stay longer?” Ace asked incredulously. He had been sure that if Whitebeard hadn’t been planning on killing them or turning them over to the marines, he’d be eager to be rid of them.

“Yes. I like you brats,” Whitebeard said with a laugh. “Stay with us and we’ll take you to Paradise. Who knows? Maybe you’ll even decide to join my crew and become my sons and daughters.”

“Trying to recruit my crew out from under me?” Ace wouldn’t blame them if they left. The marines had been after them even harder of late and Ace couldn’t guarantee their safety like Whitebeard could.

The Yonko’s eyebrows furrowed and his head tilted slightly. He scrutinized Ace a moment, before softly stating: “I meant you as well, Ace.”

Ace felt shock ricochet through his entire body. Him? The son of the pirate king, become Whitebeard’s son? It was the most absurd, insane thing he’d ever heard. And a trap. Definitely a trap of some kind.

“I’m not joining your crew old man,” Luffy said, a bright, determined gleam in his eyes. All of the ASL pirates knew exactly what his next words would be. “I’m going to become the Pirate King. I have to be captain of my own crew.”

“Gurarara!” Whitebeard laughed, nodding in approval. “I’d expect nothing less from you. You’d still
be welcome on board until you’re old enough to set out on your own if your brothers decide to join.”

“Are you crazy, old man?!” Ace snarled, anger sparking to the surface. “Do you know what it’d mean for you if I joined? The marines would go to war. They’d make a Buster Call seem like a tea party in comparison to what they’d do.”

Whitebeard leaned forward, eyes utterly sincere. “I’d face a hundred Buster Calls if it meant keeping one of my children safe.”

Ace was speechless, desperately searching the Yonko for any sign of deception. He found none, but couldn’t bring himself to believe the man was telling the truth.

“I’m sure you’ll want to discuss this with your brother when he wakes up,” Whitebeard stood up stiffly, popping his neck. “There’s no pressure on any of you to join if you do decide to travel with us to Paradise. Think it over.”

Ace watched him leave, unable to process his offer. He collapsed onto his back and covered his face with one of his arms.

Sabo had better wake up soon.

Chapter End Notes

So here's chapter five!
Once again thank you so much for all of the awesome comments!!
Updates might start to be every other week depending on my schedule and how much writing I can do in my free time. I'm taking my last classes I need to take to graduate from college, so my workload is a bit crazy.
Anyways, hope you enjoyed the chapter!
“I think that one right there is the best option,” Sabo said, pointing to a small fishing boat docked a few feet away from their hiding place. “It’s small enough for us to handle on our own, but it won’t be cramped even with all three of us.”

Ace squinted at the boat skeptically before releasing a long, exhausted sigh. “It’ll have to do. Are you sure you don’t want Luffy to come with you?”

“You just want to leave him for me to deal with,” Sabo joked softly, messing with Luffy’s soft, unruly hair. “You’ll need his help with the disguise and to carry all the supplies to the cove.”

“We’re not really tall enough with just the two of us for the normal disguise,” Ace replied with a frown, nervously tugging the hood over his head down a little more until it was almost covering his eyes.

“You need his help,” Sabo insisted, tensing unconsciously as three marines walked past the crates they were hiding behind. He kept silent until he was sure they were out of earshot. “Besides, I should be able to handle the ship by myself without a problem. I’ve been studying those books on sailing and navigation Dadan got us. I’m sure I’ll be able to get to the cove without a problem.”

Ace glanced down at Luffy, who had been oddly quiet throughout the exchange, a strangely serious expression on his normally cheerful face. He’d been unusually quiet since the disaster they were currently in had started. “Alright. We’ll meet you there tonight. Be careful, okay?”

“I should be telling you that,” Sabo said with a chuckle, elbowing Ace in the side. “Can you two actually get the supplies without getting into trouble and making a scene?”

“Of course we can! Right, Luffy?” Ace huffed, slapping a hand down on Luffy’s head and forcing the seven year old to nod up and down.

“Alright. I better go now while everyone is distracted.” Sabo glanced out behind the crates and got ready to dash to the ship, but a small hand wrapped tightly around his arm and pulled him back.

“Sabo,” Luffy said softly, fear shining brightly in his eyes. He tugged on Sabo’s sleeve. “Don’t go.”

Sabo gently pried Luffy’s rubbery fingers off his shirt and squeezed his shoulder. “I’ll see you tonight.”

He gave them both an encouraging smile, trying to exclude more confidence than he actually felt. But neither Ace nor Luffy looked any less tense, faces pale and pinched with worry.

Ace was wound tighter than a spring. His eyes were shadowed with dark circles and he was almost vibrating with nervous energy.

He hadn’t been sleeping very well the past week. Ever since the navy ships had come into sight of Dawn Island, he had been strangely tense. When they had found out the real reason why the navy had come… The only time he was able to relax enough to sleep was if Sabo was awake to keep watch.
Sabo glanced both ways and slipped out behind the stack of crates. He sprang onto the boat and quickly began to prepare to set sail. It didn’t take him long, despite operating with a complete lack of fist hand experience with boats. It seemed all of his time studying as a young child served him well now; he had managed to memorize the books Dadan had given them within days thanks to the studying techniques he had learned from his various instructors.

Sabo couldn’t remember much of what happened after he set foot on the boat. His memory seemed to jump ahead in sporadic bursts. Perhaps it was his mind’s way of protecting him.

He remembered setting sail on the tiny ship, euphoria at being out at sea washing away all of the anxiety and stress he’d experienced in the past week.

He remembered cutting in front of the large ship bearing the Celestial Dragon who was arriving to visit Goa Kingdom that day. He couldn’t remember why he cut in front of it. Perhaps he had been trying to avoid sailing too close to one of the navy ships docked at the harbor.

He didn’t remember the shot itself, but he remembered something hitting the side of the boat and exploding, sending him stumbling across the small deck. He tried to put out the fires with his coat, desperate to somehow save the boat the three brothers needed to escape Dawn Island. They had to leave before the marines found Ace and Luffy.

He almost had the fire out when the second shot was fired. He saw it out of the corner of his left eye before the world exploded in pain, fire and shrapnel hitting his small body with enough force to completely knock him out of the boat.

Sabo didn’t remember sinking below the ocean, body burnt to a blackened, bloody crisp. He was only vaguely aware of the arms that wrapped around him and pulled him to the surface.

He was told later that Ace had jumped into the water the instant the first explosion had hit the ship. By the time the second shot hit he was close enough to Sabo to keep him from drowning. Ace had thought he was dragging his brother’s corpse back to the docks.

It wasn’t until he hauled Sabo onto the dock that Ace was able to hear the terrible, pained moans coming from the limp body in his arms.

A crowd was forming loosely around them for a brief moment, but it quickly dissipated as the ship bearing the Celestial Dragon grew closer.

Ace and Luffy screamed for help, but the men and women who had come to the docks to watch the Celestial Dragon’s arrival edged away, unwilling to even make eye contact with the desperate boys. Even the marines turned a blind eye, unaware that the two boys they were hunting were right in front of them.

Sabo felt like he was still underwater; sounds were distorted and seemed to be coming over a great distance. All he could hear from his left ear was a sharp, painful ringing.

He opened his eyes—eye, and saw her. His mother was standing a few yards away, hands clamped over her mouth and eyes wide with horror.

She took a single, half aborted step forward, before Sabo’s father firmly grasped her arm. He fixed Sabo with a cold, angry stare and dragged his wife away.

Sabo’s mother clasped her hands tightly together and straightened her back, composing herself as she turned her back on him. There were no tears in her eyes.
Sabo watched them leave, acting as if they didn’t even know who he was and felt something tear apart inside of him. He felt tears stream down his face, both from the pain and the unbearable anguish he felt inside.

He thought he saw Dadan appear in front of him, but it didn’t truly register to Sabo as pain stole away his coherency. The last thing he saw was Dadan’s angry, tear stained face as she bent down to pick him up.

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Sabo woke up with a jerk. The room he was in was silent; in some ways that was more terrifying to him than the sound of cannons or the clang of steel clashing against steel. His eyes opened immediately and he stretched out his haki to get a feel of what was around him even as his eyes searched for his brothers.

Ace was on his left, curled protectively around Luffy. They were both fast asleep and snoring softly. They were clearly exhausted and covered in burns and bruises, but alive. For the moment, that was all that mattered.

He allowed himself to relax fully when he spotted Wendy, Haru, and Bam Bam huddled together on a bed a few feet away. Wendy was working on fixing Luffy’s damaged straw hat while Haru and Bam Bam were playing a game of some kind on a piece of paper.

They couldn’t be on a marine ship if they were unchained and relaxed enough to be sleeping and playing games. He frowned in confusion.

“Where are we?” he croaked, groaning when he tried to sit up. The burns he’d sustained from the water were throbbing painfully in a way he was all too familiar with.

“Sabo!” Wendy shouted jubilantly, setting the straw hat down carefully on the bed.

Ace snorted as he jolted awake, eyes instantly on Sabo. He grinned in relief when he saw his brother awake and watching him quizzically. “Finally decided you’ve gotten enough beauty sleep?” he teased, elbowing Luffy to wake him up.

Luffy just rolled over and muttered something about meat. He didn’t respond at all as Ace poked and prodded him except to somehow punch Ace in the face without even waking up.

Recoiling back as Luffy snuggled deeper into the covers, Ace swatted the back of his head and turned back to Sabo. “We’re on the Moby Dick.” He said, watching Sabo’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Jinbei and some of the division commanders pulled the three of you off Cow-chan and came and found us,” Wendy said, springing from the bed to help Sabo sit up. “Jinbei and the mayor told Whitebeard everything that happened, so they’re not trying to kill us anymore!”

Sabo blinked owlishly, grunting as he leaned forward slightly so Wendy could fluff up the pillows behind him. “That’s always refreshing.” He said dryly, eyeing the IV in his arm uneasily.

“It’s just fluids,” Ace told him, easily reading the distrustful expression on Sabo’s face. “We made sure.”

Sabo sighed and ran a hand through his tangled blond curls. He’d never had a problem with needles before, but after what had happened with the doctor they’d met on Glass Island, neither he nor Ace had been able to stand the idea of IVs, or trust doctors in general.
“The head nurse should be back soon.” Wendy said, handing him a glass of water.

“What else have I missed?” Sabo asked after taking a long drink from the cup. “What happened to Akainu?”

“Akainu got pulled out of the water by someone. The newspapers are heralding his ‘triumphant defeat’ of us. Apparently, we escaped by destroying the warships and ‘killing almost everyone on board.’ Akainu had to let us go to save his men. As if he even cares. Can you believe that?” Ace groused irately, scowling. “I got a few punches in before the ship was destroyed.”

“Good.” Sabo clenched his fists tightly, fighting down the rage that gushed to the surface at the thought of Akainu still breathing and undoubtedly preparing to hunt them down again. “Anything else happen while I was out?”

“Whitebeard invited us to join his crew.” Haru replied casually. His tone sounded as if being invited to join the most power man in the world’s crew was an everyday occurrence.

“All of us,” Ace said in a somewhat bewildered tone. “Me too, supposedly.”

Sabo wracked his brain for what he knew about Whitebeard. He remembered Rayleigh had mentioned him once or twice and it had been obvious that Rayleigh had a great deal of respect for the Yonko. Still…

“You shouldn’t act that surprised that he wants you, Ace,” Wendy said, crossing her arms. “You’re stupendous. Why wouldn’t he want someone awesome like you to join his crew?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a reply,” Ace said tensely, shaking his head at Wendy’s endless optimism. “He offered to take us back to the first half of the Grand Line, but it could be three to six months before they actually head back.”

“Hmmm…” Sabo was silent for a moment, frowning thoughtfully. “It might be our best option, at least for now. We have no one else we trust.”

“I don’t trust them either.” Ace said pointedly, glancing down at Luffy as he abruptly sat up and rubbed his eyes sleepily.

“They could’ve killed us already if they wanted to,” Sabo replied. “And it makes no sense for them to rescue us from the marines only to hand us over to them later.”

“‘Rescue’ being a loose term in this case,” Ace grunted, pointing at Sabo so Luffy would finally realize that he was awake. “All three of the ships were destroyed by the time they came, so really the only thing they did was pull us from was the ocean.”

“Sabo! You’re awake.” Luffy exclaimed in delight, clumsily springing over Ace to launch himself at Sabo.

Grunting as Luffy slammed into his chest, Sabo smiled fondly and hugged the thirteen year old tightly. “Have they been feeding you enough? How long was I asleep?”

“Two full days. Ace woke up this morning.” Wendy answered, sitting on the edge of Sabo’s bed. She tugged on the back of Luffy’s shirt. “Be gentle; he was pretty badly burned.”

Luffy leaned back and studied Sabo with intent scrutiny. His eyes fell on the scars evident on Sabo’s left collar bone and shoulder. After a moment, he huffed and seemed satisfied that Sabo was alright. “Their food is really good! Thatch showed me all around the ship. It’s huge! Thatch and pineapple
“Pineapple guy?” Ace snickered. “You mean Marco?”

“Yup!” Luffy grinned and settled himself at the end of Sabo’s bed, sitting cross-legged. “I really like him. Whitebeard too.”

“Really?” Sabo asked curiously. Luffy was strangely astute when it came to judging character.

“Yep!” Luffy said nodding. “Jinbei really likes him too. Said the old man saved the fish island.”


“He had to leave. It wouldn’t look good if he spent too much time with the Whitebeards,” Wendy explained. “He said he’d try to visit us again soon though.”

Ace scratched his head and sighed heavily. He had been hoping that Sabo would be against staying with the Whitebeards, but he probably should have known better. “There has to be another option.”

“It wouldn’t be safe for them to drop us off on an island,” Sabo said at last. “It’d take us too long to earn enough money for a ship.”

“Whitebeard already ruled out using the regular transportation routes back to Shaboady,” Wendy said. “There’s too high of a risk that someone would recognize us.”

“It seems Whitebeard is our only option, at least for now,” Sabo murmured. “Maybe we can work out an agreement with him to earn some money.”

“I don’t like it.” Ace grunted, crossing his arms. “We have no idea what his true intentions are.”

“Not everyone has ulterior motives.” Sabo retorted, staring at Ace in exasperation.

“Trust them or not, we have nowhere else to go,” Luffy said, staring up at the ceiling. “It’s a moo point.”

The ASL pirates all turned to both stared at him.

“Moo?” Ace repeated, eyebrows twitching as he exchanged an amused look with Sabo.

“You know… moo! Like a cow’s opinion. It doesn’t matter.” Luffy replied, nodding and looking quite pleased with himself. “It’s moo!”

Ace slapped a hand over his face and stifled a chuckle as Haru and Wendy both gasped and chortled under their breath.

Sabo choked and snickered into his hand. “Well, can’t argue with Luffy logic.” He said when he finally had a modicum of composure back.

“Fine,” Ace sighed resignedly, flopping down on his back. “We’ll stay for now. But, if there’s any chance to set out on our own, we’re taking it.”

“Aye-aye captain.” Haru said with a mock salute.

Luffy began chattering away cheerily, describing what had happened while Ace and Sabo had been asleep. Bam Bam and Haru settled into a game of tic tac toe, absentmindedly doodling on the paper in between turns while Wendy picked up Luffy’s hat and resumed working on repairing it.
“Hey, Luffy. What happened to the ‘thing’ you brought from the Dawn?” Sabo asked quietly once Luffy had finished talking about how he had beaten Whitebeard at rock, paper, scissors thanks to Thatch signaling him which one to pick.

“I hid it under your bed,” Luffy tilted his head and regarded Sabo curiously. “What’s in it?”

Sabo sagged back in the bed and weaved his hands behind his head. “Just something I’ve been working on. To help you and Ace.”

“Not you?” Luffy’s hands patted his head absent for the hat that wasn’t there.

“I’m not the one that the world hates.” Sabo said softly, poking Luffy’s cheek.

Staring up at the ceiling, Ace supposed that one way or the other, Whitebeard’s intentions towards them would become clear. He wasn’t sure which unsettled him more; Whitebeard planning to stab them in the back in one way or another or if he was actually telling the truth about wanting Ace to join the crew.

For now, all they could was wait and be ready for whatever happened next.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed chapter six!
I have to do some heavy editing of the next two chapters, so posting might slow down a bit until I'm satisfied with them.
I couldn't resist throwing in the moo joke from Friends :P
Thank you for all of the amazing reviews!! You guys are awesome :D
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marco and Thatch arrived at the infirmary the next morning planning to bring the ASL pirates to the mess hall for breakfast. Jules had given Sabo and Ace the clear to get out of bed as long as they didn’t do anything strenuous.

Whitebeard had quietly asked Marco and Thatch to try and form a bond with Ace and Sabo the night before. Both Marco and Thatch had already formed a relationship with Luffy, which would hopefully make it easier to build one with Ace and Sabo. If the boys were going to stay with them even temporarily, it was important that they at least trusted the Whitebeards enough to know that they weren’t going to stab them in the back the moment they let their guard down.

And, there were questions that needed to be answered.

They slowed to a stop when they reached the corner of the infirmary the pirates were sleeping in and stopped abruptly in surprise.

The ASL pirates had moved four mattresses onto the ground and shoved them together to create a makeshift bed large enough for them to all sleep on together. They had jammed the mattresses against the infirmary’s wall, no doubt to ensure that no one could sneak up on them from behind.

The six pirates were piled almost on top of each other, half buried under a pile of blankets.

Luffy was sleeping soundly on his older brothers. He was sprawled out half on top of them, legs resting on Sabo’s stomach while half his upper body was draped across Ace. The thirteen year old was drooling contentedly on Ace’s shoulder, snoring loudly in time with the others.

Bam Bam was curled up in a ball with her back brushing against Ace’s and her arms covering her face. Wendy was stretched out next to her. Wendy was lying on her stomach, somehow still breathing despite the fact that her face was pressed into the pillow.

Sprawled beside her was Haru. His head was touching the ground, the rest of his body tangled up in the sheets on top of the mattress.

“Can I keep them?” Thatched whispered, tugging on Marco’s sleeve.

“They’re not puppies, yoi.” Marco said dryly, slapping Thatch’s hand away.

“Look at them! They’re adorable. Don’t you want to keep them, you big mother hen? Huh?” Thatch grinned and elbowed Marco in the ribs, earning an unimpressed glare from his brother. “Admit it.”

“You haven’t even talked to half of them,” Marco grunted, shoving Thatch away. “At least wait until you’ve talked to them before you decide to adopt them. You’re as bad as Pops.”

“But—look at them, they’re adorable!” Thatch said, gesturing at the sleeping pirates.

Marco rolled his eyes at Thatch’s antics and started walking again. As Marco drew closer, he could tell that both Ace and Sabo woke up, no doubt sensing their presence. “We’ve come to take you to breakfast, yoi.”
“Food?!” Luffy shouted excitedly, instantly awake at the mention of food. He sprang to his feet, accidently stepping on Sabo’s stomach.

“Oof—Lu, get off!” Sabo grunted, shoving Luffy off. He half sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning tiredly.

“First you can take a shower and changes into some clean clothes,” Marco said, watching the bleary eyed pirates stagger out of bed, most of them still half asleep. “After that we’ll take you to the mess hall.”

Sabo stood up and bowed respectfully toward them, movements stiff. “Thank you for helping us. We’re very grateful. You didn’t—”

“Don’t even say it, yoi,” Marco interrupted quickly. “We didn’t rescue you because we were under any obligation. We’re pirates. We did it because we wanted to.”

Ace and Sabo both looked unconvinced, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m Thatch, the fourth division commander by the way,” Thatch said, seeing Sabo’s curious gaze switch between him and Marco. “And this is Marco, the first division commander and the crew’s mother he—”

Whatever Thatch might have been about to say was cut off by Marco slamming his elbow into the man’s chest. Thatch doubled over, coughing and grumbling complaints. “Abuse!” he cried, glaring at Marco.

“We should go now if you want to be able to take your time before breakfast.” Marco said, steadfastly ignoring Thatch.

There were bathrooms and showers throughout the ship; there had to be with so many people aboard. The bathrooms in the infirmary were more spacious than most and designed to be easily accessible to anyone with injuries.

Marco and Thatch waited outside of the bathrooms in silence, listening to the racket coming from inside with mild amusement. Luffy and Ace were shouting at each other about something and there was a great deal of splashing going on considering they were taking a shower instead of a bath.

Fifteen minutes into the showers, the Moby Dick suddenly lurched forward. Marco winced at the resounding thuds and groans as the inexperienced pirates slipped and fell in the showers, unused to the New World’s strange seas. The whole ship was tilted, making it feel like they were standing on a slippery, downhill slope.

“It’s just a slope in the ocean,” Marco called out before they could truly start panicking, completely non-pulsed. “It’s fairly normal here in the New World. Everything’s fine, yoi.”

“What? Sooo cool!!” Luffy shouted exuberantly, laughing. A moment later he stumbled out of the bathroom. He slipped and slid downwards as he struggled upwards in nothing but a towel, soap still glistening in his hair. “I wanna see!”

“Luffy! Get back here you little brat!” Ace shouted irately. “Don’t make me come out there!”

The thirteen year old struggled upwards, practically running in an attempt to climb upward. He had no traction with his wet, slippery feet and slid backwards into the bathroom and hit the far wall with a crash.
“Why do I have a feeling our shipwrights are going to have their work cut out for them?” Thatch muttered, staring at the Luffy shaped dent in the wood wall inside the bathroom.

***

They headed for the mess hall as soon as Jules put fresh bandages around Sabo’s shoulder and leg. The moment they entered the mess hall, all sound ceased. Ace and the rest of the ASL pirates froze for a moment and clustered closer around Ace and Luffy before they moved further into the room.

Heads turned and openly stared at them as they followed Marco and Thatch toward the food line. Everyone knew who they were. Of course they did; Ace’s reputation as a pirate was the quite possibly the worst in the entire world. While none of them were inclined to believe everything the World Government released, there was no denying that the ASL pirates left a trail of death and destruction everywhere they went.

Dawn Island had been the tip of the iceberg when it came to the atrocities that the World Government credited to them; even pirates with a weaker moral code than the Whitebeards were disgusted by many of the atrocities that had been pinned on them.

Fortunately, Jinbei had told Whitebeard everything the boys had revealed to him about the truth of their reputation before he left. Whitebeard had passed it along to the crew along with a quiet request to give the ASL pirates a chance to demonstrate their true character before making a snap judgement.

The clatter, conversations, and the general ambient noises resumed almost immediately after they walked into the mess hall, but it did nothing to diminish the obvious uneasiness the ASL pirates were experiencing.

Ace unconsciously straightened and lifted his chin, face carefully shifting into a mask of casual indifference. He ignored the stares with practiced ease and filled his plate with as much food as he could cram on it.

Marco and Thatch both noticed the ramrod straightness of Ace’s back and the rigid tension in his shoulders, but said nothing. His defenses were up—defenses that he had needed to build in order to survive. They both knew from experience that words alone wouldn’t be enough to reassure him that he was safe.

The others were better at hiding their tension, talking casually to each other as they trailed closely behind the three brothers.

Luffy alone was the only one without a trace of worry, tension, or unease. He drank in his surroundings with unhindered curiosity, eyes soaking in the Whitebeards cramped into the room.

They sat down at a table in one of the far corners of the room; close to one of the exits and backed against a wall. Unsurprisingly, Ace chose to sit with his back to the wall, giving him a perfect vantage point to watch for any possible threats.

Once everyone was settled and eating, Marco debated what he wanted to ask first. He decided to avoid the more serious questions they had and instead voiced one of the hopefully lighter questions that had been burning in his mind since he first laid eyes on Ace: “How old are you?”

Ace glanced up in surprise. “Seventeen. Why?” He asked cautiously, head tilting slightly as he studied Marco.
Underneath the table, Marco’s hands turned into fists. He blew out a sharp breath before answering. So much for it being one of the lighter questions he could have asked.

“Just curious,” he said as nonchalantly as he could. “Your wanted posters make you look much older than you actually are.”

The teen didn’t seem to understand the dark look that crossed Marco and Thatch’s face at the mention of his age; they had assumed that he was at least 19. And that was much younger than the newspapers, World Government, and Navy made him out to be. Although they didn’t clearly state his age, it was frequently implied that he was born before or immediately after Roger’s execution. Marco wasn’t even sure how it was even possible that Ace was Roger’s son if he was only seventeen.

Thatch cursed under his breath before the reality of Ace’s age hit him like a ton of bricks. “Wait—your first wanted poster came out seven years ago.”

Thatch glanced at Marco and watched as he came to the same sickening conclusion. Marco shoved his plate aside, feeling almost nauseous. Ace’s confused expression only made it worse.

“Ace and I were both ten. Luffy was seven.” Sabo said in between bites, eating with gusto despite the heavy topic.

Thatch didn’t bother muffling the curses that started streaming from his mouth. The next time he met one of the navy admirals—

“Ten and seven.” Marco repeated, thinking something along the same lines as Thatch, but with much more fire involved.

“So?” Ace asked, truly baffled as to why Thatch and Marco were reacting the way they were. “I really am that man’s son, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I’m trying to wrap my head around this—you were ten when the World Government decided that they wanted to execute you. Ten,” Thatch shook his head in disbelief. “And Luffy was seven? Why would the government lie about your age?” He shook his head again, barely concealing the anger he felt at the marines hunting down a child with orders to kill on sight.

“Easier to justify everything they’ve done to catch him,” Sabo answered with a shrug. “Makes them look better in the eyes of the public. Easier to stomach that they’re going to execute him without a trial. Take your pick.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Ace said with a shrug. “Most of the people hunting us down don’t care what age I am. All they want is the reward money for my head.”

“Why does it matter how old we were?” Luffy asked in genuine confusion, glancing at Ace and Sabo for some kind of explanation.

The worst part is that they don’t even understand why we’re upset. Marco thought to himself, watching Ace shrug his shoulders and Sabo just sigh and continue eating. Ace and Luffy would have been executed on the spot if they had been found.

“They don’t really get it. Ace was raised by bandits and this one—” Wendy said, pointing at Sabo with her spoon. “Grew up in a trash heap. Luffy’s—Luffy.”

“Trash heap?” Thatch repeated slowly, glancing at Sabo curiously. The teen had seen abnormally polite for a pirate and he had automatically assumed that Sabo must have been
raised by someone to have such refined manners. “Sounds like the three of you had a… interesting childhood.”

“Who cares what kind of childhood we had?” Ace snapped, glaring at the two commanders. “We don’t need your pity.”

“We’re not pitying you.” Marco said with a sigh. He had a feeling “bonding” with them would be slightly more difficult than he had originally thought, which was saying something.

“Yeah. For instance, if I see one of the admirals anytime soon and I fillet him, it won’t be out of pity.” Thatch grinned wolfishly. “It’ll be out of righteous indignation.”

“Pirates feeling righteous indignation?” Vista asked, chuckling softly as he approached the table with his empty tray. “Is such a thing possible?”

“Ace was ten when his first wanted poster was released and Luffy was seven.” Marco answered, staring down at his plate as he finished the last of his food.

“Oh, it is,” Vista said, tilting his head and blinking in surprise. “I’m Vista, the fifth division commander.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Ace and Sabo said in unison, bowing their heads respectfully towards Vista.

“Heh!” Vista chuckled and absently stroked his long, curly mustache. He regarded Ace for a moment before snorting. “You’ve got much better manners than your old man.”

Ace froze, his expression instantly darkening.

“I have no problem with Roger,” Vista gazed down at Ace, staring at him a moment before grinning at the boy. “And even if I did I wouldn’t have a problem with you. Come see me if you ever want to spar.”

The giant fifth division commander walked away without another word, leaving Ace staring at his retreating back. Ace grit his teeth, torn between the automatic anger at the mention of Roger’s name and wild uncertainty on how to react to Vista’s words.

“Shishishi,” Luffy laughed, grinning broadly. “I want to fight him!”

“He’d wipe the floor with you, Lu.” Sabo chuckled, happiness flooding through him. If Vista, Marco, and Thatch were any indication, three to six months with the Whitebeard’s was definitely doable.

They finished eating a few minutes later. Luffy shoved his plate back and sighed, flopping his head down on the table with a thud. His stomach grumbled.

“Hungry.” He moaned, words muffled since his face was still pressed against the table.

“How can you still be hungry?” Haru demanded in exasperation, staring down mournfully at his empty plate. “You ate all of your food and half of mine!”

“You’re an easy target, Haru.” Sabo said, flicking Luffy’s forehead fondly. “The last time Luffy tried to steal from Wendy she almost skewered him.”

“I work hard cooking for you three bottomless pits,” Wendy huffed. “I deserve to eat my food without having your rubbery little hands all over my food.”
“Absolutely.” Sabo said with a sweet smirk, snagging a slice of apple from her plate the moment she blinked her eyes.

Wendy glanced down at her place and froze. “Luffy!” She sprang half on top of the table and slugged him hard on his shoulder.

“I didn’t do it!” Luffy cried, springing back with enough force that he almost knocked over the bench he was sitting on with Ace, Sabo, and Bam Bam.

Thatch laughed, a slow smirk spreading across his face. “Luffy, how would you like to help me prank the twelfth division?”

“Sure!” Luffy grinned, bouncing around the table to stand next to Thatch. “What are we going to do?”

Marco and Ace watched Thatch wrap an arm around Luffy’s shoulder and whisper something in the boy’s ear with a growing sinking feeling in their stomachs. Luffy’s eyes lit up with mischievousness.

As Bam Bam sat down on the other side of Thatch, Marco had the distinct feeling that many of their brothers would rue the day the three pirates met.

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Thirty minutes later, Luffy, Thatch and Bam Bam were careening down the hall, chased by half of the twelfth division. Haruta, the division commander, was hot at their heels and quickly gaining on them.

Marco, Ace, and Sabo were pressed against the wall in the hallway, watching the seemingly endless stream of irate pirates run down the hall. Ace and Sabo watched with mixed emotions, torn between amusement and concern for their brother’s safety.

As the last half naked, purple haired pirate raced past, Ace glanced at Marco and arched an eyebrow. “I take this is a regular occurrence with Thatch?”

“He pulled his first prank five minutes after setting foot on the Moby Dick,” Marco said, fondness for his brother tinging his mildly exasperated tone. “Ask him about it once he’s done running for his life.”

“Marco!” One of the first division members came rushing down the hall at breakneck speed, face pale. “Marco, one of the Yonko just came on board! Pops wants you on the top deck right away!”

Marco pushed off from the wall and started running down the hall, Ace and Sabo dashing after him a moment later.

“You two need to stay here!” Marco ordered firmly, already halfway down the hall.

“Not a chance!” Sabo cringing slightly as the rapid movement jostled his shoulder and the bullet graze on his leg. He kept running, panic fueling his steps.

“Luffy’s up there!” Ace growled, quickly catching up with Marco.

Luffy was on the top deck and with not just one, but two of the four emperors. It wasn’t a question of if something would happen, but when, what, and how insane it would be.

***

Luffy barreled out onto the top deck of the Moby Dick, glancing both ways rapidly as he tried to
decide which direction to run. He ignored the frantic shouting that erupted the moment he came up on deck and ran straight ahead.

Hopping over a rail, he sailed through the air for a few feet and collided with a stack of crates, sending him tumbling. He skidded a few feet across the deck until a foot stepped on his head and stopped him abruptly.

Luffy stared down at a sandaled foot for a second. He glanced up and felt his mouth drop, eyes widening in complete, utter shock. “S-S-S-Sh-Shanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so long since the last chapter! Things have been kind of crazy for me lately. I've still been writing, but not as much as I was before because of all of the homework I have. My classes all end during the last week of May, so I'll have a lot of free time after that.
I have to start working on my finals soon, so I'm not sure when I'll be able to post the next chapter. It is written, but I keep going back and editing it.
And... Surprise!! Shanks is in the story. I'm mainly going to focus on him and not the other members of his crew in the next chapter, though they will be in it.
As always, thank you all so much for all of the awesome comments!!!
Feedback is greatly appreciated.
Chapter Eight

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shanks stepped aboard the Moby Dick, expression grim and heart heavy. He saw the way the Whitebeards tensed as he walked toward their captain. Wariness and curiosity were warring against each other on their faces as they watched his every move in silence. The intensity of their sharp gaze burned into his back as he passed them.

He could understand their hostility and suspicion; one wrong move, one wrong word, and war could break out between the two emperors.

But war was the last thing on his mind; all he could think of was a bright, carefree grin, determined eyes, and an old, weathered straw hat.

His eyes flickered to the numerous medical equipment attached to the old pirate as he approached him. It was such a contrasting picture—the machines that were helping to keep him alive and the powerful presence Whitebeard exuded. The air around him was crackling with energy and power, causing the hair on the back of Shanks’ neck to stand on end.

“Excuse the interruption. I haven’t come here for a fight. I just want information,” Shanks dragged the large barrel of rum forward by the ropes his crew had attached to it. “I’ve brought rum.” He added as an afterthought. Alcohol of any kind was always a sure way of getting into the old man’s good graces.

“Heh! It’s not like you to appear before me so meekly,” Whitebeard stared down at Shanks curiously. “What is it that you want to know?”

Shanks was silent for a moment, staring down at the deck. He clenched his fist. At last he met Whitebeard’s unwavering gaze, eyes ablaze. “What happened to the ASL pirates?”

Whitebeard blinked in surprise. “Concerned for your captain’s son? I thought you had kept your distance.”

“I did,” Shanks replied, unflinching under Whitebeard’s inquisitive gaze. “Approaching him only would have made his situation worse.”

It was true; the navy had watched Shanks and every other known member of the former Roger pirates with zealous, paranoid fear. They had done everything in their power to keep Ace from meeting potential allies. Only Rayleigh had managed to actually reach them and it had been a close thing.

But Ace wasn’t the only reason he was here. Not the main reason.

“He’s alive,” Whitebeard studied Shanks closely. “Spit it out, brat. Why are you really here?”

“I’m here to find out what happened to Lu–” Shanks’ words were cut off by shouting and a loud crash.

Shanks turned and stared in astonishment as a small boy crashed into a stack of crates and skidded directly toward him. He automatically stuck a foot out to stop the boy from sliding into him, staring down at the boy in fascination. Had Whitebeard found a new son? He was
just a child.

The boy lifted his head and Shanks stared down at the last person he had expected to see aboard the Moby Dick.

Whatever had been on the tip of his tongue died before the words were fully formed. He stared down at the boy in growing shock, relief flooding his entire being.

“S-S-S-Sh-Shanks.” Luffy’s jaw dropped, one hand automatically reaching for the absent straw hat that should have been on his head.

For a moment they just stared at each other, completely dumbfounded. After a moment, they both got over the initial shock, pointed at each other and shouted: “Y-You!!”

They moved as one; Luffy dove behind one of the crates he had knocked over as Shanks glanced around desperately for somewhere to hide. Finally, he dove behind Jozu, who was standing a few dozen feet away and the closest object large enough to hide him.

The Whitebeards stared at the Yonko in astonishment, glancing between Shanks, Luffy, and their captain for some clue on how they should be reacting. Whitebeard leaned forward in his chair, eyes narrowing.

“L-Luffy, you’re alive!” Shanks managed to strain out as he stared up at Jozu. The giant man twisted around to glare down at Shanks in silent disapproval and crossed his arms. His eyes flashed with irritation, totally unimpressed by Shanks’ sheepish smile.

“How was I supposed to know you’d be here?!” Shanks shouted, pressing his hand to his forehead. The Red Haired pirates had collected every scrap of information on the ASL pirates they could get their hands on, but nothing had indicated that Whitebeard had taken them in, however temporarily.

“What exactly is going on, yoi?” Marco demanded, springing over the railing. He positioned himself in front of Luffy, one arm held out defensively.

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“Luffy, are you okay?!” Ace shouted as he and Sabo rushed protectively to Luffy’s side.

Their eyes widened in shock has they spotted Shanks standing a few feet away and exchanged glances, an odd expression crossing their faces.

“Shanks is here!” Luffy exclaimed in alarm. He was silent for a moment, brow creased in thought. He suddenly whirled toward the red headed Yonko and pointed at him, eyes flashing with resolve.

“Oi, Shanks! This meeting doesn’t count.”

Shanks thought it over for a moment before nodding to himself. “Alright. This definitely doesn’t count.”

The two stood up from their hiding places and approached each other with grave faces.

Ace, Sabo, and the Whitebeards watched mesmerized as Luffy and Shanks sized each other up. They waited with bated breath until finally, Luffy and Shanks broke into broad grins and burst out laughing.
“Shanks!” Luffy threw himself at the older pirate and wrapped his arms tightly around the Yonko’s middle.

“It’s good to see you, Luffy,” Shanks’ eyes shined with relief as he wrapped Luffy in as tight a hug as he could with only one arm. “You had us worried.”

“You know him?” Whitebeard asked, leaning back and relaxing fully. Shanks had come to find out about the ASL pirates because he had been worried about Luffy. He’d been concerned when Luffy had run away from the Yonko, but it was obvious from Luffy’s expression that the boy adored Shanks.

“We go way back.” Shanks frowned and pulled back from the thirteen year old slightly. Something wasn’t quite right… “Luffy… where’s my hat?”

“I’m not giving it back because this doesn’t count,” Luffy blurted out, inching back slightly and glancing around nervously. “It’s my hat too.”

“Our hat then. Where is it?” Shanks repeated with false sweetness, watching as the boy’s lips puckered out and he glanced around nervously.

“Aaahhhhh....” Luffy hummed, desperately trying to think of a convincing lie.

“You lost it?!” Shanks hissed, clamping his hand to his face.

“NO!!! I’d never lose it. It’s my treasure!” Luffy shouted angrily, appearing slightly insulted that Shanks would even suggest that he’d lost the hat. (Though he had. On multiple occasions) “I left it in the infirmary.”

“Oh. Why?” Shanks could see Whitebeard, Marco, and the rest of their crew watching the exchange in confusion.

“It gets lightly burned by Akainu and a sea king tried to eat it so I had to reach out and get it but the sea king almost bit me off and—” Luffy’s words were nearly incomprehensible he was speaking so fast.

Shanks clamped his hand over Luffy’s mouth. Apparently he could still understand Luffy-speak, even after all this time. “So what you’re saying is, you let it get damaged.”

Luffy tried to shake his head and nod at the same time without much success in being understandable, but Shanks somehow understood anyway. He could feel a migraine coming on. He’d almost forgotten what dealing with Luffy was like.

“I want to see it for myself,” Shanks grimaced as Luffy licked his hand, pulling it back like it had been burned. “You little--”

“Shanks.” Ace interrupted, striding over to the Yonko with Sabo walking right at his side.

Shanks turned and glanced at the two teenage pirates, eyes lingering on Ace’s face. He eyed them warily, not entirely sure what to expect.

Ace and Sabo bowed low to the ground and said in unison: “Thank you for saving our little brother!”

“You’re Luffy’s brothers?!” Shanks asked in shock, glancing between them. That was the last thing he had expected to hear. It explained why Luffy was traveling with them, at least. He turned toward Luffy incredulously. “You have brothers?”
“Yeah! We exchanged cups of sake and became brothers. This is Ace and Sabo!” Luffy exclaimed proudly, beaming at his older brothers with obvious love and admiration.

So… Shanks thought, regarding the three brothers curiously. You weren’t alone after all. I’m glad for you, Luffy. Ace. Eyes softening, Shanks ruffled Luffy’s hair. “I see.”

“I don’t,” Marco interjected crossly, crossing his arms. “How exactly do you two know each other?”

“I spent a year at Luffy’s island in East Blue.” Shanks said, knowing that Whitebeard and the others would understand the significance of his statement.

Sure enough, Whitebeard and Marco’s gaze instantly went to his empty shirt sleeve. Shanks wondered how badly his hat had been damaged that Whitebeard hadn’t immediately recognized it. After all, he’d seen both of its previous owners wearing it at some point. That was assuming he’d seen it at all. Shanks had no reliable information on how the two pirate crews together, except that Akainu was involved.

“So Ben and Yassop on your ship?” Luffy asked excitedly, stretching his neck upwards to look. He spotted several familiar faces aboard the Red Force and beamed ecstatically at them. “Hey everyone!!” he shouted, waving.

The Red Haired pirates cheered and whistled at the sight of the thirteen year old, happy to see him alive and unharmed.

“What are you doing here, Shanks?” Luffy asked, glancing up at him.

“We came to see if Whitebeard had any idea what happened to you after your ship sank. There’s a lot of rumors going around right now.” Shanks explained, more for Whitebeard’s benefit than Luffy’s.

It seemed to put Marco at ease, but only slightly. The man had inched closer to the three boys like an over protective watchdog, as if he expected Shanks would try to steal the trio away from the Whitebeards the moment their backs were turned.

Some things never change. He thought, studying Luffy fondly. Luffy had an amazing charisma that seemed to draw even the most unlikely of people towards him, much like Captain Roger. He suspected that Ace shared the trait as well.

Shanks glanced at Luffy and sighed unhappily. “Hat.” He moaned, scratching his head.

“It wasn’t my fault!” Luffy snapped, crossing his arms irritably. “Wendy’s fixing it. Anyways, you broke it first!”

“What?!” Shanks growled, chest puffing up defensively. “I never let it get damaged.”

Whitebeard burst out laughing at the outright lie. “I seem to recall numerous instances when that hat was damaged one way or another. Particularly when you were still a cabin boy.”

“See?” Luffy pointed a finger at Shanks and laughed triumphantly.

Shanks shoved Luffy’s outstretched arm away and stuck his tongue out at the thirteen year old, immediately regretting it when Whitebeard snorted loudly. So much for maintaining his dignity in front of Whitebeard… he probably should have guessed it would be impossible with Luffy around.

“This is all very unexpected,” Shanks cleared his throat and glanced at Whitebeard, who was
watching everything unfold with amusement. “Under the circumstances, I think there’s only one course of action.”

“Oh?” Whitebeard already knew what Shanks was about to say if the twinkle in his eyes was any indication. “You really think so?”

“Yes. Our only course of action is to…” Shanks nodded gravely and trailed off for effect, before bursting out: “Throw a party!!!!”

The disbelieving look on Marco’s face was priceless. Shanks was going to have a fun time with this. Not as much fun as messing with Mihawk, but it’d be a close thing. Whitebeard’s first mate looked torn between having an aneurism and throwing Shanks overboard.

“Don’t let your feathers get ruffled, Marco,” Shanks called to the man, ignoring the murderous glare he received because of the bird joke. “This is going to be fun!”

Whitebeard burst out laughing as Marco stalked off, muttering threats fervently under his breath. Their captain’s laughter seemed to relax his various crew members that were scattered across the deck, who had been watching the exchange apprehensively. Several perked up at the prospect of a part, though most of the more experienced pirates still seemed wary. Especially the division commanders standing on deck.

Yes. Shanks thought to himself, seeing several of the division commanders sigh in resignation. This is going to be great fun.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone enjoyed this chapter!!
This will probably be the last update until June-- but don't worry! The next chapter has already been written. I just have a lot of editing to do and I'm not sure if I'll be able to get it done on top of all my other homework.
At least this chapter isn't a cliff hanger!
Thanks again for all of the wonderful comments! I can't believe this story has over three hundred kudos. It's amazing and you're all amazing!
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It took the two crews’ navigators over twenty minutes to decide which of the nearby uninhabited islands was the least hazardous. They were usually uninhabited for good reason, such as toxic volcanic laughing gas, and man-eating rodents of unusual size, to name just a few.

They finally settled for an island that had been abandoned because of frequent, volatile earthquakes. It had been abandoned for over a decade after a massive earthquake swallowed several of the villages that had been scattered around the island.

Luffy, Ace, Sabo, and the rest of the ASL pirates had come back with Shanks to the Red Force, much to the glee of the Red Haired Pirates. They greeted the young pirates with almost overwhelming eagerness, clearly making Ace uncomfortable with all of the attention he was receiving.

Shanks studied Ace as Yassop pulled the boy into a headlock and ruffled his hair. The boy was obviously extremely uncomfortable with the overly familiar touch, escaping the hold as quickly as possible. He instantly edged closer to Sabo, who had escaped the worst of the crew’s manhandling due to his injuries.

Shanks glanced at Luffy, surrounded by the Red Haired Pirates. His smile was almost as big as his face as he talked excitedly with Benn and Lucky Roo, gesturing animatedly.

Turning back toward Ace and Sabo, Shanks saw that they were standing side by side, slightly apart from everyone. Habitual wariness shined ever so faintly in their eyes as more of Shanks’ crew gathered around Luffy, eager to say hello to him.

He wondered how the three boys had met. They weren’t brothers by blood and Shanks knew Luffy hadn’t met them until after Shanks and the others had left Dawn Island. Luffy wouldn’t have shut up about them otherwise.

Shanks had a great deal he wanted to ask them, but there was one question burning in his mind that had haunted him for years. He’d tried every resource he had to find out the truth, but he’d had no success. He’d meant for years to go back, but things were precarious enough in the New World without him dashing off to East Blue to chase after ghosts.

“What happened to Dawn Island?” Shanks asked slowly, eyes fixed on Ace and Sabo.

The Red Haired Pirates had been willing to believe that most of the rumors were false; the World Government was desperate to kill Ace and Luffy, fear fueling and twisting their paranoid imaginations and creating the belief that two young boys deserved death simply because of the actions of their fathers. But Shanks needed to know what actually happened. Not the lies that the World Government had published. Not the rumors that had circulated the oceans. Not the scenarios he’d concocted in his head for the past seven years. The truth.

Sabo blanched and looked away, unconsciously tipping his top hat lower over his face. Mirroring Sabo’s actions with his own hat, Ace stared at the ground as his lips pressed together and he shifted uneasily. Luffy’s face was unreadable, his head bowed.

They spoke in turns of fire and ash. They spoke of marines chasing them through the forest that had
once been their backyard and playground.

They spoke of a fire so violently consuming that even the sky had looked ablaze. Ash had fallen like snow as they had escaped in a tiny boat, watching helplessly as their home was destroyed.

A storm that had appeared out of nowhere was the only thing that saved them from certain death. It hit the island with a terrifying intensity and flung their boat away from the island and past the navy blockade surrounding it. It had been a miracle they didn’t feel they deserved.

They wouldn’t have survived more than a week if Rayleigh hadn’t somehow managed to find them three days after they had escaped the island.

Ace’s voice was soft and heartbroken. “I think… I think Makino died.”

It wasn’t that he was surprised by the news. But hearing it in person… Shanks shut his eyes briefly and exhaled softly. He needed a drink. “I see…”

“I don’t… I don’t remember much of what happened… I was pretty injured at the time,” Sabo admitted, rubbing his left shoulder absently. “But I know that we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her and the others from Fuusha village who helped us escape.”

Both pirate crews were quiet for a moment, heads bowed and faces grim. Luffy looked especially dejected; the people of Fuusha village had practically raised him, after all. Makino had probably been the closes thing Luffy ever had to a mother, as far as Shanks knew.

Studying the three boys carefully, Benn took a long drag from his cigarette and shook his head at the guilty expression on Ace’s face. “What happened there was not your fault.”

“How do you figure that?” Ace’s head snapped up and he scowled, eyes narrowing. “The marines would never have even been there if it weren’t for me.”

“Who are you calling stupid, you little brat?!” Ace lurched forward, but Luffy sprang away from him. He managed to grab hold of Luffy’s arm just past his elbow and gave it a firm yank. Luffy’s arm stretched and with practice ease Ace flung Luffy’s fist straight into the thirteen year old’s face.

Luffy staggered backwards and rubbed his face, quickly retracting his arm. “Stop taking all the blame on yourself! They were after me too. If you hadn’t been there it still would’ve happened, but Sabo and I would be dead. Stop being an idiot and blaming everything on yourself!”

Ace stopped moving. He grit his teeth, but he knew Luffy was right. He knew it in his head, but deep down it felt impossible to believe that what happened hadn’t been all because of him. Because he’d been born.

“You didn’t do anything to cause the marines to chase you, and you never asked the villagers to try and help us. It was their choice. None of what happened is your fault.” Sabo said earnestly, giving Luffy a proud grin. He always loved seeing Luffy’s more serious side. It gave him small glimpses of the incredible man he was going to become one day.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Ace bit his lip and smacked Luffy’s head, eyes reflecting the pain and uncertainty his face did not. “Idiot.” He said, catching Luffy in his arms as the boy leaped upward and wrapped his arms around Ace’s neck, nuzzling him affectionately.

“They’re both right, Ace,” Shanks said, eyes shining with compassion. “You’re not responsible for
the actions of anyone but yourself, no matter what anyone else might say. Don’t let guilt and regret keep you from living and enjoying your life.”

Ace’s lips trembled and he buried his face into Luffy’s neck, hugging the boy tighter. “I know…! I promised, I’d live my life without regrets!” He choked out as Sabo placed a hand on Ace’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly.

Seeing the tense, gloomy atmosphere hanging around his crew and the three brothers, Shanks clapped a hand on Ace’s shoulder, plastering fake cheer on his face and injecting it into his voice. “This is no way to start a party. We’re going to celebrate! You’re alive and that’s all that matters. Pull out the rum!”

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The two crews reached the island two hours later and spent the better part of an hour unloading all of the food, booze, tables, chairs, and anything else that they thought might contribute to the party.

They took up over seven miles of the beach. Music starting playing, not so friendly games broke out, and excessive drinking started almost immediately.

The cooks clustered together and built giant stoves on the beach, competing with each other to see who could cook food the fastest and most delicious. The amount of food consumed in the first two hours alone and the rate it all disappeared was outrageous. It was all the poor chefs could do to keep ahead of the hungry pirates.

It took an hour to break the ice once the party officially started. The two crews stayed separate at first, as if an invisible line had been drawn in the sand. But the more alcohol was consumed, the more the lines began to blur.

By evening time it was almost difficult to tell the two crews apart.

Luffy was quite literally the center of the party; he out ate everyone as he regaled the two crews with absurd tales of the ASL crew’s adventures. Shanks wandered around the party drinking heavily and asking random Whitebeard pirates to join his crew, since Luffy was too occupied by everyone else to pay attention to him. Marco followed doggedly at his heels trying to shoo away the younger Whitebeards from the Yonko’s path.

“Hey,” Shanks slurred, swaying slightly on his feet. “Do you want to join my crew?”

“I am on your crew!” The offended Red Haired pirate shouted, spilling his beer all over the person sitting next to him.

“Oh. You must be new then.” Shanks decided, stumbling forward toward where Ace and Sabo were.

“I’ve been on the crew for six years!!” The pirate shouted at his captain’s retreating back, staggering upright to go search for more beer.

Ace eyed Shanks critically as the Yonko plopped down on the younger pirate was sitting on. “Are you actually that drunk?”

“No.” Shanks replied mournfully, staring into his half empty cup with a sigh. He couldn’t let himself get completely wasted, not since the chances of a fight breaking out between the two crews were still high.
They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, before Shanks shifted slightly so that he was facing Ace.

“What do you intend to do?” He asked candidly, soaking in the strangely familiar face.

“Whitebeard’s offered to take us back to the first half of the Grandline,” Ace rubbed a hand across his face. “I don’t see that we really have a choice. Luffy won’t want to travel on your ship and stealing a ship in the New World would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I wouldn’t be able to take you back to Paradise anyways.” Shanks said honestly.

“Do you…” Ace swallowed, eyes flickering toward Whitebeard. “Is Whitebeard a man of his word?”

“He is,” Shanks confirmed, taking a small sip of his rum. “He’s an honorable man. If he’s given you his word about something you can trust him to keep it.”

“Good.” Ace said, absently used a stick to draw spirals in the sand.

“I was surprised when I heard Luffy was part of your crew,” Shanks said, staring him as he tried to steal food off of someone’s plate. “He’s not the type to work under another captain.”

“Luffy’s convinced that he’s the captain,” Ace said with a snort. “He’ll set on his own when he’s seventeen.”

Luffy was one of the main reasons Shanks had known almost everything that had been printed and all of the rumors about Ace were lies.
The monster Ace was made out to be was not someone that Luffy would ever follow or agree to travel with.

“Hey, Shanks,” Ace stared down at his feet as he absently buried them with sand. “Did you know my mom?”

“Yeah,” Shanks smiled, remembering the beautiful little woman who had had the king of the pirates wrapped around her little finger. “She was the most remarkable woman I’ve ever met. A force of nature. The only person I ever knew that was really a match for Captain Roger in personality. Even Rayleigh couldn’t stop him once he got going with one of his crazy schemes, but she could.”

“Really?” Something lit up in Ace’s eyes as he shifted to face Shanks. “Can you tell me about her?”

“Let me tell you about the first time I ever met her,” Shanks set aside his cup, a grin spreading across his face. “It was before Captain Roger had become the pirate king. Buggy and I were arguing about something stupid—I don’t remember what and…”

It wasn’t long before Luffy sat down on the sand next to Ace and Sabo, listening to Shanks story just as enraptured as Ace was. They soaked in Shanks’ words like they were dying of thirst.

When he had told them everything he knew about Rouge, which admittedly wasn’t that much, he cautiously transitioned into one of the funnier stories about Roger. Ace’s face twitched, but he did nothing to interrupt Shanks. He even snorted at one point during the story, which Shanks took as a win.

It was well past midnight and the party was still in full swing. Luffy, Ace and Sabo had fallen asleep together leaning against the log they had been sitting on earlier, snoring away contentedly.
Bam Bam had plopped down in the sand and started building a sand castle, quietly keeping watch over them. She was quickly joined by Haru. Wendy had been helping the cooks for most of the party, but had disappeared several hours ago saying something about an errand she had to take care of.

Shanks stood up after a while and wandered around the beach for half an hour before slowly stumbling over several snoring pirates toward Whitebeard.

He plopped down in front of Whitebeard. Behind him, the musicians were playing progressively more out of sync with each other as a group of pirates sang all the wrong words to the song.

They sat in companionable silence, watching the antics of the two crews. After a moment, Shanks glanced at the older pirate with an amused smirk. “Someone finally confiscated your sake?”

“Jules brought reinforcements,” Whitebeard huffed, settling more comfortably in his large chair underneath a palm tree, the leaves just barely brushing the top of his head. “Brats.”

“Have you invited them to join your crew?” Shanks asked softly after a moment, watching Luffy stumble up and wander off to search for more food, still half asleep.

“Yes.” Whitebeard grunted, shutting his eyes.

“That could mean a lot of trouble for you,” Shanks said slowly, examining Whitebeard closely. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

Whitebeard sighed heavily and opened his eyes. “Do you have a point to this inquisition?”

“Yes,” Shanks set his cup down carefully in the sand. “You know what it will mean to have Ace join your crew.”

“Better than you do, brat.” Whitebeard retorted, opening his eyes and regarding Shanks with curiosity. “Get to the point.”

“If he does decide to join you, the World Government will go to war against you,” Shanks ran his hand through his hair and sighed. “Are you truly prepared to go to war for a boy you’ve just met? Considered what it will mean for your crew?”

“You’ve got some nerve,” Whitebeard’s gaze narrowed and he straightened in his chair, a burst of haki hitting Shanks like a strong gust of wind. “Don’t forget who you’re speaking to. I’ve been on these seas longer than anyone else. I know perfectly well what will happen if Ace joins my crew. So do the rest of my sons and daughters. I wouldn’t even consider it if they didn’t.”

Shanks silently matched Whitebeard’s spirit with his own, the clash splitting apart the clouds in the darkened sky and cracking and splintering the palm trees dotting the beach. The party fell abruptly silent.

For a moment all was still. Then, Shanks slowly stood up and stretched, yawning widely. He had a lot to think about. “I’m out of sake again,” he mumbled, breaking the building tension. “I suppose that’s all I wanted to know.”

“That’s it?” Whitebeard snorted, shaking his head. “Over dramatic brat.”

“I learned from the best,” Shanks retorted with a chuckle. “I’ll bring you back more sake.”

“Heh!” Whitebeard settled back down in his chair as the sounds from the party slowly resumed.
“Careful Marco or one of the nurses doesn’t catch you.”

“I’m always careful.” Shanks responded with a wink.

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Luffy paused when he spotted a large, delicious smelling piece of meat lying just past a few of the palm trees marking the end of the beach.
He quickly scrambled towards it and eagerly reached out to grab it. But before he could reach it, it was suddenly lurched backwards out of his reach.

Determined to eat it and find out what kind of mystery meat could move on its own, Luffy chased after it. He almost caught it several times, but it kept lurching away a second before he could reach it.

Growing frustrated and becoming vaguely aware that he was a good distance away from everyone on the beach, Luffy stretched out his arm and finally caught the mystery meat.

“I got it!” Luffy cheered happily, retracting his arm so that he could examine the strange meat.

The moment he started examining it, he finally saw it. The wire was thin and almost invisible in the moonlight, but he could see it was securely fastened onto the meat. Now that he was closer, he sniffed it and realized that it didn’t smell right either.

Luffy dropped it and turned to run back toward the beach, but something sharp hit the back of his neck.

He tried to run away, to shout, to do something, but his overactive metabolism worked against him. He was unconscious before he even hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!!
I finished all my classes :D It's a huge relief to be done finally.
And another cliffhanger... sorry not sorry :P I'll try not to keep all of you waiting too long for the next chapter.
I plan to do flashbacks about what actually happened on Dawn Island, I just haven't found a good point to put them in yet.
Thanks again for all of the awesome comments! I'm glad everyone enjoyed the last chapter.

Comments and feedback are greatly appreciated!
"Have you seen Luffy?" Wendy asked panting, hiding something behind her back.

Sabo suppressed a grin at the sight of the red head bouncing up and down on her heels in excitement. He could easily guess what she had been up to for the last three hours and he loved her for it. "He went off in search of more food. He should be around here somewhere. Is that what I think it is?"

"Uh-huh!" Wendy grinned and pulled her hands out from behind her back to reveal Luffy’s straw hat. "Shanks has been giving him a rough time all night, so I thought I’d go ahead and fix it up good as new. Where is he?"

“I haven’t heard him recently come to think of it.” Haru commented, lifting his head slightly so he could see over the large sand castle he and Bam Bam were finishing building.

Shifting slightly, Ace scanned the area in search of Luffy. He stiffened when he realized that Luffy was nowhere in sight and even worse, Haru was right. He couldn’t hear Luffy’s boisterous voice. He grit his teeth. “Let’s go look for him.”

Stretching and dusting off sand from his pants, Sabo glanced around the beach with a growing sinking feeling in his stomach. “Let’s split up and meet back up here after we find--”

Sabo and Ace both leaped back as an arrow lodged itself into the log they had been sitting on moments before. Jumping forward instantly, Bam Bam disappeared into the forest as she ran off in search of whoever had shot the arrow.

Pulling out the arrow, Sabo grit his teeth and carefully untied the piece of paper wrapped around the shaft. He unrolled it and skimmed the message with a darkening expression. “Luffy’s been kidnapped.” He growled as Ace snatched the small piece of paper out of his hands.

“How did someone kidnap him under the noses of all these pirates and two of the Yonko?!" Haru exclaimed in disbelief, muttering curses under his breath. “Who’d be stupid enough? Seriously!”

Bam Bam reappeared and shook her head. Whoever shot the arrow had disappeared.

“What’s it say?” Wendy peered over Ace’s shoulder to read the note and scowled. “We’re not actually going to do what it says, right?”

“We should confirm that Luffy is actually missing before we rush off halfcocked like last time,” Sabo interjected firmly, placing a hand on Ace’s shoulder. “This isn’t your fault. We all assumed that no one would be crazy enough to try something.”

“I never should have let my guard down,” Ace shook off Sabo’s hand and bit his lip, pulling his hat down to help cover his expression. “Let’s split up and meet back here in twenty minutes. Try not to draw too much attention. The last thing we need is someone asking questions right now.”

Sabo sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. He could tell by the growing fury evident in Ace’s eyes that it would be impossible to get him to listen to reason. Ace had been willing to trust Shanks and his crew because of the obvious love and concern they had shown Luffy.
He had even managed to relax around the Whitebeards enough to actually enjoy himself during the party. But Sabo could tell by the hardened expression on Ace’s face that he had no intention of alerting either of the two crews that Luffy had been kidnapped.

“I’m sure he’s just fine,” Wendy chirped, trying to be reassuring as she slipped the straw hat’s string around her neck. “He’s probably stuffing his face so full of food that he can’t talk.”

As Ace and the others dispersed, Sabo grabbed Bam Bam’s arm and tugged her back towards him. “I want you to try and find where they have Luffy and anything you can about what we’ll be dealing with.”

She stared up at him for a moment as she silently regarded him. She made a quick gesture with her hands to convey that she would be back in twenty minutes before slipping out her twin daggers from her sleeves.

“Be careful. Don’t do anything unnecessarily reckless.” Sabo ordered sternly, squeezing her arm gently before relinquishing his grip.

Her lips quirked into a small smirk, face conveying what she couldn’t express with words. “I’m not the reckless one.”

Sabo patted the top of her head fondly before turning away to search for Luffy. He glanced back at Bam Bam, but she was gone, swallowed up by the forest.

Fifteen minutes passed and there was still no sign of Luffy; no one else seemed to have noticed that he was missing, either too drunk or too distracted by the general manic energy emanating from the pirates as a fist fight between the two crews broke out.

Marco quickly swooped in to try and break it up, but he was rewarded for his efforts when someone tripped and accidentally punched him in the face.

“You’re in my division, yoi!” Marco shouted indignantly, instinctively leaping out of the way when a Red Haired pirate tried to tackle him from behind.

It quickly dissolved into an all-out brawl. A large cloud of sand was kicked up as the pirates kicked, punched, elbowed, bit, pulled hair, and used the beach furniture that had been brought out from the ships as weapons.

Sabo stopped paying attention to it when one of the larger Whitebeard pirates picked up a table and started using it as a club. Marco had given up trying to break it up and was simply glowering at the growing scuffle from a safe distance. He kept sending dark glances at the other division commanders who were watching the brawl in amusement and doing absolutely nothing to intervene.

“Gururura!” Whitebeard’s laughter echoed across the beach, drawing Marco’s ire away from the commanders. “Let them be, Marco. They won’t do any harm. It’s all in good fun.”

Shaking his head in exasperation, Sabo skirted around the brawl and slowly made his back to where he was supposed to meet up with Ace and the others.

“Are you just going to lay there and take that, Yassop?” Shanks called out teasingly, eager to egg on the fight. He was knocked backwards when a chair flew from the dust cloud and hit him square in the face. “Who threw that?! Yassop, you traitor!”

No wonder someone was able to kidnap Luffy with this mess going on. Sabo thought with a sigh as he sped up to avoid being sucked into the fight.
Unsurprisingly, he was the first one back. Sabo collapsed on the log and absently flipped his top hat into his lap. He pulled off the googles from the brim of the hat and carefully began cleaning them with his shirt, unable to shake the growing feeling of dread.

Haru was the first back. He shook his head and flopped himself onto the ground. He looked strange in the clothes that Marco and Thatch had given them; a black t-shirt and loose fitting green pants instead of his customary tuxedo and flowing red cape. His top hat was also missing; it was at the bottom of the sea with the Dawn.

The magician sighed dejectedly and started absently drawing in the sand. “How am I supposed to fight if I don’t have my hat?”

“You don’t need it,” Sabo replied, rolling his left shoulder back and testing the pain. The doctors and nurses on the Moby Dick had done an excellent job; his arm was already mostly healed thanks to their care and his body’s natural rapid healing. “Your rabbit trick hasn’t worked once.”

“I’ll make it work!” Haru huffed and turned away from Sabo sullenly. “Just wait.”

“You don’t even have a rabbit.” Sabo reminded him, shoulders sagging when he saw Ace and Wendy walk towards them with downcast expressions and no Luffy.

Sabo’s face hardened. “Let’s head into the forest. We’ll draw attention if we stay here like this. Bam Bam’s scouting ahead, but she should be back any time.”

Nodding in agreement, the ASL pirates silently slipped through the dense trees. They walked a few dozen feet away from the beach and hid behind a large tropical tree of some kind that was covered in thick, leafy vines.

“Luffy isn’t anywhere on the beach, but it is possible he just wandered off again,” Wendy declared, eyes shining with worry. “It is Luffy after all.”

“He’s been following Shanks around all day. He’s been too focused on him to be bored and wander off.” Ace responded, running a hand through his hair.

“Maybe—Eeeek!” Wendy shrieked and instinctively flung herself at Ace when a hand softly tapped her from behind. “Bam Bam, how many times do I have to tell you not to sneak up on me?!”

“Can I put you down now?” Ace asked in mild irritation, exhaling long-sufferingly. He’d automatically caught her when she had leaped onto him and wrapped her arms around his head, blocking his eyes completely with her slender arms.

“No.” Wendy pouted, heart yammering in her chest. She adjusted her grip slightly so that her arms were coiled around Ace’s neck instead of the top of his head.

“Cipher Pol.” Bam Bam whispered softly, voice just barely discernable as she walked closer towards them.

“Cipher Pol! Great. Those guys are complete whack jobs.” Haru threw his hands up in the air and flopped down on the ground with a huff.

“Any idea which team it is?” Sabo suppressed a sigh of relief when Bam Bam held out seven fingers. “It’s not an assassination team at least.”

“They’ll have orders to kill though,” Ace’s frown deepened. “Even if we do what they want, they’ll kill Luffy.”
“Way to be positive,” Wendy smacked the side of Ace’s head and wiggled out of his grip. “Shouldn’t we tell someone?”

“We’ve survived this long without anyone to run to for help and I don’t intend to start now,” Ace snapped stubbornly, earning a sigh from the rest of his crewmates. “We can’t start depending on other people to help us. They’ll just leave us or betray us eventually. We’re on our own; you’ve all known that from the start. We can handle this just fine ourselves.”

“We’re not actually going to do what they want, right?” Wendy asked wearily, exchanging glances with Sabo and Bam Bam.

A slow, devious grin blossomed across Ace’s face as a badly formed idea took root in his head. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“It is?” Sabo’s eyebrows arched in surprise and he exchanged apprehensive glances with Bam Bam. He had a very bad feeling about this.

“Yes! We’re going to show them exactly what happens when the ASL pirates chose to cooperate.” Ace grinned wider at the uncomprehending look on Sabo’s face. “This is what we’re going to do…”

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Luffy was being held at one of the only structures left standing on the island; a massive, crumbling castle. The ASL pirates sans Luffy marched through the forest and halfway up the hill before splitting up.

The demands the Cipher agents had made were simple; Wendy, Haru, and Bam Bam went to meet the marines waiting for them a few miles away at an old guard house. The letter had demanded that they arrive unarmed and surrender themselves to the Cipher Pol agents waiting there. Sabo and Ace were to travel to the castle and meet the other agents inside the castle’s main sanctuary.

If they cooperated, Luffy would be released into Sabo’s care and be released with the rest of the crew. The one they wanted was Ace.

Ace and Sabo were too jaded to believe even for a second that the agents would keep their word and actually release Luffy and the rest of the ASL crew. The demands were only to draw Ace and the others away from the protection the two infamous pirate crews offered and into whatever trap the Cipher agents had prepared.

The two brothers climbed up the hill until they reached the peak. They paused in front of the castle’s main gate and surveyed the ruins in front of them.

The gate’s portcullis had been forced up; two large stones keeping the rusted iron gate from sliding back down. Beyond the gate was a courtyard, overrun with weeds and grass. Thick, bushy vines covered the entire castle in a green veil, making it difficult to tell just how badly the castle had been damaged over the years.

One of the two towers that could be seen from the courtyard had at some point crashed into the roof of the main sanctuary. Several sections of the roof had managed to support the tower’s massive weight, but toward the middle there was a massive hole. The top half of the tower had been swallowed into the dank sanctuary, leaving the tower’s severed neck to be eroded away by the elements.

They climbed over the collapsed remains of the castle’s walls and picked their way through the rocks
and debris at a sedate pace. They were silent as they approached the large, ornate doors that led into the castle.

“This will work.” Ace muttered to himself under his breath, stopping just in front of the fifteen foot high doors that would lead them inside.

Sabo adjusted his googles on top of his top hat and pulled on a pair of gloves. His hat looked out of place with the navy t-shirt and jeans he was wearing, but it was a comforting weight on his head. He’d treasured it from the moment Ace and Luffy had bought it for him shortly after they had set sail. He dusted off the brim, determination rising. “Ahh yes. Your brilliant plan.”

“I don’t see you coming up with a better idea,” Ace shot Sabo an irritated glance and tightened the drawstring on his hat. “Besides, it isn’t a bad plan. Not that bad of a plan.”

“Definitely not your most brilliant, though I can think of a couple that are somehow actually worse than this.” Sabo retorted with a smirk, wincing when Ace’s elbow connected with his side in retaliation.

“Don’t even get me started on your bad plans,” Ace said huffily, cracking his knuckles. “You’re the one that thought it’d be a breeze to sneak into that marine base by yourself.”

“How was I supposed to know they’d just released my first wanted poster?” Sabo shook his head in exasperation. That had been a regrettable experience. He was lucky he got away mostly unscathed. Still, he hadn’t been able to help feeling pleased that his starting bounty had been so high and it had only doubled after his stunt at the marine base.

“I’m just saying, your track record is only marginally better than mine.” Ace stretched his arms and legs, brows quirking slightly as he reached out with his observation haki to get a better idea about what they’d be facing.

“Just as long as our track records are better than Luffy’s I think we’re okay.” Sabo responded, earning a slight chuckle from Ace.

Neither of them even needed to use their observation haki to sense that they were being watched. Several times since they had entered the courtyard they had caught sight of several different men in dark sunglasses peeking out from various hiding places. For supposed ‘secret agents’ they had a few things to learn about subtlety and how to hide.

Inside, Ace felt the presence of at least three dozen people. Two times the amount of enemies they had been anticipating, not to mention all of the agents lurking around outside.

“They must feel desperate if they managed to pull together this many agents in such short notice,” Ace’s frown deepened and his eyebrows pinched together thoughtfully. “Someone must have tipped them off.”

“It was probably one of the fishing boats or merchant vessels we passed on the way here,” Sabo replied quickly, knowing that Ace would be quick to suspect either the Red Haired pirates or the Whitebeards. “Seeing the Moby Dick and the Red Force traveling side by side would be a cause of concern to anyone. Besides, I’m sure the Whitebeards are under even more surveillance than usual since they rescued us.”

Their presence on board the Moby Dick hadn’t been released to the public, though it had certainly been reported back to the admiralty. With the ocean teeming with hundreds of marines swimming desperately for shore, there was no way the Whitebeards could have gotten to them covertly that
night. Someone would have seen them being rescued.

“You’re probably right,” Ace heaved a sigh and pushed all thoughts of how Cipher Pol had found them so quickly from his mind. There was only one thing he needed to focus on; saving Luffy and keeping his brothers and crew alive. “They must be really desperate to pull a stunt like this right under Whitebeard and Shanks’ noses.”

“Five,” Sabo murmured to himself, hands twitching for his pipe. It was sitting somewhere at the bottom of the ocean with the rest of their possessions. “Let’s go.”

They shoved open the heavy, ornate oak doors and stepped inside the massive room. It had once been the main sanctuary of the castle, but its former grandeur had faded long ago. The room was virtually empty and what little furniture that was left—a few tables, half a dozen benches, and a few weapons wracks, were covered in dust and cobwebs.

The room was like a tomb. Twelve immense stone pillars were spread throughout the sanctuary and provided the ceiling’s main support. The pillars were at least twenty feet high and ten feet in width. They had obviously seen better days; several had rather pronounced cracks and at least two were starting to crumble from the island’s constant earthquakes.

Seven floor to ceiling stain glass windows were the main source of light, casting the room in a kaleidoscopic of muted colors. Six were running along the walls to the back of the room, where the seventh and largest was located. The glass must have been incredibly thick and durable to still be intact, but time was taking its toll on them as well. Cracks were spreading across the windows like immense spider webs. It was only a matter of time before they shattered completely.

The Cipher Pol agents were scattered throughout the large sanctuary in various hiding places, all except for five that were standing at the very back of the room.

They were spread out on the stairs that led up to the area where the king’s throne had resided. The throne had been destroyed when the tower had collapsed and fallen through part of the roof, blocking off access to the huge stain glass window behind it and the door that led to the king’s antechamber.

The room was dark, despite the bright moonlight streaming in from the windows and the hole in the roof. A handful of torches were scattered across the room, it was still not enough to illuminate the faces of the agents. Despite the dim lighting though, it wasn’t difficult to make out Luffy. He was tied to a large stone that had broken off from the tower. They must have gagged him, as well; otherwise they undoubtedly would have heard him long before they had even entered the sanctuary.

Ace and Sabo took a peripherally glance around the room as they started walking toward where Luffy was being held. Using their observation haki to pinpoint the location of all of the agents in the room, they focused their attentions on the six agents on the stairs.

“You actually came,” One the agents sitting on the stairs leaned forward slightly, studying them as they approached. She brushed a strand of black hair from her face and slowly stood. “Based on your reputation, I assumed you wouldn’t think twice about abandoning a crewmate.”

“Don’t believe everything you read in the newspaper.” Sabo said lightly, fingers twitching for his absent pipe.

“We’re here now. Let Luffy go.” Ace growled, fists bursting into flames.

“Unfortunately, I can’t let him go,” The woman stood and stretched. “You knew that already, I
suppose. I’m Mia. This is Tam, Morrow, Zere, and Nobu. I doubt you’ll listen, but please don’t put up a fight. I’ve instructed our agents to kill your crew if you don’t cooperate.”

Fire crawled up Ace’s arms and he pushed up his cowboy hat with a flaming finger, eyes flashing in determination under the brim. “Let Luffy go.”

“Four.” Sabo uttered, softly enough so only Ace could hear. He tugged on his goggles and lowered them over his eyes.

Mia, the lead Cipher agent tilted her head slightly. “I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way, then. Zere, call our agents. Perhaps the screams of their crew will make them reconsider, assuming they’re still alive.”

The tallest and most muscular agent in the group complied wordlessly and pulled out a mini telephone snail from one of the pockets in his jacket. Zere was over six feet tall, clean shaven, and completely bald, wearing a dark gray long sleeved turtle neck shirt, a black jacket, and black pants. His dark skin glistened with sweat, despite the relatively cool temperature inside the sanctuary. He dialed the number and waited patiently for the agents on the other end to pick up.

“Purapurapura,” The telephone snail rang and rang, but no one picked up. “Purapurapura.”

The Cipher Pol agents shifted uneasily. The low monotonous sound of the telephone snail echoed through the empty hall; it was only sound in the room besides the flickering torches and the crackle of the fire dancing across Ace’ skin. Apprehension slowly began to dawn the agent’s faces, much to Sabo’s gratification.

“It seems you may have underestimated our crew,” A small smirk tugged Sabo’s lips upwards into a smirk. “Three.”

“Perhaps,” Mia pressed her arms over her chest and glared at the two pirates. “It doesn’t change anything. They’ll be killed on their way here, assuming they don’t decide you aren’t worth the risk and abandon you.”

“What if they decide to alert Whitebeard or Shanks?” Morrow, the smallest of the five lead agents asked nervously, unconsciously taking a step back.

Tam smirked, grey eyes fixated on Ace. She spun the silvery-blue chain she used as a weapon around in a circle, preparing to attack. “They won’t. They don’t want them involved in this, after all. Isn’t that right, little prince?”

“What’d you call me?!” Ace took a step forward, but stopped when Sabo stretched an arm in front of him. “You wanna fight, old lady?”

“Who are you calling old, you little brat! I’m twenty-seven!” Tam snapped angrily, pale skin white skin flushing red with anger.

“Oh, really?” Ace smirked as he shoved Sabo’s arm aside. “I can’t really tell because all of your grey hairs.”

“This is white and I dye it!” Tam screeched, whirling on Mia. “Permission to beat him senseless!”

“Hold on just a minute,” Mia took a step forward and spread out her arms in a wide gesture of the room. “Look around. There are over forty agents in this room alone and fifty more outside. You’re not walking out of this alive. What do you think will happen if we allow you to escape? If you joined Whitebeard’s or Shanks’ crew?”
Ace scowled. “We’re not going to join either crew.”

“Two.” Sabo said, adrenaline buzzing throughout his body in anticipation of the coming fight, making him feel antsy.

“Would you stop counting? No one’s coming to help you. Why would they? Your very existence is a crime. Hundreds of people have died because of you,” Tam paused for a moment, eyes flickering from Ace to Sabo. A cruel leer spread across her face. “Wouldn’t it be better if you just died already?”

Sabo scowled and glanced at Ace. He grimaced at the angry, conflicted look on his brother’s face. Tam had definitely struck a nerve. He grabbed Ace’s arm and gave it a firm shake. “She’s just trying to get under your skin.” He hissed softly.

“…I know that,” Ace swallowed hard. He shut his eyes and inhaled sharply, forcing Tam’s words to stop reverberating in his mind. Lies, lies, lies, lies! After a moment, he allowed a determined smile to spread across his face. “Can we stop the chitchat and get on with the fight? We have a party to get back to.”

“One.” Sabo reached into both his hands into the pockets of his jeans and waited.

A minute passed by in a tense silence. The agents glanced around, waiting for something to occur. They relaxed marginally when two more minutes passed by and nothing happened.

“I knew you were bluffing--” Tam’s smug voice was cut off by the sound of glass shattering.

The stain glass window behind the agents and the one on the wall to their left shattered in a brilliant spray of glass. Thousands of multi-colored shards sprayed down on the agents and shattered even further as they tumbled onto the floor.

Smoke bombs were thrown to the ground, rolling to a stop at the feet of the five Cipher Pol agents. The bombs exploded in a bright burst of light, smoke pouring out of them and spreading throughout the room. At the same moment, all of the torches in the room suddenly died.

Bam Bam and Wendy leaped through the windows and landed with a roll as they hit the stone floor. In the confusion of the falling glass, the sudden darkness, and the spreading smoke, they weren’t immediately noticed.

Bam Bam used the agents’ momentary distraction to reach Luffy. She quickly picked the locks on the chains and released him before the agents even fully realized she was there.

Dragging Luffy away from the agents, they quickly ran toward where Wendy had just joined Ace and Sabo, but half a dozen Cipher agents sprang in front of them to block them from reaching the others.

The two ASL pirates tensed, preparing to fight their way past them, when something invisible hit them and they collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

All around the room, Cipher agents fell boneless to the ground as Ace’s Conqueror’s haki hit them full force. The five lead agents were the only ones left standing.

“Ace! Sabo!” Luffy cried out as he slammed into his brothers, almost tackling them to the ground. “What took you so long? I waited forever for you to get here!”

“You’re the one who got kidnapped to an inconveniently faraway place,” Ace rolled his eyes as
Sabo checked Luffy over for any sign of injury.

“What’d they do? Offer to give you food or something?”

“N-no.” Luffy eyes darted everywhere but Ace.

*It was meat, wasn’t it?* Ace and Sabo thought in exasperation as they shook their heads knowingly.

“I have something for you—” Wendy started, pulling Luffy’s straw hat from where it was hanging by a string down her neck.

“Hat!!! Gimme, gimme, gimme!” Luffy grinned ecstatically and clapped his hands together. He bounced over to Wendy and snatched it from her hands. He put it on his head and sighed contentedly. “Thanks!”

“Where’s Haru?” Sabo asked in confusion, glancing around for the errant magician. “Don’t tell me you left him in a ditch again.”

“He was right behind us…” Wendy frowned, glancing at the unbroken window next to the one she had shattered and jumped through.

“Listen.” Bam Bam tugged on Sabo’s shirt and pointed at the window.

They all strained their ears, listening intently. Just faintly, they could hear a dull thudding sound coming from one of the windows and a familiar voice cursing up a storm.

Ace pressed his lips together and blew out a sigh. “I guess that window isn’t as badly damaged as the others?” He asked somewhat hopefully.

“That must be it,” Sabo said dryly, rubbing the back of his hand against his forehead. “They were designed to withstand earthquakes, after all.”

The noise continued and grew in volume before stopping abruptly.

“What’s he…?” Wendy squinted, trying to make out what he was doing through the tainted glass. She gasped and covered her mouth with her hands when Haru bodily rammed the unyielding window.

He groaned loudly and fell to the ground, shouting something about his nose.

“Why exactly did we have him join the crew?” Ace asked with a sigh.

“He’s great at parties.” Sabo said with a rueful chuckle, shaking his head.

“Well, your crew came after all and you managed to take out most of our agents,” Mia coughed slightly, emerging from the thick cloud of smoke. She stumbled over the unconscious body of one of the agents and placed her hands on her hips. “Quite the dramatic entrance too. Your crew is actually surprisingly impressive. Unfortunately, you still have us to deal with.”

Haru tumbled through the window that Wendy had jumped through and landed in an undignified heap on his hands and knees in the sea of glass. Clambering to his feet, he tiptoed painstakingly slowly through the glass on the floor. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!!”

The ASL pirates and the Cipher Pol agents stared at him silently as he stumbled over to his crew.

“Are we fighting yet? We’re fighting?” Haru wavered unsteadily on his feet as he stumbled to a halt
next to Sabo. “Dibs on the little guy.”

The ASL pirates groaned. Ace slapped a hand to his face and Sabo just chuckled. So much for their ‘surprisingly impressive’ crew and their dramatic entrance, he supposed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all of the awesome comments on the last chapter! You guys are amazing.

I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to respond back this time. My weekend has been crazy busy and I figured you guys wouldn't want to wait any longer for the next chapter.

This doesn't count as a cliffhanger, right?

Feedback/comments are awesome and greatly appreciated!
Marco didn’t notice something was wrong right away. The brawl had taken most of his attention and Shanks seemed determined to be as irritating as humanly possible. He’d been going out of his way to use any type of bird joke or reference imaginable, much to Thatch’s glee.

“…. Birds of a feather do flock together, eh?” Shanks chortled, winking at Thatch conspiratorially.

“Careful, Shanks,” Thatch warned, struggling to get his laughter under control long enough to get his next joke out. “He’s starting to get madder than a wet hen!”

They dissolved into drunken laughter and stumbled away from Marco. He watched as they zigzagged away, one of Thatch’s arms slung over Shanks’ shoulder.

Sighing heavily, Marco pinched the bridge of his nose and walked over to where Whitebeard was sitting. He flopped down besides the old pirate and ran a hand tiredly through his hair, barely suppressing a groan.

Whitebeard glanced down at Marco and chuckled. “Finally wore you out, did they?” he murmured, watching the crews’ shenanigans with fond amusement.

“Someone had to make sure they didn’t kill each other, yoi.” Marco muttered, glaring murderously at Thatch and Shanks as they tripped and fell to the ground because they were laughing so hard.

Chuckling again, Whitebeard gently patted Marco’s head. “They’re grown men. They can settle their own squabbles.”

“I know that! I also know we’re going to have the whole navy on our back, not to mention having to deal with whatever nonsense Kaido and Big Mom are up to, yoi. The last thing we need is more trouble right now. If an actual fight were to break out…” Marco trailed off and huffed exasperatedly, slumping down on the sand so he could stare up at the night sky.

Kaido and Big Mom had been more aggressive than normal lately; already, one of their allied crews had been attacked and they’d taken heavy casualties before they’d managed to drive the enemy crew off. The attacking pirates weren’t directly linked to Kaido, but the crew had been almost entirely comprised of Zoan fruit users. It was almost certainly the Yonko behind the attack, but they hadn’t found enough evidence to prove it. Not that they truly needed evidence, in the end. They were pirates, after all.

Still, Whitebeard wouldn’t start a war against Kaido on mere suspicion. Not when it would be so costly.

“Just a normal day for us then, eh?” Whitebeard said, earning a rueful chuckle from Marco.

Marco glanced around the beach at the various crewmembers swaying drunkenly to the off key music, arm in arm with members of the Red Hair pirates. He smiled slightly. “I suppose so, yoi.”

They lapsed into comfortable silence, watching the chaotic reveling in amusement and the occasional eye roll from Marco. It only lasted for a few minutes though, as Marco realized something was missing from all of the commotion.
"Have you seen where Ace, Luffy, and Sabo went?" Marco asked with a frown, sitting up straighter.

Whitebeard glanced down at Marco and scratched his head. "Well…"

"What happened?" Marco’s eyes narrowed at the grim expression on the old man’s face.

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"You know," Sabo choked out as he struggled frantically to free himself from the arms wrapped around his neck. "This is why we make exit strategies. You're great on dramatic entrances, but your dramatic exits are definitely lacking, Ace."

"I have an exit plan. It’s simple; kick their asses!" Ace huffed, slamming himself into Zere’s side hard enough to cause the agent to lose his hold on Sabo.

"Yeah!" Luffy shouted in gleeful agreement, stretching his arm out half a dozen feet to trip Zere as the man wheeled backwards from Ace’s attack.

"Timber!" Wendy shouted as Sabo scurried out of Zere’s way as the agent hurtled to the ground like a falling tree.

"Great. A Luffy plan," Haru grumbled, pulling out a long scarf from one of his sleeves. With a single deft movement, it wrapped around Zere’s body like a multicolored snake as he fell to the ground.

"Hey! I resent that." Ace grunted, barely ducking in time to avoid being hit by the seastone chains Tam used as weapons. "Besides, there’s no such thing as a dramatic exit, Sabo."

"Screaming and running away can be dramatic." Haru snapped irately, reaching into one of his pockets and producing a small vial. Pulling out the stopper with his teeth, he hurriedly poured the contents over Zere before the man could untangle himself from the scarf. The effect was instant; the scarf hardened and completely immobilized the man’s legs. "I wouldn’t struggle too hard if I were you. That’s industrial strength glue."

"Glue?!" Zere shouted in disbelief, desperately struggling to free himself.

Haru pulled out a short string of ribbon and with a smug flourish tied it into a bow. He applied a little dab of glue to it and stuck it over the agent’s lips, effectively gagging him. "My work here is done."

"N-Not yet," The smallest of the five lead agents, Morrow, said as he timidly stepped towards Haru. His body was trembling as he struggled to unscrew the lid to a bottle of pills, unsteady hands rattling the multicolored contents up and down. He tossed the lid aside once he opened the bottle and quickly dry swallowed three of the blue and red pills.

"Y-you said d-dibs on the little g-guy, right?"

"Look, let’s just save ourselves some trouble and call it a day," Haru eyed Morrow critically, a feeling of unease growing rapidly as he watched the agent double over in pain. "You aren’t looking to good. We can just—whoa…"

Morrow’s body contorted as he suddenly started growing. He howled in agony as his body was literally torn apart and stitched back together, joints popping out of place and bones breaking. His skin transformed from deathly pale to having mottled greens scales and a tail. His eyes became narrow slits as his head reared back and he roared deafeningly. Morrow’s body grew from a sickly man who stood just at five feet to a massive fifteen foot alligator on steroids. "Wh-who’s the little guy now?!" He growled, voice guttural and venomous.
Ace stared up at the hulking creature and shook his head. “He’s all yours, buddy.” He said helpfully, before switching his focus back to Tam as she slung the chains toward him, trying to wrap them around his neck.

“Help.” Haru croaked, before turning tail and running away as fast as he could.

Morrow’s footsteps shook the entire sanctuary as he chased after Haru, one disproportionate, deformed shoulder slamming into one of the pillars with enough force to crack it in half.

The pillar shuddered and fell, crashing into one of the stain glass windows. Dust, glass, and large chunks of the pillar flew in all directions and sprayed the combatants.

“Haru, don’t just run. Do something!” Wendy shouted as she parried Nobu’s katana with an iron skillet. She had filched it from the makeshift kitchen the pirates had erected on the beach, since she had lost her own frying pan and wok that she used in combat when the Dawn had sunk.

“You should be paying better attention to your own fight!” Nobu snarled, nicking Wendy’s shoulder with his blade. “If you don’t know how to fight you should just stay in the kitchen like the useless little chef you are!”

“You--” Wendy gasped, incoherent with rage as she glowered at the agent. She shifted her grip on the skillet and easily blocked Nobu’s next attack, kicking him hard in the stomach. “What are you even supposed to be? A ninja or a samurai? You can’t be both!”

She twisted out of the way as Nobu thrust his katana forward, almost skewering her to a wall. The blade sunk deep into the wall and before Nobu could pull his katana free, Wendy slammed the back of her skillet down on his head as hard she could repeatedly, until Nobu collapsed to the floor, unconscious and bleeding.

“Don’t tell me to go back to the kitchen!” she hollered angrily, staggering backwards a step and stomping her foot.

“A little help here! Bam Bam, ACE!!” Haru shouted as he reached the end of the sanctuary and twisted around to face Morrow, who was still charging at him. He grimaced and slid in-between Morrow’s legs as the massive Cipher agent skidded to a halt and sluggishly turned himself around.

“Ace, look out!” Sabo shouted, barely managing to duck in time to avoid Mia’s haki covered fist. They had been battling ever since Zere had been knocked unconscious, both equally strong in hand to hand combat. They’d been trading blows steadily, matching each other hit for hit. Sabo was at a definite disadvantage however, since he was favoring his left shoulder and doing his best to protect it from getting hit.

Ace groaned as he was smashed into one of the pillars by Tam, jarring his broken ribs and driving the air out of his lungs. His eyes widened as the sea stone chains careered towards him, barely twisting away in time to avoid them. He dropped low to the ground and thrust out his hands, sending a burst of fire hurtling toward her.

She staggered backwards and yelped in alarm when arms suddenly wrapped around her feet and torso. Hands grabbed her wrists and wrenched them sideways at a painful angle, forcing her to drop the chains.

“Now, Ace!” Luffy shouted, forehead creased as he struggled to keep the woman from moving. His neck was stretched a good arm’s length above Tam’s head and his torso half wrapped around her middle.
“That is so creepy.” Ace muttered under his breath as he surged forward and knocked Tam out with a swift strike to the back of her neck.

Tam fell to the ground as Luffy untangled himself from her, sharing a triumphant high five with his brother before his arms retracted back fully.

Only Mia and Morrow were left standing.

“Oi, don’t bring him back towards us!” Ace shouted, springing out of the way as Haru frantically ran past, Morrow right at his heels. “Luffy!”

Ace made a quick gesture with his hands and starting running, Luffy dashing after him on the opposite side of the room. He rushed past Morrow and Haru as they hurtled towards the stairs where the Cipher agents had been standing earlier. Ace got a good distance between himself and Morrow before skidding to a halt, watching Luffy expectantly.

Running past him, Luffy took a deep breath and abruptly came to a stop. “Gomu gomu… Balloon!” he exclaimed, inhaling sharply.

As his body expanded, Ace started running toward him. He sprang on top of Luffy’s stomach and rocketed off it like he’d been on a trampoline. “Haru, down!” he shouted, body ablaze as he hurtled toward Morrow.

Haru rolled sideways and dropped to the ground, covering his head with his arms and panting heavily.

Flying towards Morrow, Ace inhaled sharply and drew his arms back, fire bursting from his hands and arms to form a massive fireball. He launched it point blank at Morrow’s chest a moment before his fist connected, causing the massive agent to reel backward and howl in agony.

Concentrating, Ace sprang forward and coated his fist with haki before he slammed it into Morrow’s face. Morrow fell backwards and slammed down on the floor with enough force to shatter the stone underneath him.

Landing in a crouch, Ace eyed the fallen agent for a minute before whirling on Sabo. He crossed his arms and shook his head critically, completely unimpressed. “What’s taking you so long? I’ve already taken down fifty-three.”

“Um, excuse you, only fifty two,” Wendy retorted, shooting Ace a glare. “Don’t count the ones we were fighting in that.”

“Shouldn’t you two be doing something productive? Like going to see where Bam Bam disappeared to?” Sabo chided, panting heavily. He and Mia were trading blows at a lightning fast rate, their haki covered limbs creating impact waves powerful enough to shatter a nearby pillar.

“Where is Bam Bam?” Wendy asked, glancing around the room as Sabo punched Mia in the face and Mia kicked Sabo in the stomach at the same moment, sending them both flying apart from each other.

“She ran after someone at the start of the fight,” Luffy answered, leaping up to perch on one of the fallen pillars. He sat cross legged and started tapping his feet together absently. “Weird guy with a mask.”

Ace and Sabo’s heads both jerked toward Luffy at the offhand comment, faces blanching.
“Pay attention to the fight!” Mia shouted, kicking Sabo in the face hard enough to knock him over.

Sabo recovered quickly and used his backward momentum to backflip away from Mia. He skidded back a few feet, wheezing becoming more pronounced. His body was still healing from the burn wounds and he was fairly certain he’d ripped the stitches on his shoulder and leg open.

He grit his teeth and shut his eyes. He needed to end the fight as quickly as possible.

Mia charged towards him, fist drawn back to punch him into oblivion. Sabo merely remained crouching with both hands lightly touching the ground.

His opponent came closer and closer, but Sabo didn’t open his eyes or so much as twitch as she hurtled toward him. Instead, he waited.

The second she came within arms’ reach, Sabo tilted his head just slightly to the right, avoiding Mia’s fist. As she started to fly past him, he grabbed her arm, kicked her legs out from under her, and swiftly slammed her onto the ground.

It was only her quick reflexes that saved her from being knocked unconscious. Mia kicked Sabo in the stomach and quickly twisted out of his grip. She edged backwards, attention caught between Sabo and the other ASL pirates hovering nearby.

The ground shook suddenly, throwing Sabo off balance as he started to charge at Mia again. He blinked in confusion, wondering if an earthquake was starting, when his eyes darted past Mia to where Morrow had collapsed.

“Wendy! Luffy!” Sabo shouted, surging forward only to have Mia block his path. “Get away, he’s getting back up!”

Heads swiveling, they both stumbled as the giant Cipher Pol agent slowly shoved himself onto his feet. The ground shook again as he slammed his arms down in frustration, the stone floor cracking from the force of the blow.

“Ace, don’t let him get back up!” Haru screeched frantically, darting behind one of the pillars in a desperate attempt to hide.

“I know!” Ace hissed, springing forward to knock out Morrow before he had the chance to stand back up.

“I don’t have time for this.” Sabo muttered, sliding back a few steps and clenching his hands into fists. In a swift, fluid motion, he blocked Mia’s next strike, and knocked her out with a carefully controlled strike to her temple.

Ace took a single step forward, rapidly calculating how to take down Morrow, when he heard a sudden click. A split second later, he tripped and fell flat on his face, all of his energy suddenly sapped from his body. He groaned and lifted his head with difficulty, eyes widening in shock at the sea stone handcuff that was innocuously hanging from his wrist.

“Ha! Got you.” Tam crowed triumphantly, dangling the key back and forth in front of Ace’s face smugly.

“You--” Ace tried to scramble forward, but almost fell flat again when the ground shook. Morrow was already clambering onto his feet, eyes fixed on Ace. “Give me that key!”

Tam didn’t answer. Instead, she opened her mouth wide, dropped the key in, and swallowed.
Ace felt his mouth drop in disbelief, staring at the white haired woman as she choked and coughed. She pounded on her chest, hacking hoarsely as she swallowed the key with a grimace.

Behind him, the rest of the ASL crew were shouting and mildly panicking as Morrow’s shadow loomed over Ace. The massive Cipher agent completely ignored the crew’s frantic attempts to distract him and instead prepared to strike.

All Ace could sputter out as the world dissolved into chaos around him was: “Really?!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry you had to wait so long for this chapter! I was writing a particularly difficult section and wanted to give myself some extra time. Also, the last two weeks of June were completely insane for me :P
Writing a fight scene with more than one character is really, really hard. Especially since I wasn't focusing on one specific character in this chapter. Hopefully everything flows together well and makes sense. If you have any critique on this chapter let me know! Morrow ate the Alligator Zoan fruit. The pills he took are steroids similar to Chopper's rumble balls, but with a much more harmful affect to his body.
Thank you for all of the wonderful comments for the last chapter! You're all awesome :) Chapter 12: Marco to the rescue!
Please don't forget to leave a comment!
It hadn’t been very hard to catch up with Izo, Curial, Speedy Jiru, and Fossa. Annoyingly, they weren’t anywhere near the ASL pirates.

There had obviously been a battle. There were over fifty unconscious Cipher agents scattered around the four division commanders and Izo and Curial were both bleeding from several cuts and scrapes. Fossa was lying flat on his back, chest heaving. Around the winded commanders, there were numerous craters and numerous trees had been uprooted or cut in half.

Good thing Pops and Shanks are already mobilizing. Marco thought to himself.

“What happened?” Marco demanded as he morphed back into his human form and landed next to Izo. “You were supposed to be following the kids!”

“CP-0,” Izo replied, wiping blood away from his face. “We ran into five of them and forced them to retreat and regroup. I don’t know how Ace and the others are doing, but they’re probably already at the castle where Luffy’s being held.”

Marco glanced toward the castle with growing unease. The situation was much, much worse than he had thought. He had hoped that it was a strictly covert operation in the hopes that Ace, Luffy and the rest of the ASL pirates could be drawn away without anyone from the other two crews noticing, but if CP-0 was here on the island… “We have to alert Pops and the others right away, yoi. Ace and Luffy are in more danger than we thought.”

“I’ll go.” Speedy Jiru stood up from the tree stump he’d been leaning against to catch his breath. He took few more deep breaths before dashing off, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

“The three of you hold them off until reinforcements arrive,” Marco transformed his arms into wings and leaped into the air. “I’m going to find Ace and the others, yoi.”

Izo, Curial, and Fossa gave Marco a halfhearted, exhausted affirmative as he fully transformed into his phoenix form. He flew rapidly toward the castle, uneasiness growing by the second.

If the World Government is willing to target them while they’re with two yonko, this is going to be much difficult than we thought. They’re willing to go to war and none of them have even joined us yet. Marco exhaled slowly. Is this what you’ve chosen, Pops?

***

Sometimes I wonder how we’ve survived this long... Sabo thought as he leaped out of the way of the monstrous Cipher agent rampaging through the sanctuary.

Wendy had given up trying to sidetrack Morrow from Ace; instead, she had slung him over her shoulders and took off running, much to Ace’s complete outrage.

Haru, Luffy and Sabo had tried multiple attacks to distract Morrow from Ace and draw his attention away, but nothing had worked. The creature had worked himself into such a blind rage that he’d even stepped on and severely injured several of his fellow agents.
“Luffy! Trip him!” Sabo shouted, struggling to catch up to Morrow. His entire body was screaming in protest to all of the movement and he was starting to limp. The bullet wounds to his shoulder and leg had both reopened with a vengeance at some point during his fight with Mia. He was starting to feel sick from blood loss, but he kept moving. He didn’t have a choice.

Luffy wrapped one arm around a pillar and then stretched his other arm out to wrap around another. His forehead pinched together in concentration as he braced himself and made sure his grip was secure.

Swerving suddenly, Wendy made a beeline toward Luffy. She leaped over his arm and ran faster to try and get some distance from Morrow so he wouldn’t crush them when he fell.

Luffy grunted as Morrow’s legs plowed into him. It took all his strength and concentration to keep his grip on the poles. Sweat dripped down his forehead as the giant creature began to tip forward and fall, the stone pillars cracking from the strength of his grip.

The moment it was clear Morrow was indeed going down, Luffy’s grip gave out and his arms snapped back.

Rushing forward, Sabo leapt high in the air and landed on Morrow’s back. He quickly scaled the agent’s shoulders and clambered up the agent’s neck toward his head. Concentrating, he coated his fist and arm with haki and slammed it into the back of the agent’s skull.

The stone underneath’s Morrow’s head shattered. A shock wave sent numerous cracks through the formerly sturdy stone floors. Nearby, a window shattered from the power of the blow.

Sabo didn’t move, head tilted to the side as he tried to determine if Morrow was actually down. If he’d managed to get up after Ace’s punch, it was definitely still a possibility now.

“Is he--” Wendy’s words were cut off when one of Morrow’s hands twitched.

Sabo barely had time to sense the blow coming before Morrow’s massive hand reached back and slammed into him. He flew through the air and crashed to the ground with a pained grunt, rolling several times before coming to a halt.

Groaning, Sabo staggered onto his hands and legs. He spat out a glob of blood, lip throbbing from where he’d accidentally bitten it. With a pained grunt, he forced himself onto his feet and quickly took stock of the situation.

Morrow was staggering upright. Wendy had dragged Ace off somewhere and wisely hidden them both out of sight, much to Sabo’s relief. Haru was rummaging desperately through his pockets for something that he could use against Morrow, as Luffy calmly ran toward the downed Cipher agent, hands clenched into fists. Bam Bam was nowhere in sight.

“Gomu gomu… Gatling gun!!” He shouted, leaping into the air and raining down a series of rapid punches onto the agent’s back and head.

Not to be outdone by his little brother, Sabo dashed forward. He coated both fists in haki and barraged Morrow’s head with multiple punches.

The barrage ended quickly, leaving both brothers panting heavily. Sabo caught Luffy in his arms as the boys jumped down from Morrow’s back, eyeing the agent warily. Setting Luffy on the ground, he circled around the agent once and sighed heavily.
Luffy poked Morrow’s nose with a finger, frowning in disgust at the hard, scaly skin. “What is he? A crocodile?”

“I think he’s an alligator. He must’ve eaten a Zoan fruit. But that can’t be one of his normal forms. He took some pills right before he transformed.” Haru responded, staying back a good ways away from the agent just to be safe.

Sabo frowned and squinted down at the floor, briefly searching for the pills. But there was too much glass and debris littering the floor to find anything. The pills had probably been crushed during Morrow’s rampage. “Wendy, I think you can come out now. It looks like he’s finally down.”

Haru darted a quick glance at Morrow to make sure that he wasn’t getting back up. “Don’t jinx us, Sabo.” He muttered, eyeing the downed agent cagily.

“He won’t get back up. My punches are like rockets!” Luffy proclaimed proudly, laughing softly. He tilted his head slightly and wandered off in the direction of the double doors Ace and Sabo had come through earlier.

“Where’d Tam go?” Ace growled, lifting his head off of Wendy’s shoulder with a scowl as they reappeared from where they had been hiding. “Wendy, put me down!”

Wendy practically dropped Ace onto the floor with a scowl. “You’re welcome.” She huffed, sinking onto the ground beside him in exhaustion.

Muttering curses under his breath, Sabo quickly surveyed the room for any sign of Tam. “If we can’t find her, you’ll just have to try and pick the lock--”

“Gotcha!” Luffy lunged forward and disappeared behind one of the pillars. A brief scuffle could be heard, before Luffy triumphantly reappeared and started dragging Tam toward Ace.

“Good job Luffy!” Ace cheered in relief, staggering onto his feet by sheer force of will. “Spit it out!”

“No,” Tam choked out, coughing slightly. Apparently the key didn’t agree with her. “Not on your life, pirate.”

“Spit. It. Out.” Ace growled, moving to take a step forward. He would have fallen flat on his face if Sabo hadn’t sprung forward and latched onto his elbow.

Luffy grabbed Tam, flipped her upside down and started shaking her. “Spit it out!” He ordered sternly.

“Err… Luffy, I don’t think that will work--” Wendy’s words were cut off by one of the stain glass windows that had been still intact from the fight shattering.

A flaming, azure bird burst into the room. The creature circled above Ace and Sabo’s heads once, taking in the carnage before landing beside them and transforming into a man with strangely shaped hair.

“Marco!” Ace shouted in surprise. “We didn’t need your help!” he growled somewhat defensively, crossing his arms and almost blushing from embarrassment. He’d hoped that they’d be able to get the cuff off before any of the Whitebeards or the Red Hair pirates showed up.

“You’re late!” Haru shouted peevishly, glaring at Marco and gesturing wildly. “Where were you five minutes ago?!”

Marco glanced down at the sea stone cuff hanging from Ace’s wrist. Then he glanced at Luffy, who
was still holding Tam upside down and shaking her roughly. He arched an eyebrow in confusion and opened his mouth to ask what on earth was going on, but stopped just before the words left his mouth. He shook his head and decided there were some things that he just didn’t need to know. “CP-0 is here.”

Sabo felt all color drain from his face. “We have to find Bam Bam now.”

***

“I’m impressed you realized I was here. Your skills have improved.”

Bam Bam stared at the tall, masked figure in front of her silently. Her grip on the twin daggers in her hands tightened until her knuckles were white.

“Was it worth it? Defecting from Cipher Pol to die for those monsters?”

“No monsters,” Bam Bam forced out, a tiny, sly smile spreading across her face. “Not dead yet.”

“No yet,” The figure agreed quietly, head tilting sideways slightly. “Such a pity that you left. You were such a promising agent.”

“Betrayed,” Bam Bam growled, wishing desperately that she could shout—could scream the words that were trapped in her throat. But words had not been her friend of late. Not since that day. “Murdered team.”

“What did you expect for disobeying orders?” The masked figure huffed, turning away from Bam Bam with an almost careless attitude, clearly conveying that he thought she was no threat to him. “It must have been quite traumatic to steal away your voice so completely. Not that you were ever the most talkative person.”

Bam Bam growled, face twisting into frustration at her inability to speak properly. She pursed her lips together and stayed silent.

“I suppose I’ll never know why you decided to defect.” The masked man said with an airy sigh. “In the end it won’t be worth it. Tell me, do they know who you are?”

A genuine smile spread across her face, filled with mild wonderment. “Yes.”

“Really? How curious, I wonder what it took for you to gain their trust after so many of our other agents failed.” The man shook his head. “No matter. All you went through will be for nothing.”

“What… do?” Bam Bam grated out, heart pounding faster in her chest. She’d sensed the masked man’s presence and chased after him immediately, hoping to detain him from attacking the other ASL pirates. As strong as they were, they weren’t prepared to deal with CP-0.

“A bomb. We can’t allow an alliance to form between them and the Whitebeards or the Red Hair pirates at any cost,” The man turned back to face her and Bam Bam didn’t need to see his face to know that he was sneering. “Their continued existence will only create more problems for the World Government. They’ve been allowed to live for far, far too long.”

Bam Bam’s mind went into overdrive as the man pulled out a trigger. A cold dread washed over her. “B-bomb.” She whispered into the air, words almost a prayer. “Bomb.”

“You won’t be able to warn them in time,” The man said smugly, voice turning icy as he continued
speaking. “And even if you managed to get back to them before the bomb went off, I doubt you’d be able to tell them. Speaking doesn’t seem to be your strong suit at the moment. I can barely even hear what you’re saying.”

“B-omb.” Bam Bam repeated, a decimal louder this time. “Bomb.”

“What was that?” The man leaned forward slightly and cupped a hand to his ear. “I couldn’t hear you.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Bam Bam repeated the word over and over with more desperation. If she ran back to them, the man would set off the bomb before she could reach them. If she tried to attack him, she’d die and he’d still set off the bomb. She only had one option. And it was the one that both of them knew was impossible.

“Just give it up already. There’s nothing that you can do. Why don’t you curl up and die like the rest of your former teammates did?”

White hot anger blinded her momentarily. Her mind flashed back to the bloody corpses of her teammates, killed for refusing to follow an order that should never have been given.

Taking another deep breath, Bam Bam regarded the masked man calmly, before screaming out in a strong, echoing voice: “BOMB!!!!!”

Her voice echoed along the stone walls, shocking even her at the volume. She could only hope that they actually heard her.

“You shouldn’t have done that.” The masked man growled, jabbing his thumb onto the trigger before disappearing.

Bam Bam smiled in relief as the world dissolved into flames.

***

“Can you hurry it up Haru?” Ace snapped impatiently, glancing up from the sea stone cuff to glare at the magician.

The hair pin that Haru had been using to try to pick the lock snapped in half. Haru tossed it down to the floor in disgust. “I don’t have any of my lock picks. I’ll have to find something else.”

Haru stood up from where he’d been squatting next to Ace and aimlessly started searching the fallen Cipher agents for a spare key or something that he could use as a lock pick.

Marco shifted restlessly beside Ace, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. Ace squirmed slightly underneath the touch, but couldn’t muster the energy to dislodge it. “We need to get out of here, yoi.”

“Brining Ace out into the open like this is too dangerous,” Sabo countered, drumming his fingers on one of his legs. “One lucky shot and--”

“I won’t let that happen,” Marco said confidently, glancing at Luffy. “And neither will either one of you. We’re sitting ducks if we stay here and Cipher Pol knows exactly where to find us, yoi.”

“Stop talking as if I’m not here,” Ace growled, frustration growing by the minute. “We can’t leave until we find Bam Bam, so it doesn’t matter. Sabo, why don’t you take Luffy and help Wendy look?”
Sabo stared at Ace a moment, an eyebrow arching in surprise. He glanced between Marco and Ace before nodding slowly. “Alright. If we’re not back in ten minutes, get Ace out of here.”

“What about you?” Marco asked, trying to discern the odd undercurrent passing between the three brothers.

“Luffy and I can handle ourselves. But don’t worry, I don’t intend to fight CP-0 if we do run into one of them,” Sabo said, with a level of confidence that startled Marco considering his earlier reaction to the news that CP-0 was on the island. “We have a few tricks up our sleeves when it comes to escaping.” He added with a cunning grin.

Marco didn’t doubt him, after witnessing their… unique escape plan a few days before. He was glad Sabo had the good sense to run if they did encounter a CP-0 agent.

“Take care of him,” Sabo punched Ace in the shoulder lightly and nodded at him. “Come on, Luffy.”

Marco and Ace watched them leave the sanctuary in search of Bam Bam in silence. When they were gone from sight, Marco adjusted his position slowly so that he was sitting next to Ace on the ground.

It was quiet, save for Haru muttering to himself under his breath. Marco studied Ace thoughtfully, taking in the pale complexion that made his freckles stand out even more pronounced on his face.

“What?” Ace glared at Marco the moment he realized the older pirate was staring at him.

“You surprise me,” Marco said slowly, carefully measuring his words as he cast a reevaluating glance at Haru. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d want to be alone with me right now.”

Ace’s eyes flickered down to the sea stone cuff that was sapping his strength and leaving him completely helpless. He shrugged. A slow grin broke out on his face. “Well… Maybe I’m just tired of waiting for you to try something.”

A startled laugh escaped Marco at the mildly teasing tone in Ace’s voice. He reached over and ruffled Ace’s hair. “You’re crazy, yoi.”

“Don’t think this means I trust you though.” Ace cautioned with mock severity, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Of course not, yoi,” Marco hummed in response, still smiling. “You--”

“BOMB!!!” Bam Bam’s scream echoed throughout the sanctuary, sending ice through Marco’s veins.

They had to get out now.

Marco grabbed Ace and unceremoniously picked him up and started a mad dash toward the door. The teen didn’t even bother to protest; there was no way he could run with the sea stone cuff weighing him down like an anchor.

“Haru, get out of here!” Ace shouted, pulling on the cuff hard enough to make his wrist bleed. “Go!”

The magician didn’t have to be told twice. He scrambled to his feet and ran.

Heat prickled the back of Marco’s neck. The explosion knocked him off his feet and sent him hurtling into the air.
All around them the castle was collapsing in on itself, debris raining down from the ceiling.

They were too far from the door. Marco couldn’t morph even partially into his phoenix form without dropping Ace; the teen wasn’t strong enough to hold onto him with the sea stone cuff still attached to his wrist. All Marco could do was bodily throw himself on top of Ace as fire licked at his skin and stone pounded onto his back.

A sharp pain hit the side of his head and everything went back.

***

Shanks and Whitebeard were halfway up the hill when they stopped abruptly, catching sight of the fight happening by the shoreline. Three more division commanders had gone with Ben and Yassop to help drive off CP-0.

They didn’t have time for a drawn out battle. It was unlikely that CP-0 would be willing to go up against seven of the division commanders, plus Benn and Yassop. But if they were, the nine pirates were more than capable of handling it.

“It looks like they’re retreating,” Shanks commented, glancing subtly at Whitebeard. “I’m surprised they gave up so easily after risking facing us.”

Whitebeard hummed thoughtfully, before he started walking again. “Don’t let your guard down, brat. This isn’t over.”

Suppressing the mild irritation he felt at being called a brat, Shanks sprang forward to follow after the old pirate. He had to take at least ten steps for every one that Whitebeard took.

They were halfway up the hill when the explosion happened. There was a burst of bright orange light an instance before the near deafening roar filled the air.

Shanks and Whitebeard stared in horror as the castle collapsed in on itself. Dust and smoked filled the air. It was almost impossible to see anything, but that didn’t stop them from running the rest of the way up the hill.

Shutting his eyes, Shanks stretched out his senses with his haki and tried to detect if anyone was alive under the ruined castle. He could faintly make out two people buried underneath the rubble and his heart rate sped up. “We need to dig them out.” He said, knowing that Whitebeard could sense them as well.

“We’ll need more help than this.” Whitebeard said, glancing down at Speedy Jiru.

“On it, Pops.” Speedy Jiru disappeared in a blink of an eye, running rapidly to bring help and the necessary tools to dig out whoever was trapped underneath the debris.

Shanks made a beeline toward the three figures he could sense were standing a few feet away from the castle’s remains. It was almost impossible to see anything, but he didn’t need his eyes to navigate his way through the wreckage.

He leaped easily over a particularly large stone and collided with Luffy, who instantly gripped his shirt and dragged him forward.

“Ace and Marco are buried under there!” Luffy shouted, completely distraught. The boy was covered in scratches and rapidly forming bruises. A thick layer of dust covered him from head to toe, dulling the familiar yellow and red of the straw hat dangling down the back of his neck.
“We’re going to get them out of them,” Shanks gripped one of Luffy’s shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. “Where is the rest of your crew?”

Before Luffy could answer, Sabo and Haru came barreling into sight.

“Ace and Marco--” Sabo began, his breathing harsh and uneven. “They--”

“Luffy told us,” Whitebeard interrupted, kneeling down to place a steadying hand on Sabo’s shoulder. “We’re going to get them out.” He said, in a way that booked no arguments.

Sabo nodded, struggling to get his breathing under control. He was running on fumes. The fights had been taxing and his shoulder and leg were still bleeding. Not that it would stop him from digging Ace out if he had to move every stone himself to get to his brother. “They were almost to the door when everything collapsed. I’m not sure how they weren’t crushed, but we can’t just blindly start digging them out.”

Whitebeard nodded. If they weren’t careful, they could destabilize the wreckage and cause a second cave in. But if they weren’t fast, Marco and Ace could very well suffocate before they ever reached them. “You know what to do, boys.”

The Whitebeard pirates who had accompanied them all nodded and spread out. Using haki to guide their work, they began lifting the debris. They were quickly joined by the Red Hair Pirates, working together to shift the debris as swiftly as possible.

Sabo turned to help, but Whitebeard tugged him back and called for one of the nurses to come take check on his wounds. “Let us take care of this.” He said, gazing steadily into Sabo’s eyes before standing and joining the other pirates in their work.

Shanks hung back with Luffy, who had been sternly ordered to wait for one of the nurses to check him before joining the others to help. He studied the boy’s grave expression a moment before settling down on a rock. Ten minutes passed as they wordlessly watched the two crews dig.

“You’ve grown up.” He decided, breaking the silence.

“Yeah,” Luffy agreed, sitting down next to Shanks. He stared down at his hands for a moment before clenching them into fists. “I’m going to become stronger than anyone, Shanks.”

“Oh?” Shanks snatched the straw hat from Luffy’s head and stared down at it. He resisted the urge to put it on his head and instead slowly flipped it over in his hands, staring at it fondly.

“There are people that I want to protect,” Luffy stated simply, voice filled with steely conviction. “So I have to become stronger. Stronger than anyone.”

Shanks stared down at the hat in his hand. Hello, old friend.

The hat had obviously been repaired with the utmost care and love. Shanks could hardly tell that it had been damaged, though the red ribbon was beginning to fray in a few places. Wordlessly, Shanks plopped the hat back down on Luffy’s head. “I’m glad you found your brothers, Luffy.”

Luffy said nothing, pulling down the hat lower over his face.

Fifteen minutes later, Sabo sat down next to Luffy with a scowl. “I’ve been ordered to just sit here and not do anything, while Ace and Marco are under there suffocating for all we know!”

Shanks glanced over at Sabo. “Are you going to listen?” He asked, wondering how the teen had met
Luffy and Ace. He knew next to nothing about Sabo and he was curious how Sabo had gotten thrown together with Luffy and Ace. He knew that the three boys had become brothers and a few random stories about their childhood and their time as pirates, but that was it.

“No,” Sabo snorted, tilting his head slightly to glare at the nurse who was hovering a few feet away. “I’m just waiting for her to get distracted so I can go help.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time for that.” Jules said, crossing her arms and staring at Sabo pointedly.

Sabo glared at her a moment before sighing and shuffling closer to Luffy. The moment her back was turned he stuck his tongue out at her, but he made no move to get up.

“Ace will be alright, Sabo,” Shanks said confidently, watching as the Whitebeards and members of his own crew organized themselves and began working on digging Ace and Marco out. “Marco’s with him.”

“Yeah. Besides, pineapple’s with him.” Luffy said, nodding to himself.

“Marco is pineapple, stupid.” Sabo said with a sigh, ruffling Luffy’s hair.

“Pineapple?” Shanks repeated, chuckling softly. “Why didn’t I think of that one?”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
It was originally supposed to be two separate chapters, but I decided not to torture you with yet another cliffhanger...
Feedback/comments are greatly appreciated!!
Next up: Ace and Marco have a chat.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ace groaned as awareness hit him like a sea train. He started coughing almost immediately, choking on the stale and dirt filled air. He was curled up on his side with his knees drawn up to his chest. There was a heavy weight on top of him, crushing him and making it impossible to take deep breaths.

Blinking groggily, Ace stared at the limp hand hanging down in front of his face for a good minute before realization sunk in. “Marco.” He choked out, shifting slightly.

Marco didn’t answer. Ace clenched his fists and twisted his head upwards as much as he could with Marco on top of him. He glanced around the cramped space they were in, heart sinking.

Directly above them was one of the pillars that had once supported the sanctuary’s ceiling. Something was holding it up four feet off the ground, creating a tiny pocket of space. It was the only thing that had saved them from being crushed to death.

Carefully crawling out from under Marco, Ace painfully twisted around and tentatively examined Marco for injuries. Marco’s shirt was ripped in multiple places and stained in blood, but when Ace checked him over to see how serious the wounds were, he found nothing. No cuts, no bruises. Nothing.

Utterly perplexed, Ace ran a hand through his hair and winced when his fingers grazed a rather sizable lump. Pulling his hand back, it came away bloody. He grit his teeth and wiped the blood off on his pants.

“Marco.” Ace tapped the man’s cheek, eyes flitting to Marco’s legs. They were both crushed underneath a large stone just up to his knees, blood pooling him in frightening quantities. It was a miracle that Ace had escaped being caught under the stone himself.

There were soft blue flames flickering on what was visible of his legs, the only light they had. Since the flames didn’t appear to be hurting him, Ace guessed that he most have eaten a devil fruit of some kind. What was his moniker? Marco the Phoenix? “You need to wake up, now.”

The commander groaned and slowly opened his eyes. His face was lined with pain, but there was a sharp alertness to his eyes. He groaned and shifted slightly.

“Don’t move! Your legs are pinned underneath the rubble.” Ace grit his teeth and tugged on the sea stone cuff that was still sapping all of his strength and energy.

Marco craned his neck around and peered at his legs, face pale and covered in dirt. He took in the gruesome sight his legs made, perfectly calm as he took several deep breaths. He cursed under his breath and shifted slightly, testing his legs and the stone that were crushing them. With an irritated huff he turned back to Ace, concern flashing in his eyes. “Are you alright?”

“Am I alright?” Ace repeated incredulously, staring at Marco disbelievingly. “Y-yeah, I’m fine. But you’re not going to be if we don’t get you out of here soon.”

Glancing back at his legs again, Marco sighed and settled himself into a slightly more comfortable position. The pain was almost unbearable, but he forced himself to push past it.
If it had been Thatch, Jozu, or any of the other commanders with him, he would have just let himself pass out and let them sort the situation out. But he wasn’t with one of the division commanders, or even another member of the crew. He was with Ace, who didn’t know about Marco’s devil fruit ability and was still painfully young.

Ace was already on the verge of panicking, not that Marco could blame him. The last thing Marco wanted to do at the moment was black out and leave Ace alone, even if unconsciousness was appealing.

Since he’d eaten his devil fruit, Marco had noticed that his already high pain tolerance had skyrocketed to almost inhuman levels. He could push through this. Besides, he’d had worse. Much, much worse.

“Marco, you need to stay awake.” Ace said, something different in his tone of voice. Less panicked and much more determined.

The teen shoved his hand in front of Marco’s face. “You need to break my thumb.”

“No,” Marco said immediately, forcing Ace’s hand aside. “We can wait until Pops digs us out, yoi.”

“We can’t wait that long. You’ll bleed out—” Ace protested, eyes flashing in frustration.

“I won’t. My devil fruit has healing capabilities. Once they dig us out, all I’ll need is a few minutes to heal and a big meal to replenish my energy,” Marco said, meeting Ace’s gaze steadily. “They’re going to get us out. Everything will be fine.”

Ace’s nose wrinkled as he stared down at Marco. He sighed heavily before sagging slightly, carefully pressing a hand to the still bleeding wound on his head. “This whole thing is ridiculous.”

“You won’t hear an argument from me,” Marco responded, folding his hands under his chin to prop his head up. He forced himself to breath in and out at a steady pace. “Why didn’t you tell us Luffy was kidnapped?”

“Does it matter?” Ace muttered, staring up the pillar sullenly.

“Shanks would have torn the entire castle down by himself to save Luffy, yoi,” Marco said, forcing himself to stay still, despite the growing restlessness he felt at being trapped. And pain. A lot of pain. “You and Sabo both seem to respect Shanks, and trust him to a limited extent. So, why did you just rush off without telling anyone? CP-0 could have been a real problem if they had caught us off guard.”

Marco shuddered to think what could have happened if one of the weaker members of either pirate crews had accidentally stumbled into the path of CP-0. He knew that the World Government was desperate to capture and execute Ace, but he never imagined they’d be willing to go up against Whitebeard and Shanks, especially so quickly. He’d been more concerned that a fight would break out between the two crews.

“We need to be able to take care of ourselves,” Ace answered waspishly, pulling his knees up to his chest and grimacing as the movement jarred his ribs. The past week had not been kind to his body and he was definitely starting to feel it. “If we start depending on other people to save us now, it’ll only hurt us in the long run when—”

“When we betray or abandon you?” Marco interjected pointedly. “That’s incredibly cynical, yoi.”

“I have to protect my brothers and my crew, no matter what. I can’t let my guard down,” Ace
responded with a huff, wiping his forehead absently. Marco’s flames were giving them light, but it was also raising the temperature in the tiny space. Not to mention using up the limited amount of air that they had left. “Can’t you do something about those flames?”

“I’m suppressing most of them already, but…” Marco trailed off and mentally calculated how much oxygen they had left. “It won’t do much good. If I put them out completely, it wouldn’t be long before I lose consciousness and they’d start up again.”

“Great.” Ace sighed again and tugged at the collar of his shirt. It was already unbuttoned, but it was tempting to just take it off. But he had his reasons for always wearing a shirt. He missed the days that he had been completely unashamed to go shirtless.

“Whitebeard said that all of you are under his protection. We’ve given you no reason to distrust us, have we?” Marco pressed, unwilling to be side tracked from their conversation.

“Not yet,” Ace said, glancing back at Marco. “I’m not being overly cynical or fatalistic—I’m being realistic. I’ve trusted people before and been betrayed. It’s not impossible to gain my trust, but I just can’t take the risk with Whitebeard.”

Marco fell silent. For a moment, Ace worried that he lost consciousness. But before he could do anything to check, Marco spoke. “I was around your age when I first met Pops, yoi. It was before he was known as Whitebeard. The captain of the pirate crew I was with was about to beat me to death for disobeying an order. He’d wanted me to kill Jozu, who was already with Pops at the time, but I let him get away.”

“So, what happened?” Ace asked, trying to act like he wasn’t incredibly interested to hear the story.

“I thought I was going to die. No one was going to help me. In the entire world, there wasn’t a single person that cared about me… who would miss me if I was gone,” Marco paused, recalling the feeling of hopeless, of utter despair that he had felt in that moment. “I remember thinking, ‘maybe it’s better this way.’”

Fingers curling into fists, Ace visibly shuddered at Marco’s words. Understanding flashed in his eyes, and for a moment Marco could see raw hurt in the lines of his face as Marco’s words resonated in the teen.

“The captain was seconds away from kicking my head in, when out of nowhere the entire ship trembled and half the crew was overboard,” Marco smiled slightly, remembering the sound of the ship’s wood splintering and the cries of the crew. “Whitebeard had come for me. He defeated the entire crew and offered me a place on his.”

Ace perked up slightly as Marco spoke. “You weren’t one of the first crewmembers?”

“No,” Marco shook his head slightly. “Though, I wouldn’t call any of the pirates that were with him at the time original members of the Whitebeards, except for Jozu. Things were different then.”

“So, you joined his crew after he rescued you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t trust him. Not for one second.” Marco shook his head.

“What changed that?” Ace questioned softly, once again staring at an undiscernible spot on the ceiling.

“Pops saved my life,” Marco murmured, closing his eyes briefly. “He risked everything to save my life. He lost most of his crew, sustained severe injuries, and lost a devil fruit that was literally
priceless, all for me. I was so angry at him at first.”

Marco had spent a good fifteen minutes yelling at Whitebeard as soon as he had fully recovered from the whole ordeal. The moment he’d stopped shouting, Whitebeard had merely smiled and said: “I’m glad you’re okay, son.” Marco remembered staring at Whitebeard incredulously before he’d started sobbing quietly. No one had ever cared about him. No one had considered him worth what Whitebeard had gone through to save him. “It was the first time I ever felt truly valued. Pops was the first person who ever truly cared about me. He considered my life more important than his own life—more precious than treasure, than all the gold in the world… I knew then that I’d follow him to the ends of the earth. I wasn’t the first to join the Whitebeards, but I was the first to call him Pops.”

They lapsed into silence. Above them, they could hear a slight rumble, which hopefully meant that they would be dug out soon. Ace continued staring at the ceiling, something tired and vulnerable flashing across his face.

“Why does everyone call him ‘Pops’?” Ace asked, so quietly that Marco almost missed it.

“Because he calls us his sons, yoi.” Marco answered, a smile spreading across his face.

Ace stared at Marco in surprise for a moment before turning away, eyebrows furrowed contemplatively.

The stone surrounding them trembled, dust filling the air as Marco bit back a groan of pain. He could sense Pops and the others somewhere above them, but he had no idea how close they were to actually digging them out.

His healing ability was rapidly draining him of energy and it was becoming more and challenging to stay awake.

“What happened? On Dawn Island,” Marco asked, eyes closed as a wave of pain and exhaustion swept through his body.

Ace buried his head in his arms. He didn’t want to relive what had happened again so soon after they had told Shanks. And they hadn’t even told Shanks the entire story.

“Why do you care?”

“I’m just trying to understand better, yoi,” Marco answered, eyeing Ace through hooded eyelids.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Sighing, Ace directed his gaze to the ceiling once more. He was half tempted to refuse to say anything, but… Maybe telling Marco would help the commander understand why he could never join the Whitebeards. “Fine. You want to know what happened? I’ll tell you.”

***

“Dadan should’ve been back by now.” Ace mumbled under his breath, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his oversized red sweater. It had been pouring rain for the past day and a half, making the dank cave they were hiding in even chillier than normal.

The three brothers had found the cave a month ago. It was high in the mountains and the entrance was so covered in vines and foliage, it was almost impossible to find unless you knew what to look for.

They’d been hiding in the cave from the marines for the past two days, ever since Sabo had been attacked while trying to steal a ship for them to escape the island.
Ace didn’t know what he would have done if Dadan hadn’t been there. Sabo’s wounds were terrible and it had been nothing short of a miracle that they had managed to escape High Town.

Dadan, Dogra, and Magra had all done their best to treat Sabo’s injuries, but they were completely out of their depth. They had done what they could with their limited knowledge and medical supplies, but Sabo wasn’t doing well. Not at all.

A fever had set in almost immediately and he’d been incoherent from the pain and his high temperature. Ace had never seen Sabo look so bad, not even when he’d gotten sick with pneumonia when they had been seven. His skin was pale and his breathing was growing increasingly labored.

Ace was no stranger to death. He knew that if something wasn’t done, Sabo would die.

Late in the night, Dadan had stood up abruptly from Sabo’s side and announced that they were going to get medicine and a doctor.

“If we can’t find a doctor to come willingly, we’ll just have to kidnap one,” Dadan had pronounced grimly, shoving a handkerchief into Luffy’s hands. “Blow.”

Luffy blew his nose noisily, eyes red and drooping steadily. He’d been fighting sleep for days, only napping fitfully whenever Ace sat down with him and hugged him close.

They were both afraid that if they let themselves sleep, something would happen to Sabo.

“Are we going to Fuusha village or High Town?” Magra asked, placing a hand on Sabo’s forehead. He shook his head at the high temperature radiating from the boy.

“Both. You and Dogra go to High Town and get the medical supplies. I want you to break in and steal as much as you can carry,” Dadan paused for a moment, thinking fast. “Don’t just get medicine for burns. Make it look like a regular robbery.”

Dogra and Magra both nodded. It wouldn’t be the first time they had gone to High Town and robbed the pharmacy. They knew what to do.

“What about you, boss?” Dogra asked, placing a fresh, cool cloth on Sabo’s forehead to help fight the fever.

“I’m going to Fuusha village to get the doctor.” Dadan announced, pulling on her coat and boots.

They had left twenty minutes later, just as the wind outside had started to pick up. Ace had watched them disappear into the dark of night from the entrance of the cave, apprehension gnawing at him.

That had been almost a full day ago.

Ace turned from the cave entrance and walked back to Luffy and Sabo. Luffy had been instructed by Dogra on ways to bring down Sabo’s fever and had been doing so with meticulous, overly cautious care.

“Ace,” Luffy’s head jerked up the moment he heard Ace’s footsteps. The boy’s eyes were watering with tears. “He’s getting worse.”

Kneeling next to Luffy, Ace reached out and pressed a hand against Sabo’s forehead. He winced at the heat emanating from Sabo’s body. “His fever has risen…”
“We have to do something…” Luffy mumbled, wiping his nose with his sleeve. “Dadan still isn’t back yet?”

“No,” Ace chewed on his bottom lip. He inwardly debated whether going to High Town or going to Fuusha village would be better. “I’m going to find her. You stay here and take care of Sabo. I’ll be back soon.”

“Ace--” Luffy tugged on Ace’s sleeve. “Fuusha is where the admiral is. You can’t go there.”

They’d found out that a marine admiral was in Fuusha the same day that Dadan had left for the village. Some of the other bandits had come to warn them hours after Dadan had set out. They didn’t know who it was, but they did know that it wasn’t Garp.

Garp. Who was nowhere in sight when they needed him most. They hadn’t heard anything from him, even after Dadan had sent him a discreet note warning him about what was going on.

“I won’t let him see me, obviously,” Ace snapped, absently bending down to ruffle Luffy’s hair. “It’ll be okay. Trust me!”

Luffy’s lower lip trembled. He glanced between Ace and Sabo and shook his head vigorously. “Dadan said for you not to go.”

“Since when have we ever listened to Dadan?” Ace scoffed, rolling his eyes and grabbing one of their pipes from the ground. “I don’t know where to find a doctor in High Town late at night. But I do know where to find a doctor in Fuusha. Look, I promise I’ll come back. Hopefully with Dadan and a doctor. Just—take care of him while I’m gone, okay?”

“Hurry.” Luffy said reluctantly, knowing that there was nothing he could do to stop Ace. He wasn’t sure if he should stop Ace, anyways. Sabo was getting worse. He’d needed a doctor hours ago.

Ace nodded, eyes lingering on Sabo’s pale face. He couldn’t lose Sabo. He couldn’t. “You better be here when I get back.” He muttered under his breath, before forcing himself to turn and head out of the cave.

The weather was some of the worst he’d seen on the island as Ace approached the entrance to the cave. Wincing and pulling his hoodie more securely over his head, Ace carefully scanned the forest to make sure that the coast was clear.

Ace darted out from the cave and quickly ran toward the relative safety of the forest.

It would take several hours to make his way down the mountain to Fuusha, so he decided to pace himself instead of running the entire time. He needed to save his energy in case he ran into trouble.

The rain was making the ground turn muddy, slowing him down considerably. Thankfully, he could navigate the forest blindfolded. Literally. Garp had spent a week on the island when he was seven, making him spend the entire time wandering around the forest blindfolded for ‘training.’

Forcing his mind from worrying about Sabo and Luffy, and the possibility of running into the marines, he instead focused on the task at hand—finding a doctor and Dadan.

Several hours later, Ace stopped running and hid behind a bush. Just ahead, he could see the faint light coming from the houses in Fuusha village.

He squinted, eyes scanning the village. He’d never been to it before. He’d never been allowed.
According to Luffy, the doctor’s village was closer to the ocean than the forest, meaning he’d have to sneak past any marines present in the village to reach it. But, if he could make it to Makino’s house, she could get the doctor for him.

Dadan had grilled Luffy about where Makino lived before she had left, so he knew roughly where her house was. Hopefully Luffy had been accurate with his instructions to Dadan, otherwise… it didn’t really bear thinking about.

Decision made, Ace carefully made his way down the hill, grimly noticing that there was a significant amount of light coming from the village. The villagers might be asleep in their beds, but the marines were wide awake.

The village was dangerously devoid of good hiding places, but it was dark and Ace was quick. He didn’t waste any time in making a beeline toward the nearest house. It was several yards from the rest of the village and all of the lights were out. As far as he could tell, there was no one nearby.

Ace reached the house as the rain stopped drizzling for the first time since he’d stepped outside of the cave. He glanced around cautiously, eyes focusing on the bright light coming from the center of the village. A cold knot settled in his stomach.

Now that he was closer, he could faintly hear noises coming from the village and see that the center of the village was filled with people.

“What’s going on?” He murmured, debating if he should turn around. It was entirely possible that Dadan had been caught by the marines. She had a bounty out on her head, so she could have been spotted and recognized.

He shook his head as he inwardly debated with himself. He couldn’t turn back. Not without at least trying to get a doctor or at least medicine for Sabo. Ace wouldn’t be able to make it to High Town in time to do Sabo any good. It was now or never, especially if Dogra and Magra didn’t make it back.

And… if they did catch him…

Shaking his head once more, Ace grimaced. He couldn’t let himself go there.

Ace waited fifteen minutes to check and see if the marines had decided to patrol around the village, but no one came. He waited a minute more until he was satisfied that whatever was going on in the village had the marines’ full attention, before springing forward out of his hiding place and dashing toward the village.

His skin was covered in a cold sweat. He crept around the back of it, keeping to the shadows as much as possible.

Now that he was closer, he could make out two distinct voices. One was booming and grating, fury seeping into every word. The other, he knew all too well.

“Why would I know some punk kid?! I’m a bandit, not a nursemaid!” Dadan growled, voice hard and scornful. “And if I did know where he is, don’t you think I’d tell you for a reward?”

“I don’t know,” The chilling voice retorted. “Would you?”

Dadan started cursing loudly, dirtier than he’d ever heard from her before as he crept closer, heart sinking. She’d gotten herself caught after all! Now what was he supposed to do? It didn’t feel right to leave her in their clutches without trying to do something, but he couldn’t risk being spotted by the marines. And what could he do against such a large group of marines, not to mention an admiral?
“I think you know more than you’re letting on,” The man said, voice lowering dangerously. “I know that you came here for a doctor tonight. Perhaps for the boy that was injured at the docks? I received reports of a woman matching your description leaving there with a young boy.”

“Him?” Dadan started laughing. “He’s a rich kid from High Town. I kidnapped him to ransom him back to his parents.”

Ace inched around the back of the house and started carefully edging his way along the side so he could see better what was happening. His heart was yammering in his chest, but he crept forward anyway.

“Don’t think I can be fooled,” The man growled. “I know that there were two other boys with you. This is your last warning. Tell me what I want to know, or there won’t be enough of your face left intact to collect on your bounty.”

Ace felt his mouth drop open in shock and terror at the man’s words, but a hand cupping itself over Ace’s mouth muffled any nose that might have been about to escape.

“Ace, listen to me! You have to get out of here now,” Makino’s voice whispering desperately in his ear made him quickly catch himself from instinctively elbowing her in the stomach. “They know that you’re on the island and I think the Admiral is suspicious about Luffy. They know Garp comes here. The two of you have to leave right away before he starts searching Mt. Colubo.”

Twisting around, Ace shook his head. “Sabo is sick and I can’t just—I can’t just leave Dadan like this!”

“You have to! Listen to me, Ace,” Makino grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “If they find you, there will be no one to protect Luffy and Sabo. They’ll execute Luffy. And Sabo might even be executed or imprisoned because he knows about you.”

“Why would they care about Luffy?” Ace asked in confusion, brow furrowing as cold dread wrapped it’s icy fingers around his heart and squeezed.

“I don’t know all the details, but his father is a very dangerous criminal. Garp warned me years ago about it,” Makino bit her lip, tears shining in her eyes. “They’ll execute him because of his father, just like you.”

Ace stared at Makino in shock, unable to comprehend the information she had just told him. “Luffy’s… like me?” He asked, voice slightly unsteady. He felt like the ground underneath his feet had just given way.

Luffy, his idiotic, stupidly loyal little brother, also carried the blood of one of the world’s most notorious criminals. Ace wondered if he knew. He doubted it, not that Luffy would really care even if he did.

“Yes,” Tears started streaming town Makino’s face. “Listen to me Ace. Dadan knows what she’s doing. You have to get out of here and hide, okay? Leave the island if you get the chance.”

Half a dozen protests formed in his mind, but no words came out. He was angry, and desperate and helpless. There was nothing he could do against an admiral. If the admiral was even half as strong as Garp, there would be no way he could beat him.

There was Sabo and Luffy to think about, too. Now it wasn’t just Sabo’s life on the line; Luffy’s was in danger too. If Ace didn’t get back to the cave soon, it was entirely possible that Luffy would try to go for help and get caught by the marines while wandering around.
“What about you?” Ace asked, regarding her fearfully. He didn’t think the marines would simply let her go if they found out she had helped him.

“I’ll be fine,” Makino wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled. “I promise, I’ll be waiting here for the three of you. So, definitely come back someday, okay?”

Makino pressed her forehead to Ace’s and wrapped her arms tightly around him. She clung to him, unwilling to release him from the enclosed safety of her arms.

Shutting his eyes, Ace stayed perfectly still except to return the hug and focused on memorizing every detail he could of her. His eyes stung with unshed tears. He didn’t want her to let go.

All too soon she pulled away, wiping tears and snot from her pale face. She sniffed and handed Ace a small satchel. “This has medicine for Sabo and instructions on how to treat him. I’m hoping Garp will be able to come find you, but--”

“Gramps will definitely come for us,” Ace said, with more confidence than he felt. There was a growing uncertainty about Garp in the back of his mind, feed by years of insecurity and feelings of worthlessness. “He definitely will.” He repeated stubbornly. For Luffy.

“The marines might be watching him,” Makino whispered, reaching out to stroke Ace’s face. “He won’t be able to help you if he leads the marines straight to you. Just—just trust that he’ll do everything he can, okay? He really does love all three of you boys.”

Ace nodded. There was something incredibly final in her words and the heartbroken way she was gazing at him. His eyes were watering, but he refused to cry. He bit down hard on his lower lip, chin trembling.

“Go now. Quickly,” Makino gently stroked Ace’s face with a thumb, as if she could wipe away his unshed tears. “Take care of your brothers.”

Knowing that he had no choice, Ace half turned and took a few steps away from her when the sound of a gun being cocked froze him completely.

“Don’t move.” A marine ordered, pointing the rifle directly at Ace.

“Please,” Makino stood up and instantly placed herself between Ace and the marine. “This isn’t who you’re looking for. He’s just a child. Let him go.”

The marine shook his head, eyes burning into Ace with terrible certainty in them. “He’s the right age and he looks—he looks like--”

“He’s a child!” Makino said, voice hitching. “Please. Please. He’s just—just a child. He hasn’t done anything.”

The marine’s resolve wavered. The barrel of the gun lowered just slightly from where it had been pointing at Makino’s chest. “That may be true… but this was never about anything he’s done, except that he was born.”

Those words crashed into Ace like a tidal wave, panic flooding through him. “Makino, move out of the way.” He pleaded hoarsely, hands balling into fists.

A Celestial Dragon had destroyed Sabo’s ship, almost killing him in front of dozens of marines. There’d been one standing next to that monster when the shots had been fired. If he hadn’t seen that, he might not have understood the danger that Makino was putting herself in.
“No,” Makino firmly, shaking her head. “Ace--”

Things seemed to slow. Ace surged forward, intent on attacking the marine, but Makino flung herself in front of him and shoved him back.

Her arms stretched wide to shield him from the rifle as she shouted for Ace to run. The marine tried to shove Makino out of the way, but she stubbornly refused to budge.

Ace saw the marine’s fingers inching for the trigger and something inside him snapped. “Noo!!” He shouted, lunging forward to push Makino out of the way—to get to the marine before he could pull the trigger.

The noise of the gunshot left Ace’s ears ringing as Makino fell to the ground. For a moment, Ace just stared at her in horror as she clutched her shoulder. Blood dripped through her fingers, staining her hands and shirt crimson.

Ace’s eyes snapped to the marine, but he was flat on the ground. He was unconscious and foaming at the mouth, much to Ace’s confusion. He hadn’t even been close enough to hit him, but the marine was out cold.

Shouting erupted from nearby. It was only a matter of minutes before the marines reached them, but Ace was frozen in place.

“Ace,” Makino grabbed Ace’s arm, smearing blood on him as she tugged him close. “Run. You have to protect your brothers.”

“I can’t just--” Ace started, but Makino simply shook her head and gave him a not so gentle shove towards the woods.

“Go!” Tears were streaming down Makino’s face, but she smiled at him. “Get Luffy and Sabo out of here.”

It went against everything in his being to run away, but Ace started turning right as a tall, broad shouldered man with a white coat and a hat that had “marine” written on it ran into view.

The man’s eyes narrowed dangerously, instantly honing in on Ace. Something crimson and scorching started streaming down his shoulders and arms, so hot the air was shimmering from the heat. “At last. I’ve found you.”

Ace knew what the white coat meant. He’d seen Garp wearing one enough times to recognize the admiral’s coat anywhere. This wasn’t a fight he could win. If he stayed, his brothers would be left alone. Sabo was going to die without medical help and Luffy would be killed if he was caught.

There was really no choice. Nothing else he could do. He grit his teeth, furious, bitter, and so very, very afraid for Makino.

He swallowed hard, glanced at Makino one last time, and ran.

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“What happened after that?” Marco asked, opening his eyes when Ace abruptly stopped speaking. “Ace?”

Marco stared at the teenager. Ace’s hands were over his face, as if they could block out the images burned into his mind. He’d grown paler and paler the longer he’d spoken, making his freckles stand
out starkly in the dim lighting.

“You don’t have to keep going if you don’t want to, yoi,” Marco said at last, when the teen remained silent. He knew the end result of what happened that night, so he could fill in some of the blanks. “I’m going to kill Akainu when I see him again,” he added under his breath.

It’d been a long time since Marco had felt such rage boiling up inside of him. It helped him push past the pain.

He tried to imagine Ace, Luffy, and Sabo facing off against Akainu only a few days ago. With the added knowledge that it had been Akainu at Dawn Island, encountering him a few days ago after the seemingly close call with Whitebeard must have been absolutely terrifying.

Ace didn’t respond, instead once again burying his face in his knees and wrapping his arms around his legs.

“It’s a miracle you managed to escape Akainu at all,” Marco said, allowing himself to imagine creative, painful ways that he could bash Akainu’s face in. He wondered how Ace had escaped, with Akainu undoubtedly doggedly chasing after him. “Though I still don’t see why this was supposed to convince me that you shouldn’t join the crew, yoi.”

“He killed Makino,” Ace said, voice choked with emotion and muffled by his knees. “She was burnt alive.”

Marco grimaced and shut his eyes briefly. He couldn’t imagine how traumatic that must have been for Ace. He’d watched friends and crewmates—his brothers, die in front of him.

To lose a parental figure that way… Marco’s mind flashed to Whitebeard and he shuddered.

“Some of the villagers tried to help her, but…” Ace trailed off, shuddering. “When they realized that she—that she was… they turned on the marines.”

Ace could still remember the moment of realization--of horror he’d had seconds before the shooting had redirected toward the villagers instead of at him. There were no words—no possible way to describe what he’d felt as he watched the villagers fall as the marines turned against them. They hadn’t stood a chance, most of them completely unarmed. He shuddered.

“I couldn’t do anything. Akainu came after me and I thought maybe if I led him away from the villagers, maybe I could help them,” Ace lifted his head, eyes haunted by the memories replaying in his mind. “He chased me for a while, but something—I’m not sure what, but something stopped him from chasing me. I don’t know exactly what happened after he stopped, but he went back the village and burned it to the ground. I don’t know how anyone could have survived.”

I can’t believe he survived… Marco shook his head and grimaced, heart heavy and aching in compassion for Ace. What was he supposed to say in response to what Ace had just told him? There were no words.

Just looking at Ace made his head hurt. He was finally beginning to understand what was going through Ace’s head and he could guess the point Ace was trying to get across by telling him this. He wasn’t sure he’d act or feel any differently, if their roles were reversed.

“I barely managed to make it back to Luffy and Sabo,” Ace continued, not noticing the deeply pained expression on Marco’s face. “We escaped that night, just in time to see High Town get shelled. They destroyed it and set fire to the Gray Terminal, all because I was there. Because someone helped me. If the marines and the World Government were willing to murder innocent
people like that, what do you think they’ll do to pirates?!”

Before Marco could say anything in response, Ace continued, voice growing louder with each word, eyes fierce and furious. “It wasn’t just Dawn Island— once they destroyed an entire village just because they let us stay overnight and treated our wounds. They sent Cipher agents against two of the Yonko, on the off chance we’d join you. What do you think they’d do if we actually joined? I can’t let something like that happen again, not if I can prevent it. Besides that, your crew is huge. Can you really guarantee that none of them hold a grudge against Roger? That none of them will try and take a swing at me or decide that they want the bounty on my head or that I’m not worth all of the trouble?”

Above them, the stones trembled dangerously, causing Ace to flinch. They both waited with bated breath for the shaking to stop, coughing as it grew more difficult to breathe because of the thinning, dust filled air.

“First of all,” Marco said once his breathing was more under control, eyes narrowing as he finished processing everything that Ace had just said. “You’re right. We’re pirates. Not defenseless villagers. We can handle ourselves, and to suggest that we can’t is mildly insulting. Our captain is one of the four emperors of the oceans. He’s called the strongest man in the world. And he knows exactly what the consequence would be if you accepted his offer to become one of his sons. He knows better than you what will happen, but he considers you of such value that he’s willing to risk everything if it means giving you a home and a family. You’re right. Some of our crew do have grudges against Roger. I’m sure not everyone will agree with having you join the crew, but they’ll either get over it or leave. Pops’ word is final when it comes to who he accepts as a son. It’s as simple as that, yoi.”

Ace’s eyes widened, face painfully young as he gaped at Marco’s words. For a moment, Marco could almost see longing shining in his eyes. But almost immediately, his expression became more guarded and he glanced away. “It’s really not.”

Sighing in mild frustration, Marco tilted his head thoughtfully. “Why were you so quick to trust Jinbe?”

“I don’t trust him, not exactly,” Ace responded slowly, scratching his head slightly sheepishly. “But… I beat him. It took five days, but I beat him. Even though I didn’t trust him, I wasn’t worried about him being around us because I knew that Sabo and I could take him if he tried something. Whitebeard…”

“Ah,” Marco sighed. If Whitebeard decided to attack or betray them, what could they truly do against the strongest man in the world? Ace hadn’t even been able to so much as scratch Whitebeard when they had fought. “I understand. I suppose you have a choice then; you can continue distrusting us. We’ll take you back to Paradise just like we promised and we’ll go our separate ways. Or, you can take a chance on us. You might be surprised with what happens, yoi.”

Before Ace could respond, there was another tremor and a rumble that sounded far too close for comfort. It was quickly followed by another, even more violent tremor that caused the stones above them to grind together dangerously.

“What are they trying to do?!” Ace grunted, coughing heavily as he unconsciously edged closer to Marco. “Bury us twice?”

“They know what they’re doing, yoi.” Marco responded, staring up at the ceiling calmly.

The rumbling stopped abruptly. A second later, the pillar that had saved them from being crushed was split in two. Blinding, early morning sunlight streamed in, along with a burst of fresh air.
“Took you long enough.” Marco said with a smile, staring up at the giant face peering down at them.

“Glad to see you in one piece,” Whitebeard said, grinning happily at the sight of his son. His smile faded when he saw that Marco’s legs were pinned and Ace’s pale complexion. “Let’s get you out of there.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a really, really heavy chapter and the longest one yet! This one took me a long time to write, especially the flashback.
Please let me know what you thought of it! Hopefully Ace and Marco were both in character the entire time.
Thanks for all of the kudos’ and the comments! They're greatly appreciated :D
Feedback/comments are always, always greatly appreciated and reread multiple times!
Ace refused to move until Marco was free, earning him a curious glance from Vista, Izo, and Jozu. He hovered a few feet away from where the three commanders were examining the stone that was crushing Marco’s legs, stubbornly managing to stay on his feet.

It wasn’t difficult for Vista and Jozu to lift the stone pinning Marco’s legs up enough to allow Izo to pull Marco free. Izo let out a choked noise at the brief glimpse of Marco’s legs he had, before they were consumed by brilliant azure flames.

Marco emitted ragged sigh of relief as the flames burst across his legs, sagging in Izo’s grip as shattered bones and broken skin were knitted back together. One hand automatically reached out and gripped Izo’s kimono tightly, the other clasped firmly by Vista. His head lolled dazedly in Izo’s lap as his vision flickered in and out. “Did he see?” He slurred hoarsely, tongue heavy and numb.

Izo cocked his head toward the pale faced teen and scrutinized him for a moment before shaking his head. “No.”

Ace had inched closer to Marco the instant he’d been pulled free, but he hadn’t seen Marco’s legs before the flames had erupted, effectively hiding the damage from view. Relief was clearly evident on his face as he wavered unsteadily on his feet.

“All right, let’s see what we can do about you,” Vista said, giving Marco’s hand a comforting squeeze before releasing it and glancing at Ace. “Pops, can you--?”

“I got him.” Whitebeard said, carefully wrapping his hands around Ace and lifting him up with ease.

Ace stiffened in his grasp, but Whitebeard was infinitely gentle as he carried Ace away from the rubble. The old captain brought Ace over to where Luffy, Sabo and Shanks were sitting and sat him down in front of one of the nurses.

“Take care of him and see what you can do about the sea stone cuff.” Whitebeard said, keeping a steadying hand on Ace’s shoulder as the teen’s knees threatened to give out.

“Ace!!” Luffy shouted, almost tackling Ace to the ground in his excitement to hug his brother. Whitebeard’s warm, steadying hand on Ace’s back was the only thing that kept him upright as Luffy did his best to wrap himself around Ace as much as possible.

“Luffy,” Ace breathed, all tension draining away as he weakly reciprocated the hug. He caught sight of Sabo hovering a few feet away and practically melted into Luffy’s arms in relief. “Is everyone else okay?”

Whitebeard kept a firm hand on Ace until he was lowered safely to the ground. “We’re still searching for Bam Bam, but the rest of your crew is fine.”

“They’re just over there.” Shanks added, gesturing toward where Wendy and Haru were swathed in blankets and being thoroughly prodded by the nurses.

They both waved at him, relief shining brightly in their eyes. They were both covered in a heavy layer of dust and littered head to toe with bruises, but they were alive.
“Let’s see what we can do about that cuff.” Shanks declared, motioning for Lucky Roo to come over.

Lucky Roo jumped down from the pile of rubble he had been sitting on at the sound of his captain’s voice. He covered in dirt and sweating profusely, but despite his overall exhausted state he was grinning as he sprang over to Ace.

Ace glanced around and realized in astonishment that the two crews were scattered around the castle ruins. The two crews had worked together to dig them out, putting aside a rivalry that spanned decades to help them. And the Red Hair pirates hadn’t even been doing it to help one of their crewmembers, unlike the Whitebeards!

Flinching slightly when Lucky Roo grabbed his arm, Ace realized that Shanks and the Red Hair pirates were present only to help him. The thought warmed him, even though he knew it was mainly for Luffy’s sake. “Is everyone okay?”

Luffy reluctantly pulled back from Ace and sat down next to Shanks so Lucky Roo could work. He slapped Shanks’ hand away when the Yonko reached over and tried to snatch the straw hat from his head.

“A couple of the division commanders got hurt driving CP-0 away, but none of the injuries were serious,” Shanks answered, taking a sip from a flask of alcohol. He had sat with Luffy and Sabo for most of the night, the only reason they hadn’t exhausted and hurt themselves trying to dig Ace out. “It could have been much, much worse.”

“Uh oh.” Lucky Roo grimaced as his lock pick tool broke in half. He squinted at the lock, scratching his head. He tried to pull out the other half of the lock pick, but it was completely jammed inside.

“What do you mean, ‘uh oh?” Ace demanded wearily, staring down at the cuffs with a growing sinking feeling. “Just break my thumb--”

“That wouldn’t do much good, in this case. It’s too tight.” Lucky Roo said, tugging on the cuffs experimentally.

Horror dawned on Ace’s face. “I’m going to have to chop off my hand, aren’t I?!”

“Calm down,” Shanks struggled to restrain a chuckle at the growing dismay on Ace’s face. “If it wasn’t possible to get the cuffs off, all of the devil fruit users in the New World would be handless.”

“True story.” Lucky Roo agreed with a snort. He twisted Ace’s arm around and shook it vigorously in an attempt to dislodge the broken fragment of the lock pick. “We’ll have to take care of this back at the ships. I need better tools.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve found the woman who swallowed the key?” Ace glanced at Sabo, sighing in frustration when his brother shook his head.

“They haven’t found any sign of her. She either escaped or she died in the collapse.” Sabo said, shrugging helplessly.

“This isn’t the first time something like this has happened. We have the tools on the Moby Dick to remove the cuff,” Whitebeard said reassuringly, patting him on the back as the teen groaned in frustration. “We’ll have the cuff off in no time.”

“Well, now it’s my turn,” Jules said, gently hauling Ace to his feet and guiding him over to where the other nurses were swarming. “Time for a checkup.”
Ace was bruised from head to toe. He had a small cut on the top of his head, but thankfully didn’t appear to have a concussion. He was coughing and having some difficulty breathing because of all of the dirt he’d inhaled and his fractured ribs, but mercifully his ribs hadn’t suffered much damage during the fight.

After cleaning and bandaging the worst of his cuts and scrapes, Jules grudgingly released Ace from her clutches until they were back on the Moby Dick. She didn’t even lecture him about taking it easy; she wasn’t particularly worried about him overexerting or accidentally reinjuring himself, considering he could barely keep his eyes open.

A heavy exhaustion was dragging at Ace, caused only in part because of the sea stone cuff, but he stubbornly forced himself to stay awake. He was half leaning against a rock, half leaning against Sabo’s legs. “Any sign of Bam Bam?”

“She wasn’t with us when the castle collapsed, so they’re searching the other areas of the castle and the surrounding area for her,” Sabo said, shifting restlessly on the rock he was sitting on. “It’s entirely possible she managed to get out before it collapsed.”

Considering that it had been Bam Bam who had warned them of the bomb, Ace highly doubted that. Still, Bam Bam was strong and resilient. It would take more than a castle collapsing down on top of her to kill her.

Whitebeard had moved off shortly after Ace had been swarmed by the nurses and was conversing with three of the division commanders a short distance away. His white captain’s coat had been discarded shortly after the digging had started, revealing the numerous scars littering his chest. Like all of the other pirates milling about nearby, he was filthy and sweaty, but the commanding air surrounding him was almost tangible as he helped organize the search for Bam Bam.

“Did Whitebeard help?” Ace asked, staring at the tattoo on Whitebeard’s back. Unlike the rest of his body, Whitebeard’s back didn’t have a single scar.

“He helped the entire time. I’ve never seen such precision control of a devil fruit before,” Sabo answered, eyeing Ace curiously. “Ace?”

Ace tore his gaze away from Whitebeard’s back and turned back toward Sabo. “Shouldn’t we be helping them look for Bam Bam?”

“You aren’t going to be doing anything until we can get that cuff off. Besides, we’d have to escape the nurses first.” Sabo said sheepishly, glancing wearily at the nurses clustered nearby.

“So?” Ace demanded impatiently, not seeing what the problem was. “We can’t just sit here.”

“Can you even stand up?” Luffy asked curiously, stretching out an arm to poke Ace’s shoulder. He almost knocked him over, but Sabo quickly grabbed Ace’s shoulder and steadied him.

“Don’t even think about it,” Sabo crossed his arms. “You’re not in any condition to do anything at the moment and the nurses wouldn’t let you even if you were. I tried to help them dig you out, but the nurses—err... stopped me.”

“We can’t just sit here--” Ace protested, struggling to stand even though he was using Sabo’s knee to prop himself up.

“Oh, yes you can. You can’t even stand up on your own, how are you planning on looking for Bam Bam?” Jules flicked Ace’s forehead, sending Ace flopping back to the ground.
Ace opened his mouth to object, but was cut off by a familiar voice. “Go easy on him, Jules. He’s had a long day, yoi.”

“Marco!” Ace craned his neck around and felt his mouth drop in shock. The last thing he’d expected was to see Marco standing, legs healthy and whole. “Your legs…”

The first division commander was walking under his own power, with not a scratch on him. His pants were a tattered, bloody mess, he was paler than normal, and he was clearly exhausted, but that were the only indications that anything had happened to him.

“Good as new, see?” Marco said, slapping a hand on Ace’s shoulder. “I just have to eat something soon to replenish my strength, yoi.”

Jules grumbled something under her breath and grabbed Marco’s arm. “Don’t think just because your devil fruit healed you means you’re getting out of a checkup.”

Marco gritted his teeth and sighed, the snickering coming from the Whitebeards sealing his fate. He couldn’t protest without negating the endless number of arguments he’d had with the crew about Jules’ dictatorial policies. There was no escaping. “Very well, yoi.”

The checkup didn’t take long; Marco was didn’t have a single scratch on him, afterall. But just like Ace and the rest of the ASL pirates, he was banned from doing anything strenuous until they could get him something to eat.

Meanwhile, Ace was leaning heavily against Sabo, moments away from falling asleep.

“I think we should move Ace somewhere more comfortable.” Sabo said softly, chuckling ruefully when he realized that Ace was drooling on him.

“Let’s move him over there,” Marco suggested, kneeling down next to them. “Do you mind if I carry him? Jules will have a conniption fit if you try moving him with your shoulder.”

Sabo studied Marco’s face for a moment, before nodding slowly.

“I can carry him!” Luffy protested, bouncing over and grabbing one of Ace’s arms.

“Can you carry him without dropping him like last time?” Sabo shook his head. “Better let Marco do it.”

“When did Luffy drop Ace?” Haru whispered to Wendy in confusion, walking over to them. They’d finally been released from the nurses’ clutches.

“It was the last time we were running from Akoji. Ace twisted his knee and Luffy had to carry him back to the ship. It was fine until Luffy accidentally dropped Ace into the ocean while he was coming up the gangplank.” Wendy explained, sighing to herself.

“Oh.” Haru had been frozen solid at the time, so he didn’t remember anything that happened during the fight. Ace being angry at Luffy about something outrageous he’d done wasn’t anything new, so he hadn’t paid much attention to their heated bickering after he had been thawed.

“Hmmm,” Luffy placed his heads behind his head and shrugged. “Okay. But I only dropped him once. I’m strong!”

Marco carefully lifted the teen up and carried him over to an area by a more intact section of the castle’s wall. It was out of the way of all of the commotion as the search continued for Bam Bam and sheltered from the early morning sunlight.
Sabo and Luffy quickly joined him, positioning themselves as close to Ace as possible. Ace relaxed against them with complete trust, already half asleep.

At least you’re able to trust someone, Ace. Marco thought, smiling slightly at the obvious care and protectiveness Sabo and Luffy were displaying.

“Honestly, you just can’t keep out of trouble, can you?” Sabo said fondly, examining the sea stone cuff dangling from Ace’s bruised wrist.

Luffy laughed and sprawled himself out half on Sabo and half on Ace. “You’re one to talk, Sabo.”

“That goes double for you, Luffy! You’re just as bad—worse actually, you’re somehow worse than them.” Wendy snorted, sitting down a few feet away from the three brothers. She positioned herself carefully so that anyone who wanted to reach them would have to go through her first.

“Hey, we’ve managed to stay out of trouble remarkably well, considering,” Sabo chuckled, leaning back heavily against the wall.

“It’s amazing the world hasn’t imploded from all of the random chaos you three cause.” Haru retorted, flopping down flat on his back and covering his eyes with his arms.

Luffy started chattering away with Wendy and Haru, occasionally prodding Ace to ask him something or tell him a joke. Ace responded by letting out a puff of air or grunting in response, too tired to respond with words. Ace’s breathing slowly evened out and his eyes drifted close as he fell asleep, comforted by the familiar voices surrounding him.

The young pirates surrounding him were a little wary of Marco close proximity to Ace, except for Luffy, who had already determined that Marco was a good guy. And Ace, who was asleep.

They were all painfully aware of how completely helpless Ace was with the sea stone cuff; if someone tried to hurt him now, there was literally nothing he could do to defend himself. Marco felt a surge of protectiveness rise up inside him with surprising force.

“We’re not going to let anything happen to him,” Marco said quietly, sighing slightly as the ASL pirates unconsciously tensed as a cluster of pirates brushed by them. “We wouldn’t go to so much effort to save him just to let someone kill him now, yoi.”

Absently running a hand through his hair, Sabo nodded. “I know.” He said quietly.

And he did… the logical part of his mind knew that the Whitebeards wouldn’t hurt them. They were surprisingly honorable, for pirates. But years of ingrained mistrust was hard to fight against.

Ace twitched slightly and shifted away from Sabo. He ended up leaning against Marco with his head on Marco’s shoulder.

“He drools.” Sabo warned, allowing Luffy to practically climb into his lap so he could be closer to Ace.

Glancing at Marco, Sabo realized that remarkably, the first division commander had miraculously managed to endear himself to Ace during their time buried beneath the castle.

Eyeing the commander thoughtfully, Sabo thought it was safe to guess that the same could be said about Marco.

Relaxing and stroking Luffy’s head as he fell asleep, Sabo relaxed fully. Ace was safe and he was
surrounded by people who cared about him and would protect him while he couldn’t protect himself.

Maybe, just maybe… Marco included.

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Whitebeard was in deep conversation with Jozu, Fossa, and Namur as Shanks approached. Whitebeard glanced up at him warily as he drew closer before finishing issuing his orders. “… Jozu, you’ll be taking charge of the second division. Coordinate with Atmos and sweep the island one more time. I don’t want any more surprises. Namur, I want you and Fossa to inspect the Moby Dick for any sign of tampering.”

“You got it, Pops.” Fossa said, turning to leave and nodding at Shanks as he walked past.

Shanks waited until the division commanders were out of earshot to walk over and stand next to Whitebeard. They were silent for a minute, watching their two crews work together to find Bam Bam. It was an impressive sight.

He sighed heavily and wordlessly offered Whitebeard his flask. He glanced thoughtfully around the decimated castle and shook his head. “This was a warning, you know.”

“Stop telling me things I already know, brat.” Whitebeard said, taking a short gulp. He stared down at the now empty flask mournfully for a moment before handing it back to Shanks.

Glancing at where Luffy and Sabo were huddled around Ace, Shanks felt his resolve grow, fueled by a strong burst of fondness and overprotectiveness. “You better not let anything happen to them.”

The old pirate snorted derisively and shook his head. “You’re a hundred years too early to threaten me.”

Luffy’s distinct, joyous laughter echoed throughout the courtyard. Shanks couldn’t help but smile. “Gurarara!” Whitebeard threw his head back and laughed at Shanks outright. “I’m surprised you haven’t offered to take them yourself.”

“Luffy wouldn’t go with me. We made a promise,” Shanks said, turning back to face his fellow Yonko and eyed him shrewdly. “Besides, I think you can offer them something different than what I can. Something they need more.” Something Ace needed more.

“And what makes you think that?” Whitebeard asked, offering him back the rum.

Shanks shrugged. “Call it a hunch.”

“Hmmph,” Whitebeard shook his head again. “They haven’t even agreed to go with us yet.”

“They will,” Shanks once again met Whitebeard’s gaze, expression dead serious. “Just one more thing; when the time comes, the Red Hair pirates will stand with you.”

Whitebeard paused, but didn’t turn around. “That’s a risky statement, brat. You sure you’re ready to back it up? What about the consequences?” He asked, throwing Shanks’ words from their conversation on the beach back at him.

“I’ve given it as much thought as you did when you offered to take them in, old man.” Shanks retorted blithely. Sobering quickly, he gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. “You’re going to need help. You’re the strongest man in the world. Your crew is the one of the most powerful in the entire
Grand Line, but even you will need help against the entire world.”

Because it wasn’t just the marines that would be gunning for them if Ace actually joined, or Cipher Pol, or the World Government—the entire world was against him. If Ace became Whitebeard’s son and joined his crew, all hell would break loose.

They were after Luffy as well, but it was mainly Ace who they were gunning for. The son of the pirate king was a larger, more tangible threat to many than the shadowy figure running the Revolutionaries. Not that Luffy was in any less danger.

Whitebeard didn’t respond immediately, instead eyeing the three teens that were currently in his care. Marco was staring incredulously at Luffy as the boy told a story, lips twitching rebelliously into a faint smile as he struggled unsuccessfully to keep from laughing. Leaning against his shoulder was Ace, fast asleep.

“They’re worth it.” Whitebeard murmured quietly, knowing that he was risking everything by offering to take them in, even if it was just temporarily. But they deserved to have someone who was willing to fight for them.

Shanks nodded in silent agreement as joyous, triumphant shouts sprung up from the ruined castle. “We found her! She’s badly wounded, but alive. We’re taking her straight back to the ships.” Yassop shouted, springing easily over the rubble toward Shanks and Whitebeard.

“Great work! Tell the crew to pack it up and head back to the ship. We’re leaving as soon as the ASL pirates are back on board the Moby Dick,” Shanks said, sighing in relief. “Let’s go tell them.”

Whitebeard nodded and walked over to them, booming voice praising his crew for all of their hard work. The ASL pirates all perked up as he approached, immediately cheering and jumping up in relief at the news that Bam Bam was alive.

Sabo bent over and tried to shake Ace awake, but gave up quickly when he didn’t so much as twitch. He was drooling slightly on Marco’s shirt and snoring softly, out like a light. Rolling his eyes, Sabo said something to Marco that made the commander laugh softly.

Hanging back, Shanks watched as Luffy, Sabo, Wendy, and Haru all gathered around Whitebeard to find out how Bam Bam was. He smiled to himself, pleased that a bond was already forming between them and the Whitebeards.

Luffy wouldn’t join the crew, he knew. He didn’t know Sabo and the others well enough to even guess whether or not they would join. But Ace… Even though he had just met Ace, he had a feeling that he’d find a home with the Whitebeards if he just gave them a chance.

_Do yourself a favor and give it to them, Ace._ Shanks thought, grinning as Luffy eagerly ran over to him.

***

Ace was awake and incredibly embarrassed as they walked back to the beach. He was being carried by Whitebeard, since Jules had banned the ASL pirates and Marco from doing anything strenuous. His only consolation to the embarrassment of being carried was that the sooner they reached the Moby Dick, the sooner they’d get the cuff off.

The steady rhythm of Whitebeard’s long, smooth gait was almost enough to lull Ace back to sleep, but there was something that he had to say.
“Oi, old man,” Ace paused for a moment and rubbed a hand tiredly over his drooping eyes. “We’ll travel with you-- but that doesn’t mean that we’ll be joining your crew! And, I have a condition.”

“Oh?” Whitebeard glanced down at Ace curiously, inwardly impressed and extremely amused that Ace had the audacity to actually put a stipulation on the offer he had made.

“I get to spar with you.” Ace said, eyes bright with excitement.

Whitebeard grinned, chuckling softly. “You’ve got guts, kid! Very well. But, every time we spar, you have to spend an hour with me.”

“An hour?” Blinking in surprise, Ace stared up at Whitebeard curiously. “Why would you want to spend an hour with me?”

Letting out a small puff of air, Whitebeard shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “If you’re going to be on my ship, I want to get to know you better.”

Brow furrowing, Ace considered that a moment. “I suppose with all of the rumors going around, you’d want to know who we are.” He muttered to himself.

Casting his eyes heavenwards, Whitebeard let out a long suffering sigh, but didn’t bother to correct him. Hopefully, with some time he’d get it.

“Alright,” Ace decided, grinning in anticipation. “It’s a deal then?”

“It’s a deal,” Whitebeard answered, grinning back at him and feeling pleased. “Any time, any place. Bring it on, brat!”

Sparring once a day with the boy was actually something he could very much look forward to. It’d keep him on his toes.

***

Flash forward three days…

Whitebeard’s eyes snapped open and his fist came up instinctively, hitting a body that was leaping towards his bed. His attacker crashed through a wall and slammed onto the deck of the Moby Dick with a grunt.

Blinking awake fully, Whitebeard sat up and carefully untangled himself from the various IVs connected to him. He peered through the hole in his wall and suppressed a groan.

Ace was picking himself up from where he had crashed into the deck, wiping blood away from his nose. He grinned at Whitebeard crookedly and clambered wobbly to his feet. “You did say any time.” He said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

Outside, a few of the Whitebeards on watch came running over to see what had happened as Whitebeard regarded his newest problem child. He shook his head in mild amusement. He’d had no idea that Ace would take what he had said so literally. “I did.” He said, still trying to wake up and wondering if being attacked in his sleep actually counted as sparring.

Dusting himself up, Ace poked his head through the hole and studied Whitebeard for a moment. “Want to get breakfast?”

“Why not?” Whitebeard said, sliding out of bed and stretching. “While we’re eating, I think we need
to define ‘sparring’ and discuss the proper rules of engagement.”

“They’re rules of engagement?” Ace asked in surprise as they walked toward the mess hall.

***

Present time…

They were walking down to the beach when they heard it-- a familiar, shrill cry coming from the ocean.

“Cow-chan!” Luffy shouted in delight, dashing down to the beach with Sabo, Wendy and Haru hot on their heels.

“Let me down!” Ace squirmed out of Whitebeard’s arms and would’ve face planted on the ground if Whitebeard hadn’t managed to snatch the back of his shirt.

Ace took one step forward and almost fell again. Huffing out a sigh, Marco wrapped an arm around his shoulder and helped him stumble after his crew.

“Is that…?” Shanks trailed off in astonishment as a sea king calf poked its head out of the water and swam as close as it could to shore, eager to meet the young pirates racing toward it.

The two emperors watched as Luffy leaped onto the calf and started chattering excitedly to it. Sabo, Haru, and Wendy waded over to greet the calf, while Ace hung back with Marco, grinning broadly. In so many ways, it was a surreal sight.

“What’s she saying?” Wendy asked, gently rubbing the top of the calf’s head and peering up at Luffy. She stumbled slightly as a wave that came up to her waist swept past her.

“She says ‘thank you for helping me,’” Luffy translated, listening intently to Cow-chan’s soft mewing. “She’s going away with her family, but she wanted to say goodbye first.”

On the beach, the Whitebeards and especially the Red Hair pirates were staring at Luffy in shock.

“Pops—is he actually… understanding it?” Izo asked incredulously. “I didn’t know that was possible.”

“Not even King Neptune can understand sea kings.” Namur uttered, completely astonished. In many ways, he understood the significance of what they were seeing better than everyone but Shanks, Whitebeard, and Marco.

Shanks swallowed hard, shaking his head in wonder. He felt almost giddy. It seemed Luffy would never cease to amaze him. In all his time in the Grand Line, he’d only ever met one person with the same ability. He’d never imagined he would meet a second. “Captain Roger could.”

Watching Luffy’s face closely, Whitebeard broke into a broad grin and started laughing. The younger generation had some interesting prospects indeed. “It seems you picked an interesting brat to bet your arm on, Shanks.”

Several yards away from the island, a sea king surfaced and called out to Cow-chan, startling everyone on the beach and the look outs on the two ships.

Patting Cow-chan’s head one more time, Luffy sprang off of her head and into Sabo’s waiting arms.
“Bye Cow-chan! See you later!”

“Thank you for helping us!” Wendy shouted, waving goodbye as the calf swam toward what they assumed was one of her parents.

“Come visit us someday!” Luffy shouted, climbing up Sabo so he could sit on Sabo’s shoulders. They shouted their goodbyes until Cow-chan and the other sea king disappeared beneath the ocean.

“Extraordinary little brat, isn’t he?” Whitebeard mused quietly to himself, recalling Luffy’s bold pronouncement that he would become the next pirate king, not Whitebeard. Shaking himself from his reverie, he turned to his crew and arched an eyebrow. “What are you scallywags all doing standing around? Back to the ship!”

His children jerked from where they had been standing frozen on the beach at the sound of his voice. They scurried quickly to the nearest boats and started ferrying the crew back to the Moby Dick.

It didn’t take long for Luffy to wander over to Shanks, followed closely by his brothers, Wendy, and Haru. Marco trailed behind them, face unreadable as he eyed Luffy with new interest.

It took two hours to ferry the majority of the Whitebeards and the Red Hair Pirates back to their ships, along with the excavation equipment and everything from the party. Almost immediately after Cow-chan had left, Marco flew to the ship and retrieved the tools needed to free Ace from the cuff.

“Got it! Feel better?” Lucky Roo grinned as he pulled the cuff off of Ace’s wrist, watching his expression closely.

Ace couldn’t contain the grin that spread across his face as a familiar warmth surged throughout his body. He stood up and allowed the bright flames to flare to the surface. Orange flames danced across his hands and up his arms and shoulders as he sighed in relief. “You have no idea.” He answered honestly as the flames flickered out of existence.

They spent the rest of the two hours sharing stories with the Red Hair pirates. Luffy and Shanks were both painfully aware that they wouldn’t see each other for years once they left the island. It only made their time together more precious, even though it passed by all too quickly.

By silent agreement, the last ones on the beach were Shanks, Luffy, Ace, Sabo, Whitebeard, Marco, and Benn and Yassop.

“So… I guess this is it.” Shanks said, staring down at Luffy gloomily. It’d been too short of a visit, but they had to leave. It wasn’t safe to stay on the island and he couldn’t travel alongside the Whitebeards for a multitude of reasons.

“We’ll meet again when I’ve become a great pirate!” Luffy exclaimed confidently, grinning up at Shanks.

“I can’t wait,” Shanks ruffled Luffy’s hair and pulled him into a tight hug. He glanced up at Luffy’s brothers. “Take care of him.”

“We will.” Ace promised, holding his arms open for Luffy as the boy released his death grip on Shanks and transferred it to Ace.

Placing his hand on Ace’s shoulder, Shanks studied the teen for a minute. “Give the old man a chance, Ace. He might just surprise you.”
Ace shifted uncomfortably, but nodded, albeit stiffly. He’d had a burst of energy when the cuff had been removed, but now fatigue from everything that had happened in the last week was hitting him hard.

“Sabo, it was a pleasure meeting you,” Shanks said sincerely as he pulled the blond into a hug, wishing that he’d had more time with the three brothers. “Whitebeard.”

“Shanks.” Whitebeard gave him a respectful nod.

Hugging Luffy one last time, Shanks took advantage of Ace’s dulled reflexes to give him a swift, tight hug. “Take care of yourself too, okay? Your brothers worry about you.”

“I know.” Ace responded, staring down at his feet.

Climbing into the boat with Benn and Yassop, who had both already said their goodbyes, they shoved off and started rowing toward the Red Force.

Shanks just had one thing to say. “Take care of them, pineapple head!” He shouted gleefully, enjoying the way Marco’s face twisted at the sound of his voice.

What Marco shouted back at him was not appropriate for a thirteen year old to hear, but it probably wasn’t the worse thing he’d ever heard. Luffy was a pirate after all.

Watching as Luffy climbed into a boat with his brothers and Whitebeard, Shanks twisted slightly to glance at Benn. “Is it too late to kidnap them?”

Benn just chuckled and kept rowing.

“We could take them,” Yassop said, eyeing the boat the three brothers were in critically. “We could knock Whitebeard and Marco overboard and then swoop in and snatch them while the rest of the Whitebeards are distracted!”

Shanks let out another sigh, but felt a smile spread across his face. “They’ll be fine with them.”

Luffy would have been fine on either of the two ships and he was fairly sure that the same was true with Sabo. But it wasn’t necessarily true with Ace. Ace needed something more than his brothers did. And Shanks had a feeling that the Moby Dick was exactly where Ace needed to be.

***

Marco went to his cabin as soon as the ASL pirates were all settled in the infirmary, camping around Bam Bam’s bed. He’d already showered and changed into clean clothes. Now, he was ready to collapse on his bed and sleep for the next eight or nine hours.

Exhausted from staying up all night, and the stress placed on his body from his injuries, he collapsed on his bed.

Instantly, bright blue feathers exploded from his bed and pillow, filling the room entire room like a colossal blue cloud. They lightly floated downwards, every inch of his room becoming completely covered with the azure plumes.

Sitting up slightly and spitting out feathers, Marco grit his teeth and shut his eyes as half a dozen blue feathers landed on his head. “Thatch!!!!!”
Whew! Long chapter. I had to go back and rewrite a huge section of this chapter, so that's one of the reasons I didn't post this sooner. It took me forever to decide if I should change it or not.
The chapters from here on out will probably be this length or longer, so I might be a little slower in posting chapters. I have the rest of the story plotted out, so I'm hoping I can finish it by the end of the year!
Thank you for all of the awesome feedback on the last chapter! I really appreciate the time that all of you take to comment on the story.
Three days after they had left the island, all of the members of the ASL crew but Bam Bam was released from the infirmary. The relative sense of peace that had settled over the Moby Dick during the last three days was over.

The first thing Ace did once they were officially released was find out where Whitebeard’s cabin was. Some naïve, unwitting pirate gave him directions, thinking that Ace wanted to talk to the Yonko about something. Five minutes later, Ace crashed through the wall of Whitebeard’s bedroom.

That had been early in the morning. You’d think getting his ass handed to him by strongest man in the world once would be enough for one day, but Ace was stubborn. And persistent.

“Ace isn’t actually trying to kill Pops, is he?” Izo asked in mild concern, watching as Ace skidded across the deck, crashed into the ship’s railing with enough force to break it, and fell into the ocean.

“No, of course not,” Sabo said somewhat doubtfully as a fishman dutifully dove after Ace. “He’s just… venting frustration.”

Izo and Jozu both arched their eyebrows, unconvinced.

“Have either of you three fine gentleman seen Marco this morning?” Thatch whispered from behind them as he carefully scanned the deck for any sign of his most recent angry prank victim. He’d been in hiding for the past three days, disappearing deep into the bowls of the Moby Dick, except for when he crawled out to cook.

“Oh, there you are. Marty was looking for you earlier. Something about needing to go other the food supplies with you.” Izo said, not bothering to glance back at Thatch.

Sabo shook his head as Ace was hauled back on deck and glanced down at where Thatch was crouching behind a few barrels. “What did you do to make Marco so mad at you?”

“What makes you think it was something I did? I’m not the only one that pulls pranks on this ship,” Thatch snapped somewhat defensively, peering suspiciously every which way as if he expected Marco to pop out of the woodwork and attack him. “I’m innocent I tell you, innocent!”

Izo covered his laughter with a cough. Sabo just stared down at him skeptically.

Bursting out laughing, Jozu shook his head. “Hasn’t even been with us a week and he has you pegged.”

“Okay, I might have allegedly put blue feathers in his bed so that when he lay down,” Thatch made pouf motion with his hands and Sabo and the two commanders winced.

“He blames me—falsely I might add, because of all the bird jokes Shanks and I made during the party.”

“Falsely… right.” Izo snorted and shook his head. “How exactly are you still alive?”
“How many attacks was that? Five or six?” Jozu asked, resting his head on his chin as he watched Ace recover from being pulled out of the sea and wander off.

“Eight. Ace doesn’t give up easy. Shouldn’t you be hiding somewhere else, Thatch? This area is awfully exposed,” Sabo grinned mischievously. “Although it would be fun to see what Marco does to you when he catches you.”

Thatch paled and started to tiptoe away, but a hand latched onto his shoulder. A shiver ran up and down his spine. “Oh--”

“Found you, yoi.” Marco said, an evil gleam in his eyes.

After a brief but violent struggle, Thatch flew over the side of the ship and into the ocean.

“Man overboard—oh wait, never mind. It’s just Thatch.” The look out in the crow’s nest shouted.

“Aren’t Thatch and Marco always like that?” Sabo wondered aloud, watching as the head chef surfaced and started shouting obscenities at Marco, shaking his fist.

A crash sounded from somewhere aft, followed by a splash and shouting.

“Ace is over board again,” The lookout called. “Atmos, you owe me a hundred beli.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Izo responded, exhaling slowly. “Ace is trying to kill Pops, isn’t he?” He didn’t seem particularly worried at the prospect.

“Maybe a little…” Sabo muttered, shaking his head in exasperation.

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Ace’s hair was still damp when he followed Sabo, Luffy, Wendy, and Haru into the mess hall later that day. Once again, all the sound in the mess hall ceased the moment they entered, all eyes focusing in on Ace. The three boys automatically stiffened, eyes sweeping the mess hall warily.

The tense moment was broken by a snicker.

“What are they laughing at?!” Ace demanded, crossing his arms defensively and glaring at the guffawing pirates.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sabo said airily, dragging Ace out of the doorway and over to the food line. “Maybe it has something to do with the fact that you’ve been thrown overboard six times in less than two hours?”

Blushing slightly, Ace shot his brother a glare. “Whitebeard said I could spar with him.”

“Whatever--” Haru made several vague, indecipherable hand gestures. “That was, isn’t what I’d call sparring, boss.”

“That’s what Whitebeard said, too,” Ace’s brows furrowed. “Did you know there were rules of engagement?”

“Yes.” Sabo said, rolling his eyes at the same time Luffy exclaimed; “There are rules of engagement?!”

“Yes! There are,” Ace whirled on Luffy, face aghast. “There are rules! For fighting!”
“Ehhhhh?!” Luffy’s eyes widened in horror.

Ace launched into an explanation of the rules of engagement that Whitebeard had told him about during breakfast. “Can you believe that?” He shook his head.

“Um… yes?” Sabo said, chuckling ruefully at Ace and Luffy’s horror-struck expressions. “I mean, if there weren’t rules, it’d be like the time Luffy and Haru fought at Swamp island every day.”

Ace, Wendy, and Haru all swiveled to face Luffy with a flat, disapproving glare.

“What?” Luffy crossed his arms and pouted. “It was an accident! I didn’t know that I’d break his nose. And his arm. And his leg.”

Haru shuddered and grabbed the nearest tray, unconsciously edging away from Luffy.

“Anyways, moving on,” Wendy cleared her throat and consolingly patted Haru on the back. “I think we can all agree that avoiding another Lu-catastrophe like that is in everyone’s best interests.”

“I guess I can understand a little better,” Ace said reluctantly. “Still… rules. For fighting.”

“Oh, knock it off,” Sabo lightly punched Ace’s shoulder. “We had the one hundred match limit, remember?”

“That was about how much we could fight, not how we could fight,” Ace retorted defensively, shaking his head at Sabo. “Luffy gets it.”

“Mmm!!” Luffy said in garbled agreement, mouth full of food.

Rolling his eyes, Sabo smiled and started filling his tray with food. Despite what Ace and Luffy said, they both had their own unwavering code of conduct when it came to fighting, though he doubted either of them would ever call it that.

“Hey!” Wendy smacked Luffy’s hand as he started to stretch his arm to grab more food. “We’ve talked about this. Wait. Your. Turn.”

“No,” Sabo shook his head with a wry grin. “Usually Bam Bam’s here and it’s worse.”

Thatch’s smile widened, mind flashing to all of the wonderful pranks he’d be able to pull off with his two new accomplices. “Fantastic—I mean, uh, that must be very hard for you. Well, anyways don’t worry. She’ll be back to terrorizing everyone in no time.”

“Thatch, can you tell me who the head chef is? I need to talk to him or her.” Wendy said as she passed by him in the line.

“Look no further,” Thatch said with a cheery grin. “I’ve actually been meaning to talk with you, too. Do they always eat like this? Please, please tell me they don’t.”

Wendy glanced at Luffy’s tray and grimaced. “Actually, they usually eat more, but they just can’t pile enough food on one tray. Though Sabo doesn’t eat quite as much as Ace and Luffy—I said *quite as much*. He’s still a bottomless pit.” She hastened to add upon seeing the hopeful expression on Thatch’s face.

Blanching, Thatch glanced between Ace, Luffy, and Sabo and down at their trays. He shuddered.
“You must be a miracle worker. We’ll talk more about this later.”

“I’ll be in the infirmary.” Wendy answered, smacking Luffy’s hand away from her tray only to have Ace steal a mango slice from it while she wasn’t looking.

Laughing softly, Thatch shook his head and shifted his attention back to serving the food. He was really going to enjoy having the ASL pirates on board. Even if it meant that they faced a food shortage crisis in the very near future.

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They were halfway to the infirmary when Ace suddenly staggered, his tray tipping forward precariously. He blinked sluggishly and swayed before his body suddenly went slack and he crashed to the ground.

Sabo’s reflexes kicked in and he managed to catch Ace’s tray midair. He glanced down at Ace sighed. They were lucky no one had been around to see him fall. “We’re going to have to come up with some sort of strategy about this.”

“Great priorities there, Sabo.” Wendy said, rolling her eyes at how Sabo had chosen to catch the tray instead of trying to help Ace. She knelt down and gently nudged his shoulder.

“It’s not like anything of you did anything either,” Sabo shot back, poking Ace with his foot and mentally calculating how long it’d been since he’d fallen asleep. “Come on, wake up.” He muttered under his breath.

Footsteps resounded behind them. Sabo mentally ran down his lengthy list of lies and excuses to find the most logical reason Ace was lying face down in the middle of the hallway, unmoving.

“What happened? Is he alright?” Haruta asked, quickly striding towards them the moment he spotted Ace on the ground.

On the floor, Ace twitched suddenly, before sitting up abruptly and rubbing his eyes. “Uhh…”

“He tripped!” Wendy said, shaking her head in exasperation as she stood, still balancing her tray of food in one hand. “Maybe Whitebeard hit him one too many times in the head this morning?”

Grimacing, Haruta offered his hand to Ace and helped the teen up. He scrutinized Ace’s face for a moment. “You are pretty banged up. We should have Jules--”

“No,” Ace said sharply, running a hand through his unruly black curls. “I’ve been prodded enough by that woman for a lifetime.”

“She’s just getting started, trust me,” Haruta snorted, glancing at Luffy. “I still owe you for that stunt in the shower, by the way.”

“Shishishi!” Luffy grinned broadly at the commander, completely unconcerned that Haruta was promising to get him back for his part in the shower prank he had pulled with Thatch and Bam Bam.

“We should be getting to the infirmary,” Sabo said, handing Ace his tray back. “Bam Bam’s waiting for us.”

“Oh!” Haruta offered them a cheeky grin. “By the way, Pops is looking for you, Ace.”

“Oh,” Ace frowned, wondering why the Yonko would want to see him. “Alright. I’ll find him after
lunch.”

“See you later then! Tell Bam Bam we’re all wishing her a speedy recovery.” Haruta resumed on his way to wherever he was heading with one last wave and they resumed heading to the infirmary.

Bam Bam was awake and sitting up, multiple fluffy pillows propping her up. She was still very pale and covered in bandages, but she was slowly healing.

They had found her in one of the underground tunnels underneath the castle. She had escaped being crushed by the collapse of the castle by the skin of her teeth; it was ironic, if she hadn’t been so close to where the bomb had been planted, she would have been killed. The explosion had flung her far enough down the tunnel that she had managed to escape the worst of the collapse.

“Bam Bam!” Wendy sat her tray down on Bam Bam’s bed and smothered her in a hug.

“You know, you can stop doing that every time you see her,” Haru said, plopping into a chair and kicking his feet up on the bed. “She’s alright.”

“She could have died though! She deserves a hug. Lots and lots of hugs.” Wendy exclaimed as Bam Bam squirmed in her grip.

“I think you’re smothering her—literally.” Ace warned, settling down on the end of Bam Bam’s bed and digging into his food.

With a reluctant sigh, Wendy released Bam Bam. Nudging her to scoot over, she squeezed onto the bed and passed Bam Bam one of the trays before taking her own. “Bam Bam’s been hug deprived. I’m just trying to make up for it. She had a lonely childhood.”

Bam Bam nodded in agreement and wiggled into a more comfortable position next to Wendy, eyes shining with contentment.

“Not that again.” Ace rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. Wendy had declared Sabo, Luffy and him ‘hug deprived’ not long after she had joined the ASL pirates.

The next hour was spent lightly bickering with each other as they ate. Bam Bam was as silent as always; blissfully content to have her crew around her. But… there was something just a little off about the way she was acting.

“Hey, Bam Bam,” Sabo paused and glanced around the room to make sure no one was nearby. “Did you run into CP-0? You haven’t really told us why you disappeared during the fight…”

Nodding her head, Bam Bam struggled to get the words out. She had shouted. Talking normally should be easy after that, right? “Saw CP-0 agent. C-chased after him. Told me there was a b-bomb.”

Ace blinked in surprise. “So it was you that shouted.” It had been the only logical answer, but it had been hard to believe. After almost four months, they had never heard her talk any louder than a whisper. She had been practically mute when she had first appeared on their ship.

Shrugging her shoulders, Bam Bam stared down at her hands folded neatly in her lap. “Had to.”

Sabo glanced at Ace, spotted the downcast expression on his face and sluggéd him on the shoulder. “None of this was your fault—well, except for not telling the Whitebeard and Shanks that Luffy was kidnapped in the first place—”

“So, kind of his fault,” Haru interjected, eyeing Ace shrewdly. “Fifteen percent his fault.”
“I think that’s being a bit generous,” Wendy stood up and started collecting the various plates, utensils and trays scattered around Bam Bam’s bed. “There’s no way he could’ve known that CP-0 was there or that they had planted a bomb.”

“Five percent then.” Haru leaned back in his chair and stretched.

“I--” Ace began, only to be interrupted by Sabo.

“Contrary to what you think, all the terrible things in the world don’t revolve around you,” Sabo said, punching Ace again on the arm. “Besides, that whole thing was Luffy’s fault.”

“Huh?” Luffy squirmed as all eyes turned toward him, slapping a hand onto his hat and smiling sheepishly. “Oh, yeah it was. Shishishi, sorry about that!”

“Don’t laugh while you’re apologizing you little brat!” Haru snapped, springing on Luffy and grabbing his cheeks. “You caused everyone a lot of problems! Be sincere!”

“I said I was sorry!” Luffy elbowed Haru’s stomach, causing the magician to release him and double over in pain.

“Luffy, what have we said about roughhousing with Haru? He’s normal. You have to gentle with him!” Wendy exclaimed, grabbing Haru’s shoulder and carefully easing him to the ground.

“I didn’t even hit him hard! See?” Luffy sprang forward to elbow Wendy to prove it, but Ace grabbed quickly pulled him into a headlock before he could reach her.

“Stop beating up your crewmates, Luffy,” Ace ordered sternly, eyeing the boy closely and sighing.

“I--” Bam Bam swallowed hard. She had shouted. If she could shout, then talking to her crew shouldn’t be that difficult. “I—I was very l-lonely. Before.”

Ace and Luffy both stilled from their wrestling. Sabo, Wendy, and Haru all waited patiently as Bam Bam struggled to get her words out.

“Always, always… lonely. B-but now… I’m not. Because I found you,” Bam Bam squeezed her eyes shut as they prickled with tears. After a moment, she lifted her head and stared directly at Ace. “And—I’m so g-glad. I’m so very glad I met you.”

Swallowing hard, Ace released Luffy and turned away. “I’ve only caused you trouble. You were kicked out of Cipher Pol because of me. They killed your entire team—they nearly killed you! You should curse the day we crossed paths.”

Bam Bam shook her head firmly. “Never. Never, Ace. D-despite everything that happened… I’m so h-happy I met you.”

“If you say so,” Ace murmured bashfully, head bowed, heart swirling with a strange mix of joy and pain. Unspeakable awe that he had felt so many times with Sabo and Luffy welled inside him. He rubbed his eyes wearily. “Thank you.”

Glancing down at the ground, Haru stared off into space. “I never realized how lonely I was until I met all of you.” He said quietly.

“Haru!” Wendy lunged forward and dragged him into a hug, one arm still wrapped around Bam Bam.
Luffy laughed and sprang onto the bed to join in on the hug, almost knocking Haru over in his eagerness.

“Watch it!” Haru snapped, grunting as Luffy barrled into him and Wendy to hug them.

“He needs to burn off some energy, or he’ll end up destroying half the ship.” Ace sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Whitebeard wanted to talk to you, right? We could ask him if they have a training room we could use.” Sabo said, standing up and stretching.

Luffy was destructive enough on a good day, but Luffy with too much energy? It was a disaster waiting to happen.

Ace, Sabo and Luffy left the infirmary to search for Whitebeard, leaving Wendy and Haru to keep Bam Bam company.

It wasn’t difficult to discover where Whitebeard was, but actually getting there proved challenging. The Moby Dick was huge and they hadn’t had a chance to explore the ship, so they ended up spending over an hour lost before one of the crewmembers took pity on them and guided them to Whitebeard.

“Ahh, there you are!” Whitebeard grinned as the three brothers entered one of the smaller conference rooms, where he was meeting with Izo, Fossa, and Rakuyo.

Although it was smaller than the conference room usually used by Whitebeard and the twelve division commanders, it was still spacious enough to fit Whitebeard’s considerable mass and the three division commanders comfortably. The narrow oak table was large enough to fit six comfortably, with a large map of the Grand Line that ran almost the full length of it.

Miniature ships that represented the Whitebeard fleet, their allies, and various other pirate and marine ships, were spread out across the map. Next to the map was a telephone snail and several additional miniature models that were waiting to be placed on the map.

Sabo approached the table and stared down in fascination, easily recognizing several of the islands on the map as ones that they had visited during their travels. “How accurate is this?”

“It’s updated hourly,” Izo said, adjusting the position of where one of Big Mom’s ship was on the map. “We have allies and informants spread throughout the entire Grand Line that help us keep track of the major players. Unfortunately, with the nature of the Grand Line being what it is, it’s extremely difficult to consistently track ships, especially after it leaves an island. Plus, this isn’t even a complete world map. This is just what we’ve managed to catalog during our travels.”

“You’re the navigator, right?” Fossa asked Sabo, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head.

“I wouldn’t call myself a navigator exactly,” Sabo said ruefully, noting with interest that there were even a few ships belonging to the Revolutionaries positioned on the map. “I defaulted into the role since I was the only one really willing to study it. I have the knowledge, but I don’t have the instincts of a true navigator.”

It’d been a miracle, pure and simple that they hadn’t gotten into more trouble than they had. Sabo had read all the books he could get his hands on about navigating, but the Grand Line was against all logic. Knowledge simply wasn’t enough without the instincts of a true navigator in the Grand Line.
“I’m sure our navigators would be willing to teach you a few tricks that you might find come in handy,” Whitebeard said, eyeing the map contemplatively. “We also have a library that has some journals and travel logs you might find interesting—”

“A library?” Sabo interrupted excitedly, face immediately reddening when all eyes in the room turned toward him in amusement. “I mean, uh…”

“Gurarara! I’ll show you there myself later today,” Whitebeard said with a grin. “In the meantime, I think Ace and I should get started.”

“Get started with what?” Ace asked dubiously, brow creasing.

“You agreed to spend an hour with me every time we spar. We ‘sparred’ fifteen times today so that means—” Whitebeard couldn’t help but grin as realization dawned on Ace’s face.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ace said, completely flabbergasted at the turn the conversation had taken. “I had breakfast with you—”

“That was only twenty minutes at the most, Ace,” Whitebeard cut in, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “You still need to spend fourteen and a half hours with me. I had no idea you were so excited to spend time with me.” He added teasingly.

Ace’s jaw dropped. He glanced at Sabo and Luffy, disbelief clearly written on his face. His brothers both shrugged unhelpfully. “You can’t be serious! That would be past midnight!”

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you attacked him fifteen times.” Sabo said, shrugging again and grinning at the frustrated glare Ace shot him.

“Not helping, Sabo,” Ace snapped, clenching his jaw.

“What were you thinking?” Whitebeard questioned, eyeing Ace with interest.

“I didn’t think you’d actually hold me to that. I mean, you don’t actually want to spend that long with me, right?” Ace asked, jerking back at the pained expression that flashed across Whitebeard’s face the moment the words were out of his mouth.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Whitebeard asked softly, gazing at Ace steadily.

It took every ounce of Ace’s self-control not to squirm under the weight of Whitebeard’s gaze.

“Ace is stupid!” Luffy exclaimed, elbowing Ace in the stomach and effectively ruining the moment.

“Luffy!” Ace growled, charging after Luffy as the boy bounced away. “How am I stupid—don’t answer that!” he quickly added, pointing at Sabo and glowering darkly at him.

They spent three minutes chasing each other around the room before Whitebeard lunged forward and scooped Luffy onto his knee. “Getting back on track, Izo go ahead and start preparations for the operation. Fossa and Rakuyo go get your divisions ready. In the meantime, I have to go talk to Marco about organizing the training exercises we discussed.”

“You got it, Pops.” Fossa said, putting out his cigar and leaving the room, followed closely by Izo and Rakuyo.

Whitbeard sat Luffy on the floor and slowly stood to his feet, joints crackling and popping. “Shall we get going, Ace? You two boys can accompany us if you like, or you can go badger Namur to show
you one of the training rooms.”

“Training?” Luffy grinned excitedly, bounding over to Sabo and to tug on his sleeve. “Come on, let’s go, let’s go!”

Sabo glanced at Ace and shrugged helplessly. “We’ll find you later today.” He said, grunting as Luffy dragged him out of the room.

Glancing at Whitebeard, Ace sighed and inwardly conceded defeat. He’d brought this on himself. But, in his defense, he’d never have thought that Whitebeard would actually hold him to spending fourteen and a half hours together.

“Ready?” Whitebeard asked, looking down at Ace with a benevolent smile. The twinkle in his eye gave Ace the distinct impression that he was greatly amused by the whole situation.

Still, spending fourteen and a half hours with the old man might have some advantages. It’d be hard to maintain such a kind, almost gentle attitude toward Ace if he was hiding any disgust or hatred toward him for that long. Or, it was possible he’d slip up and accidentally say something that would indicate his true intentions.

Shanks probably wouldn’t have let them go with Whitebeard if he wasn’t sure that they would safe. But, it wouldn’t be the first time that they’d trusted someone based on another person’s recommendation and been betrayed.

He grimaced slightly as phantom pain flared. His hand automatically went to rub his back.

“Alright,” Ace said slowly, eyes narrowing in on Whitebeard’s face. “Let’s go.”

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“…Ace, are you listening, yoi?” Marco asked, absently organizing the numerous papers scattered haphazardly in front of him.

Blinking rapidly, Ace sat abruptly upright. “Uh-yes, yes.”

Whitebeard and Marco both eyed him skeptically, but slowly resumed their conversation.

Struggling to clear out the cobwebs clogging his brain, Ace ground his teeth and pinched his arm. He had to stay alert. The last thing he needed was to draw any suspicion to himself, especially in front of the two individuals sitting across from him.

He hadn’t just zoned out. Increased daytime drowsiness was just one of the numerous symptoms that quite possibly would be the death of him one day.

Ace grated his teeth together and struggled to keep his attention on what Whitebeard and Marco were saying.

They were talking about a joint training exercise with their fleet. It was actually an interesting discussion, but it took all of Ace’s will power just to keep his eyes open.

“…It’ll take some organization, but it shouldn’t be too difficult to equip the ships with the means to travel in the Calm Belt. We’ll have to do some scouting to find an island there that’s suitable for what you have in mind, yoi,” Marco’s eyes sidled toward Ace as he spoke. “I think we’re losing Ace, Pops.”

Ace’s head jerked up. “I’m awake.” He grunted, pinching the bridge of his nose.
“If you say so,” Whitebeard laughed good naturedly and reached over to ruffle Ace’s hair. “Now, about coordinating with our allies…”

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Ace spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the ship with Whitebeard and trying not to draw attention to the fact that he’d already had three sleep attacks. And they still had ten hours left.

Thankfully, Sabo and Luffy came to his rescue as soon as Luffy had worn himself out from training. They were used to covering for Ace’s narcolepsy, so he was able to relax marginally as soon as they joined him.

It was actually a lot of fun to explore the ship. The Moby Dick was amazing! They spent four hours wandering around the ship with Whitebeard and they hadn’t even been through a quarter of the ship. But surprisingly, the best part of the day was Whitebeard.

Whitebeard had an easy going, mischievous sense of humor that took Ace by surprise. He had plenty of amazing stories to tell that kept even Luffy’s short attention span hanging on every word he said.

Watching him interact with the crew was fascinating. He knew them all by name, which was extremely impressive considering the size of the crew. The way the crew stared up at Whitebeard as he walked by… it was the same unadulterated love Ace saw in Luffy’s guileless, bright eyes.

Ace wondered what it was like to have so many people look at you like that, like you hung the moon and the stars.

After dinner, the nurses corralled Whitebeard and forced him to sit down and rest for a few hours, which was extremely fortunate for Ace; his exhaustion had only grown worse and he knew it was only a matter of time before someone noticed that something was off.

They ended up outside on the quarterdeck, lounging around Whitebeard’s chair while the nurses fiddled with his various IV’s, switched out the tank that fed oxygen to his nasal cannula, and complained about his drinking.

Ace quickly tuned out Jules’ diatribe, sprawled out on the deck, and fell fast asleep, using Sabo’s leg as a pillow.

He came back to partial awareness to quiet voices, the smell of alcohol, and the cloying odor of medicine.

“…must have been really exhausted. He didn’t even twitch when we moved him.” Izo said quietly from somewhere from his right.

“Jules says he hasn’t been sleeping good. Hopefully moving out of the infirmary and having a room of their own will help.” Whitebeard rumbled softly, surprising Ace by how close he sounded.

Blinking heavily, Ace stared up at Whitebeard’s face for a moment uncomprehendingly before jerking upright. Bright red blossomed across his cheeks the moment he realized he’d been laying on one of Whitebeard’s massive arms, head resting against the Yonko’s chest. He scrambled upright and would have fallen off the Yonko’s arm if Whitebeard hadn’t stretched out a hand to steady him.

“Wha—? Where are--?”

“Sabo and Luffy went with Marco to get settled in your new room,” Whitebeard said, gently covering Ace’s shoulders with the blanket that had fallen off of him when he’d sat up.
“You still have four hours left with me.”

“How long was I asleep?” Ace asked, coming short as he tried to mentally calculate what time it was.

“Five hours,” Izo responded. He was sitting comfortably on the arm of Whitebeard’s chair, feet dangling down. “Sabo said you haven’t been sleeping very well, so we decided not to wake you.”

“Oh,” Ace rubbed a hand over his eyes again. He glanced up, the stars shining brilliantly in the clear night sky. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You have a few more hours left to spend with Pops. Marco’s on watch right now, but he’ll take you to your new room in a few hours.” Izo said as he jumped down from the chair.

“Get some sleep, son,” Whitebeard said, leaning back in his chair. “You have a busy day tomorrow.”

Izo nodded and bid them both goodnight with a grin.

Ace watched Izo’s retreating back for a moment, shifting slightly before glancing up at Whitebeard. “Why… Why was I sleeping on you?”

“Was it uncomfortable?” Whitebeard glanced down at Ace, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards. “I have it on good authority that I make for a very comfortable pillow, more comfortable than sleeping on the deck at least.”

“It’s not that,” Ace tugged the blanket covering him closer over his shoulders as a chilly gust of wind jostled his hair. “It’s just—never mind.”

They fell silent. Ace soaked in the sound of the ocean and the gentle creaking of the ship and stared up at the sky. Clear nights like this were his favorite. On warm nights, he’d more often than not camp outside with Luffy and Sabo, stargazing until they fell asleep.

He wondered why Sabo and Luffy had left for a moment, but he quickly guessed Sabo probably wanted him to have a chance to talk to Whitebeard alone. He grit his teeth.

Ace looked at Whitebeard. He seemed to be enjoying the quiet night and the starry sky as much as Ace. He looked peaceful, although his forehead was slightly creased as if he was deep in thought.

“Aren’t you worried?” Ace blurted out, cringing the moment the words were out of his mouth.

“I find that worry takes up too much energy. A complete waste of time and energy,” Whitebeard responded, exhaling slowly. “Not to mention, an utterly useless way to spend an evening.”

“Oh,” Ace absently picked at the blanket, pulling on a loose string. “I suppose so.”

Did Whitebeard have no regard for the trouble he was booking? The longer Ace and Luffy were on board, the more dangerous it would become for them. If there was any other option that would safely get them back to the first half of the Grand Line, he would’ve taken it in a heartbeat. He still didn’t trust them, but if they were sincere in everything they had said…

Guilt gnawed at him. He’d learned long ago that he could only return kindness with misfortune. He didn’t have to wonder if the world would be better without him; he already knew.

“I do have concerns, but I wouldn’t call them worries.” Whitebeard said, startling Ace out of the dark train of thought his mind had taken.
“Like what?” Ace peered up at Whitebeard and wondered what could ‘concern’ the strongest man in
the world, beyond the safety of his crew.

“How my sons and daughters are doing. If the trip Fossa and Rakuyo are planning is a wise course
of action, considering the events of the last week. If you’ll be able to feel safe with us during your
stay here,” Whitebeard paused, absently adjusting one of his IVs. “What Kaido and Big Mom are up
to.”

“Those sound like worries to me.” Ace said, exhaling slowly.

“I lay my concerns to rest before they can become worries and I don’t let them dominate my
thoughts,” Whitebeard sipped at the water the nurses had supplied him in replacement of his sake.
“Dwelling on them further in unproductive.”

Ace picked at a loose string on the blanket and chewed on his lip. “I still don’t understand why
you’re even bothering yourself with us.”

Whitebeard carefully pulled out the sake he had managed to hide from the nurses and leaned back in
his chair, staring up at the crow’s nest. “You know, I was foolish when I was a young man. I thought
I could find satisfaction in money—in fame and power. I wasted years of my life chasing after those
things. But, at the end of the day, none of those things were what I truly wanted. All of those things
are so temporary. There’s no lasting fulfillment in them. Even strength doesn’t last, in the end.”

He fell silent and stared at the numerous IVs attached to his body and shook his head. “None of
those things were what I wanted. Accumulating them wasn’t my dream.”

“What did you want?” Ace asked, wondering what the strongest man in the world dreamed about, if
not wealth and fame and power.

“A family,” Whitebeard tilted his head down toward Ace, a slight smile spreading across his face.
“My entire life, that’s all I’ve truly wanted. The first time I told someone my dream, they laughed in
my face, ha! Called me a fool. To others, it must seem foolish. But that was what I wanted.”

“It’s not.” Ace said honestly, thinking about the one thing he truly wanted in life.

“To have a home—a family, is something that I believe everyone should have. It’s something we all
want, even if we don’t realize it. The desire to be loved and valued is ingrained in all human beings,”
Whitebeard swirled his drink and peered down at Ace. “It doesn’t matter who you are, where you
came from, or who your parents are. It doesn’t matter, Ace. We are all children of the sea. You have
as much right to a family, to a home—to be loved, as anyone else. It doesn’t matter what everyone
else says. And you are valued and loved, Ace. By your brothers. Your crew. And by us, even
though we just met you. That’s why I offered to help you. You don’t understand it now, but
someday you will. Someday you’ll know your true worth.”

Tears prickling at Ace’s eyes, he stared up at Whitebeard in wonder. It had to be a trick, right? But
Whitebeard’s face was totally sincere and his eyes—his eyes were shining with fondness. He was
looking at Ace the similar to the way Sabo and Luffy looked at him, but it was different somehow. It
was profound. Precious, in a new and inexplicable way that he’d never experienced before.

There was a question that Ace wanted to ask— the question, but he clamped his mouth shut. Both
Garp and Rayleigh had told him the same thing; he needed to find the answer on his own. But
somehow he knew what Whitebeard would answer—the same thing Luffy and Sabo said when he
asked them. And it made his heart swell with joy.

“I’m not perfect, Ace. I have many, many faults,” Whitebeard took a sip of his sake and grimaced as
one of the nurses passed by and glared darkly at him. “Case in point. But, I hope that at the very
least, you can feel safe while you’re on board my ship. You’re strong and capable of taking care of yourself and protecting your brothers, but it never hurts to have some help, right?”

“I’ve never been very good at accepting help,” Ace stared up at Whitebeard’s face, Shanks’ parting words to him echoing in his mind. “But I guess now would be a good time to try.”

It was small, but it was a start. And, judging by the radiant smile on Whitebeard’s face and the timid smile Ace offered in return, it was a good one.

Chapter End Notes

Woo chapter fifteen! This story is a lot longer than I intended it to be, lol. It's officially the longest thing I've ever written! I'm at 65,000 words right now.
Hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please let me know what you thought of the conversation between Whitebeard and Ace.
Thanks for all of the awesome comments last chapter!! I love hearing from all of you.
Feedback/Comments are greatly appreciated!!
“We’re all going to starve!” Thatch exclaimed, flapping around a piece of paper with a graph of the Moby Dick’s projected food supplies for the next month and a half.

“Aren’t you being a little overdramatic?” Whitebeard scratched his forehead as he stared down at Thatch and Marty, the assistant head chief, who were both on the verge of panic attacks.

“Overdramatic?! Overdramatic?!” Thatch screeched, voice rising up to an octave that a grown man should not have been capable of reaching. “We’ve already depleted half of our food supplies for the month. Half. And all our planning for the month was done before the three black holes and before the party!”

The sound of an explosion echoed through the conference room, followed closely by a second, but it was completely ignored by the room’s occupants.

Marty waved around a stack of papers with the food menus for the month, standing on her tiptoes in an attempt to wave them in front of Whitebeard’s face. At 5’2, she didn’t come anywhere close, but he obliged her by leaning down somewhat. “We’ve already had to redo all of the meal planning for the remainder of the month thanks to them. And it’s not looking good. Not good at all.”

“So, we’ll dock at an island and restock on supplies.” Whitebeard snatched the papers out of Marty’s hand and squinted down at them. If he had known being a pirate would entail so much paperwork, he might have chosen a different profession. Or had a smaller crew.

The two cooks exchanged exasperated glances. They shook their heads vigorously and rearranged the huge stack of papers and graphs they had brought with them.

“Pops, we can’t just go to an island and get supplies. The average island won’t have enough supplies for over a thousand hungry pirates,” Thatch explained ruefully. “Not to mention the prices would be outrageous.”

“We’re weeks away from the usual island we resupply at, but there’s a cluster of islands nearby that are under our protection. It’s a little off course, but they should be able to supply us with enough food if we’re careful and cut out dessert.” Marty pulled something out of his pocket and presented an eternal log pose to Whitebeard.

“Cut out dessert? There’ll be riots.” Whitebeard chuckled at the thought as another explosion resonated from outside.

“A few of them could use to go a few weeks without dessert.” Thatch muttered under his breath, earning another chuckle from Whitebeard.

“Very well,” Whitebeard reached out and ruffled Marty’s hair. “Go tell Marco to change course and alert the islands that we’ll be--”

Izo burst through the door of the conference room, sopping wet, clothes and hair in complete disarray. “Pops, you have to tell them to stop!”

“Tell who?” Whitebeard frowned and leaned forward to hand Izo a box of tissues.
“Bam Bam and Haru! They’re fishing with dynamite!” Izo exclaimed, wringing out his clothes and
dripping water all over the floor. “It’s dangerous and it ruined my kimono. Look!”
Whitebeard, Thatch, and Marty all stared at the soaking wet fabric.

“I wouldn’t call it ruined—” Marty began, inspecting the fabric closely.

“You have to tell them to stop!” Izo exclaimed again, gazing up at Whitebeard imploringly.
“They’ve been nothing but trouble since Bam Bam was released from the infirmary.”

“They’ve been nothing but trouble since they came on board.” Marty muttered, snorting softly.

“What did Marco say?” Whitebeard asked patiently.

Izo muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

“What was that?” Marty asked, absently adjusting her thick round glasses.

“Marco said they didn’t need to stop, but—”

“If Marco already said they could keep using dynamite to fish, then you shouldn’t have tried to go
over his head,” Whitebeard said patiently. “We don’t play the mom and pop game on this ship. If
Marco said it’s fine, it’s fine.”

“Yeah, Izo. What Momma Marco said, goes.” Thatch snickered.

Izo threw up his arms in frustration and stormed out of the room.

Whitebeard shook his head and turned to look at Thatch. “I wouldn’t go around calling him Momma
Marco just yet. He’s still angry at your feather prank.”

Thatch shuddered. “Don’t I know it.”

A smaller crew might mean less paperwork, but it wouldn’t be half so interesting and amusing as the
one he had now. Besides, he wouldn’t trade even one of his sons.

Another explosion echoed throughout the ship and Whitebeard chuckled. He wouldn’t trade them for
anything, not even for peace and quiet.

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Ocean water rained down on Ace, Sabo and Luffy as the dynamite exploded, sending a giant fish
flying into the air.

Stretching out, Luffy grabbed the unconscious, half burnt fish and pulled it back towards the deck,
accidentally hitting Ace in the face with the fish’s tail.

Ace just let out a long suffering sigh and wiped his face with his arm. “Luffy…”

“Come on Ace, you should have been able to dodge that,” Sabo chuckled, throwing his hands up
defensively when Ace’s glare was redirected to him. “I’m just saying—”

Another explosion cut him off. Luffy caught the fish and tossed it onto the growing pile that they had
catched.

They’d been fishing for the entire morning, after Thatch had complained about how much Ace,
Luffy, and Sabo ate every meal. The Moby’s dwindling supplies was mostly due to them, so they’d
started fishing out of a combination of guilt and boredom.

At first they didn’t have much luck, until Bam Bam had started using explosives. After the initial alarm the Whitebeards on watch had felt at something exploding by the side of the ship, they had all gone back to their various duties.

“That one was a little close to the ship, Bam Bam,” Marco called out from the crow’s nest. “I’d prefer that you didn’t create a hole in the hull your first week, yoi.”

“That’s something reserved for your second month with us!” Curial chortled beside Marco, watching them in amusement.

“Do not give them ideas, yoi!” Marco hissed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “The shipwrights are already angry at Ace for all the walls and railings he’s destroyed.”

Curial chuckled again. “You should have seen Luffy in the training room earlier. He and Sabo were—”

“Luffy, let go!” Sabo cried out, reaching desperately to grab a hold of him.

Glancing down in alarm, the two division commanders’ eyes widened in astonishment as Luffy was dragged from his perch on the ship’s railing as the fish he had his arms wrapped around dove back into the ocean.

The Whitebeards on the deck realized the danger and started shouting in alarm. Ace latched onto Luffy and tried to pull him back, but was instead dragged down with Luffy when the boy didn’t release his grip from the fish. Everyone on the deck watched in alarm as the two devil fruit users disappeared beneath the waves, rushing over to help.

There was no hesitation from the ASL pirates. Sabo only bothered to hand Bam Bam his top hat before he dove headfirst after them, Wendy plunging in moments later.

Cursing loudly, Marco leaped from the crow’s nest, transforming into his phoenix form midair. “Someone get Namur!” He shouted, circling the area where the two boys had disappeared beneath the ocean’s surface.

Less than a minute later, Sabo and Wendy broke the surface with Ace and Sabo.

Marco sighed in relief and swooped in as low as he dared to the water. “Swim over to the ship; we’ll throw a ladder down for you.”

The four pirates stared up at Marco in astonishment for a moment, before nodding and slowly towing the two anchors back toward the Moby Dick. Thankfully, the sea was calm, warm day and they were in relatively peaceful waters for the New World. Otherwise, it would have been a very different situation.

Rushing over to the crowd that had gathered, Namur sighed in relief when he spotted that the two anchors had already been rescued. “Move aside.” He grunted, pushing his way past the pack of concerned pirates to dive over the side of the ship.

He quickly swam over to them and took Luffy from Wendy as they approached the rope ladder that had been tossed down. Tossing Luffy on his shoulders, Namur quickly clambered back up the ladder and plopped the thirteen year old down on the deck.

As soon as Sabo, Ace, and Wendy were all safely back on deck the crowd of pirates dispersed to get
back to their duties, grumbling good naturedly about how troublesome devil fruit users were.

“As soon as the four of you dry off, we’re going to have a little chat about ship safety and the protocols we have for devil fruit users,” Marco announced as he landed on the deck. “Are you okay?”

Ace coughed and brushed his hair out of his eyes, not bothering to sit up. Next to him, Luffy started laughing.

“Shut up! This is all your fault.” Ace elbowed Luffy in the stomach, turning to glare at him.

“Next time just let him go, Ace,” Sabo sighed and kicked off his sopping wet boots. “You can’t swim anymore. I’m tired of having to pull both of you out of the water every time something like this happens.”

“Seconded!” Wendy chirped, kicking Ace’s foot as she staggered to her feet.

Cocking his head sideways, Marco regarded Ace for a moment with sinking suspicion. “How long have you had your devil fruit?”

“Umm…” Ace sat up and scratched his head and glanced at Sabo for confirmation. “Two months?”

“Almost three, actually,” Sabo stood and shrugged off his shirt, wringing the water out. “You’d think you would be able to remember that you can’t swim by now.”

“I know I can’t swim,” Ace retorted, staring up at Sabo’s scarred back for a moment before glancing away. “It’s a habit.”

Marco exchanged glances with Namur, feeling slightly sick. Sabo was covered in scars, most of them fairly fresh, but the burns scars… the burn scars were old. Covering his left shoulder, arm, and side, the scars were bad enough to make them both wonder how Sabo had even survived. How old had he been when he had gotten them? They were at least five years old, possibly older. Had they happened when Dawn Island had been destroyed?

Now that Marco was looking closely, he realized that the scar on Sabo’s face was actually larger than he had thought; the scar extended all the way past his left ear, but it had been hidden by his hair.

Squeezing as much water out of the shirt as he possibly could, Sabo didn’t waste any time in shrugging it back on. He caught Marco and Namur’s gaze and the corners of his mouth twitched downward. “We should go change into something dry before you start lecturing us.”

“I don’t think I have anything that’s clean.” Wendy mumbled, shivering slightly as water dripped from her clothes.

“We’ll find you something. We’ll probably be stopping at an island soon, so we’ll make sure to give you some money to buy yourselves more clothes.” Marco said, frowning slightly as the ship changed course. “In the meantime, go dry off. I’ll find you and deliver my ‘lecture’ later, yoi.”

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The laid back atmosphere of the last few days evaporated rapidly as word spread like wildfire throughout the crew that they were going to be stopping at an island. And not just any island, either. It was one of the islands under Whitebeard’s protection. The anticipation only grew as the days passed and they drew closer and closer to their destination.
Arriving at islands could be tricky, especially if it was one that they had never been to before. Reactions varied vastly and there was truly no way to predict what would happen. Would there be mass panic? Would the inhabitants try to fight them off? Would they be welcomed to the island out of fear of death? It was always different and potentially extremely dangerous, though most would argue that the danger was what made it so much fun.

But it was different with the islands under their protection. Whitebeard didn’t require any tribute or payment for his protection and the islands actually wanted it, unlike several of the islands under Big Mom and Kaido that had been taken by force.

The islands under Whitebeard’s protection were grateful for it and welcomed the Whitebeards and their allies with open arms, which only increased the crews’ excitement at the prospect of visiting one.

They could walk around and interact with the islands shops and inhabitants freely. For a pirate, especially ones as infamous as the Whitebeards, that was one thing that was never, ever taken for granted.

For Ace, he’d never truly felt safe in a village or a city, even when there hadn’t been a bounty on his head. It hadn’t taken long for him and Sabo to get bad reputation in the Gray Terminal and High Town after they had started robbing people. The reputation had only grown when Luffy had joined them. But even before that, there had always been a sense of unease whenever he had been around a crowd of unknown people.

The unease had been there ever since the day Garp had told him who his father was, when he’d been five years old. Sometimes, he tried to remember what life had been like before then, but the memories were vague and tainted with his own feelings of shame and self-loathing.

It had been a dark time for Ace after Garp had told him that his father was the pirate king. The only good thing he had to say about that time was that he had met Sabo.

Glancing at Sabo now, Ace wondered if his brother knew just how much he had impacted Ace’s life. “I already told you, I’m not going.”

“Ace, you can’t stay on the ship the entire time we’re with the Whitebeards,” Sabo objected, cringing in surprise as he opened a door to the poop deck and was instantly greeted by a heavy gust of snow. He slammed the door shut. “Great, a winter island.”

“Just shop for me! I don’t want to go,” Ace crossed his arms tightly over his chest as he shivered. Even with his devil fruit, it still felt cold. “The last thing we need right now is a ruckus the moment they see me.”

“Ace, you have to come! It’s a new island,” Luffy was literally unable to contain his excitement, body quivering in eagerness. “It’ll be an adventure!”

The thought of an adventure was tempting and Ace’s resolve wavered as he imaged exploring the island with Luffy and Sabo. Very tempting. “I don’t know…”

“The newspapers have probably been plastering the fact that we’re with the Whitebeards all over the world by now,” Sabo reasoned as he opened the door and stepped out onto the deck. “We can check. I’m sure the islanders won’t have a problem with us since Whitebeard’s temporarily taken us in.”

The three boys barely took three steps onto the deck before they were half frozen from the violent,
artic wind. The poop deck was already covered in at least three inches of snow and visibility was so bad they could barely see two feet in front of them. They instinctively huddled closer together as they squinted for a Marco shaped blur on the deck.

“W-why are—are we,” Sabo shuddered, teeth chattering violently as he wrapped an arm around Ace and pressed against him. “U-up here, wh-when we’re--”

“Dressed in shorts and t-shirts?” Marco materialized in front of them wearing heavy winter clothes, face obscured by a thick scarf and the hood of his coat. The only part of him them could see over the layers of clothing was his pineapple shaped hair. “Are the three of you idiots? Get back inside where it’s warm!”

“W-we w-w-wanted to see the i-island, p-p-pineapple.” Luffy wedged himself between Ace and Sabo, nose dripping from the extreme cold.

Arching an eyebrow, Marco stared down at the three teenagers in disbelief. “Ah, I see. You can see so much right now, with the weather.” He said, voice dripping with sarcasm. They could barely see him and he was standing right in front of them.

“The man h-has a point,” Ace grit out, glancing at his brothers. He’d thought that his devil fruit would help keep him warm, but if it was, he couldn’t tell. Luffy and Sabo were leaning into him so much that he had to brace himself from tipping over. “We sh-should go b-back.”

They didn’t move. Marco crossed his arms and eyed the three infamous pirates in exasperation, completely unimpressed. Snow was piling on top of their heads and shoulders.

They were leaning precariously sideways, only a few inches from tipping over.

“How long until we’re out of the artic island’s climate?” Ace asked, wondering if they’d even have time to play in the snow.

“About an hour and a half, maybe two.” Marco answered, opening the door to his room and ushering them inside. “The island we’re heading to is part of an archipelago, so there’s a bit of overlap in the climates.”
“I suppose that means that they get storms pretty often.” Sabo eyes traveled around the room curiously.

Marco’s room was smaller than what Ace had expected, filled with all kinds of knickknacks that he had undoubtedly collected throughout the Grand Line. The room had a queen sized bed, a desk, a little sitting area with a couch and two chairs, and his own bathroom. It was rather crammed with the sitting area, but it was comfortable and well lived in.

“You’re right. This area is prone to hurricanes fairly often. Let me see what I can find,” Marco opened the sliding door to his closet and started digging around for coats. He wasn’t a clothes horse by any stretch of the imagination, but considering that his devil fruit involved fire and the unpredictable nature of the Grand Line, he had plenty of spare clothes.

“There’s a total of five islands in the archipelago. Three are summer islands, two are winter islands, and there’s one spring island. The archipelago’s a ways off from the usual routes ships take, so they don’t get a lot of visitors besides us and trading ships.”

“How long has this island been under Whitebeard’s protection?” Ace asked, staring at an ornate dragon mask that was hanging on Marco’s wall. “Where is this from?”

“The entire archipelago had been under Pop’s protection for almost twenty years now,” Marco said, tossing three coats to the floor. “That’s from Wano.”

“Why are the islands under your protection if they don’t get a lot of visitors?” Sabo snatched Luffy’s hands back as the thirteen year old reached for a wooden figurine of falcon.

“The summer islands have some of the best farming land in the entire world,” Marco answered absently, finally finding his spare pairs of gloves. “At the time that the archipelago came under Pop’s protection, both Kaido, Big Mom, and the marines were all interested in it.”

“So, what did Whitebeard do to get the islands as his?” Ace wondered aloud.

“They asked for his protection,” Marco said, tossing Luffy a coat. “Try this on, yoi.”

“Was there a fight?” Luffy asked inquisitively, shrugging on an oversized coat that swallowed him whole.

“Yes,” Marco briefly described the three way battle between Big Mom, the marines, and the Whitebeard as he helped the three brothers bundle themselves up for the weather and track down Wendy, Haru, and Bam Bam.

“And then Garp the Fist—” Marco opened his mouth to describe how Garp and Whitebeard had fought Big Mom together to keep her from going on a killing rampage and slaughtering the villagers, but Ace abruptly cut him off.

“Garp was there?” Ace’s eyes widened in surprise and he shared a quick glance with Luffy and Sabo.

“Yes,” Marco glanced down at the three of them, gaging their reactions to the name curiously. “I don’t suppose you know him very well since he’s a marine. Have you encountered him before?”

The three brothers exchanged glances. Garp was a touchy subject for them. Ace had purposefully not mentioned Garp when he had told Marco about Dawn Island, and he wasn’t about to mention it now.
They were saved from answering by the familiar sound of Haru complaining about something.

“I’m just saying, a top hat will never go out of fashion. They’re literally the best—oof!” Haru grunted as he turned a corner and Luffy barreled into him.

“Yay!” Luffy cheered excitedly when he saw that Haru, Wendy, and Bam Bam had already found snow clothes. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

“I’ll leave you to it then, yoi.” Marco said, shaking his head in amusement.

“Where are you going? You’re coming too!” Ace said as Marco turned to leave, surprising everyone but Luffy.

Luffy grinned like mad and grabbed Marco’s sleeve, pulling him forward. “Come on!”

“I’m not really interested in playing in the snow--” Marco tried shaking his arm free, but gave up quickly when he realized that Luffy’s grip was strong enough to rip his sleeve and that the boy was not letting go.

“It’s already decided!” Luffy exclaimed, earning a chuckle from Ace and Sabo. They were painfully familiar with that statement and all the chaotic stubbornness involved with it.

“Just go along with him. It’s easier.” Sabo advised, laughing softly at Marco’s befuddled expression as to why he was being dragged along to play with them in the snow.

“The voice of experience.” Wendy muttered under her breath, earning a mild glare from Sabo.

Rolling his eyes, Ace allowed himself to be dragged back outside by Luffy, Marco and Sabo on either side of him. Somehow, he thought he could really get used to this.

Not only was Marco coerced into playing with the ASL pirates in the snow, but a dozen other Whitebeards joined in as well. He was still a bit bewildered as to how he had gotten sucked into it, but his protests and objections only seemed to egg them on.

The snowball fight was admittedly epic. It didn’t take very long for them to gather a crowd cheering them on; a few people even started betting on which team would win the snowball fight.

Marco’s team would have lost if they hadn’t entered the climate of one of the summer islands and the snow had started melting, creating a temporary cease fire. He blamed it on the fact that he was more than a little rusty at snowball fights, and the ASL pirates were obviously much more experienced in the art of snowball making. And they’d had Thatch on their team. The cheater.

Shedding their heavy coats, the ASL pirates crowded close eagerly to the ship’s railing as the island they were stopping at came into view.

The island was flat as a pancake, with fields of all types of vegetables and fruits interspersed with tall forests and orchards. It was a disappointingly ordinary island, especially since it resided in the New World. Even the village looked abysmally normal.

“Ahhh…” Luffy drooped downwards until the only thing holding him up was the railing. “It looks boring.”

“What were you expecting?” Marco stifled a chuckle at the disappointed expressions on Ace, Luffy,
“Something cool!” Luffy’s face scrunched up, as he struggled to think of an example, but honestly, anything was cooler than this. “A meat island!”

Ace and Sabo both groaned. “For the last time, there’s no such thing as a meat island!” Ace exclaimed, smacking Luffy’s shoulder lightly. “Haru made that up to mess with you.”

“It could too exist! How would you know?!” Luffy retorted, straightening and crossing his arms.

“Because if it did, some glutton like you would have eaten it by now!” Ace snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“So, you admit it could exist!” Luffy crowed triumphantly, laughing loudly as Ace smacked a hand to his forehead.

“Anyways,” Marco interrupted quickly, deciding to stop the argument before it devolved into a brawl. “The three of you should make a list of things that you’ll need during your stay with us. The village should have the basics of what you’ll want.”

“Shopping’s boring,” Luffy huffed, flopping down flat on his back. “I want adventure!”

“We just had an adventure,” Ace grumbled, poking Luffy’s side with his foot and unconsciously pressing a hand to his ribs. “I’m tired of being in the infirmary.”

“If you come with us we’ll let you pick out a new hat,” Sabo offered diplomatically. “And, I’m sure we’ll be able to find a picture book with bugs.”

Luffy rocketed onto his feet in an instant. “Can we go explore the forest too? We could go hunting!”

“Would that be okay?” Sabo glanced at Marco questioningly. “We don’t want to cause you any more trouble than we already have.”

“It should be fine, but after what happened on the last island I’d prefer it if you’d take one of the commanders with you, yoi,” Marco stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Ask Haruta.”

“Is it really okay for us to go on the island?” Ace asked frowning, crossing his arms. “The newspapers still haven’t released that we’re traveling with you.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll make sure that we notify the mayor that you’ll be coming to the village,” Marco slapped Ace on the shoulder. “Relax. This is one of our islands. There won’t be any trouble, yoi.”

“Marco clearly doesn’t know us very well yet,” Ace decided as he slowly raised his hands and placed them behind his head, cautiously eyeing the giant man looming over them with a bazooka. “‘There won’t be any trouble, yoi.’ As if.” He snorted.

“I thought Marco said they’d let the village know we were coming,” Sabo murmured, eyes sweeping the villagers surrounding them and pointing guns, axes, and pitch forks at them. “We just have to wait for Haruta to come back.”

Luffy pressed his lips together and struggled to stand still, hands held up in the air. “We weren’t doing anything.” He stated firmly, staring up at the bazooka carrying villager with unnerving calm.

“You’ve made a huge mistake coming here! Don’t think we know who you are,” The man with the
bazooka growled, glaring down at them angrily. “We’ve already sent word to Whitebeard. I guess getting beaten once by him wasn’t enough for you.”

Ace and Sabo exchanged glances, eyebrows rising in synchronized disbelief.

“You don’t know who we are?” Ace asked, twitching slightly in a strange mix of amusement and irritation. “Or, did you mean to say: ‘don’t think we don’t know you are?’”

“That’s a double negative,” Sabo pointed out, years of forced grammar studies rising unbidden to the surface. “You should have just said ‘We know who you are,’ or something like that.”

“My grammar is not the issue here!” Bazooka man shouted, glancing at one of his friends in disbelief. “We’re not going to let you destroy another one of Whitebeard’s villages, or any other village for that matter! Don’t think we’ll just lay down and let you slaughter us without a fight!”

“Ahh, where’s Haruta?” Luffy grumbled as one of the villagers shoved a pistol right in front of his face. “I’m getting hungry.”

The issue wasn’t that they were in any danger from the villagers. Luffy and Ace were both bullet proof and Sabo could easily dodge their attacks. Any other time, they would have simply walked away.

No, the issue was the building behind them and the cowering villagers inside. The collateral damage to the village if a fight broke out would be terrible if the bazooka was any indication. They needed to stay on Whitebeard’s good side and inadvertently destroying another village under his protection was not the best way.

“We’ve already told you, Whitebeard took us here and even gave us money to shop,” Ace said, struggling to keep his frustration in check. “Just ask the people inside. Haruta was with us just a few minutes ago. He’s in the bathroom right now--”

“As if I’d believe anything you say, monster. Murderer!” Bazooka man growled derisively, causing Ace to flinch. “Any minute now--”

The door to the shop behind them opened and the young women who owned the clothing store hesitantly stepped out. “Wash, what--?”

“Aaah, please go back inside,” Ace twisted around slightly to glance at her. “We’ll have this sorted out in just a--”

A gunshot rang out from one of the villagers. Pandemonium broke out.

Ace tackled the poor shopkeeper to the ground as Luffy and Sabo attacked as one, rapidly disarming the villagers and knocking them to the ground before bazooka man had the chance to fire.

A cloud of dust rose up in the air as the villagers collapsed to the ground. They were slightly stunned and bruised, but otherwise unharmed.

“Great,” Ace sighed in aggravation and ran a hand through his hair, knocking his cowboy hat back behind his head. “Are you alright?” He helped the shopkeeper to her feet.

“Yes,” The flustered shopkeeper dusted off her clothes and glanced up at Ace apologetically. “I don’t know what got into them. I was going to tell them that you’re with Whitebeard, but--”

“It’s alright. We’re used to this sort of thing,” Sabo said reassuringly, picking up their shopping bags
and leaping over one of the villagers who was already stirring. “We should get out of here before they get up.”

“If Haruta comes back, tell him we went back to the ship--” Ace broke off as he sensed a rock hurtling towards him. He jerked slightly, intending to dodge it, when he realized that if he moved the rock would hit the shopkeeper directly on her face.

It was a split second decision to keep his body solid; he didn’t have time to shove her out of the way again, or even shout a warning. The rock hit the side of his head with a loud crack, knocking him down to his knees.

“Ace!” Luff shouted in surprise, throwing himself in front of his brother as more rocks were pelted at them from a group of teens.

“Let’s get out of here,” Sabo grabbed Ace’s arm and hauled him to his feet as the villagers stirred. “Come on, Luffy! We can’t afford a fight here.”

Glaring at the teens for a moment longer, Luffy chased after Sabo and Ace as soon as he was sure the shopkeeper was safely out of the way of the barrage. They sprang quickly towards the nearest alleyway and made a beeline to the familiar shelter of the woods directly behind the village.

“You okay, Ace?” Sabo asked worriedly as he shoved Ace’s bloody hand aside from the wound so he could get a better look at it.

Ace’s only answer was to throw up on Sabo’s shoes, moaning as the action jarred his still healing ribs.

“Guess not.” Luffy’s nose wrinkled in disgust, but his arms automatically came around Ace’s waist to steady him.

Well, so much for not spending more time in the infirmary.

***

“Pirates! Pirates are attacking!” the shout raised the hackles on the back of Marco’s neck as a villager raced frantically toward the Moby Dick.

Glancing worriedly at Izo, Marco shoved the supply list into the mayor’s hand and dashed over to the panting villager as he collapsed onto his knees. “What happened?”

“P-pirates,” The villager wheezed, pointing frantically toward the village. “The-the A-ASL pirates are attacking!”

Izo released an explicative that would have had some of the less seasoned pirates blushing. Marco silently agreed with the sentiment.

“Tell Pops!” Marco ordered, transforming into his phoenix form and leaping into the air. “Send someone to the village to explain everything and find out where Haruta is.”

It took him five minutes to reach the village, but he didn’t sense Ace, Sabo, and Luffy there. Ignoring the commotion happening below him, Marco stretched out with his haki and sighed in relief when he sensed them not far from the village.

Swooping down, Marco relaxed fully the moment he spotted the three brothers perched on top of a partially thick oak branch. He glided down to the ground and shifted back into his human form at the
“Are you okay?” Marco asked, peering up at them in concern, spotting the blood stains on Ace’s shirt and the teen’s pale complexion.

Luffy and Sabo glanced at each other and shrugged.

“More or less.” Sabo answered, pressing a shirt to the side of Ace’s head to staunch the bleeding.

The cheerful, devil may care attitudes of the last several days was gone, replaced by something heavy and bitter.

“Are you going to come down?” Marco glanced at the pile of shopping bags and back up at the brothers.

They glanced at Ace, who was leaning limply against Sabo, eyes clenched shut.

“Nope.” Luffy shook his head, legs swinging back and forth.

“Alright then, yoi.” Marco nimbly climbed up the tree and edged over on the branch to them.

Ace raised his head slightly and his flickered open a moment as Marco sat down next to Sabo and peered over at him. “S’always trouble.” He slurred.

“He needs to get back to the ship, yoi.” Marco motioned for Sabo to move the shirt so he could see the wound, wincing at the rapidly blossoming bruise and jagged cut on Ace’s head.

“Just…” Ace opened his eyes and glanced at Marco and winced slightly. “Just give us a minute.” He slurred.

“Everything seemed fine, so Haruta went to the bathroom,” Sabo shook his head and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “We thought it’d be fine. It couldn’t have been more than a minute or two after he left when some of the farmers came back from the fields and recognized us.” He quickly explained the rest.

“He wasn’t even gone five minutes and that happened?” Marco shook his head in disbelief. “You can’t even keep out of trouble for three and a half minutes?”

“They’ve gotten in more trouble than that in less time before, actually.” Sabo coughed to hide a chuckle.

“You’re one to talk, Sabo.” Ace and Luffy retorted in unison.

“So, what you’re saying is, we can’t leave you unsupervised. Ever, yoi.” Marco scratched his head.

“Luffy once got eaten by a crocodile while Sabo and I were five feet away from him,” Ace muttered, straightening slightly and eyeing Marco closely. “It doesn’t matter if we’re supervised or not. No one’s ever actually managed to keep us out of trouble.”

Marco caught Ace’s eye and released a long breath, easily guessing what was going through the teen’s head. He laughed. “I guess the next couple of months are going to be very interesting, then.”

Blinking in surprise, Ace stared at Marco in confusion. The first division commander never acted the way he’d expected him to. Ace had thought that Marco would be upset that they had taken in three of the worst trouble magnets in the world. Or, upset because of the raucous they’d caused in the
village. Instead, he actually seemed amused by the entire thing.

“Hey… Marco,” Ace paused for a long moment, turning away from the division commander. “Are we monsters?”

Staring up at the sky, Marco contemplated Ace’s question for a moment. “That’s not a question that’s simple to answer.”

Ace flinched, curling closer to Luffy. His brothers watched Marco stiffly, something protective flashing in their eyes as they glared waringly at the commander.

Ignoring the stormy glares he was receiving from Luffy and Sabo, Marco chose his next words carefully. “When I first saw Pops fight, it was frightening. How could one man be so powerful? He took on three marine warships all by himself and came out of it without a scratch. In that moment, to me, he seemed like a monster.”

He’d been barely conscious when Whitebeard had saved him from being saved by his crew, so he hadn't really seen his soon to be captain beat his former crewmates senseless. It hadn't been until a few weeks later that he'd seen Whitebeard fight for the first time. He could still remember the awe he had felt as if it was yesterday.

“It’s easy to be called a monster in terms of strength. If you look at it that way, all the Whitebeards are ridiculous, freakishly strong monsters,” Marco smiled to himself. “But to us, they’re family. They’re our brothers and sisters. And Pops is very, very special to us. He’s the best man I’ve ever met. Even after serving under Pops for years, the old man still surprises me. I’ve seen him do incredible, terrifying things in terms of power, but I’ve never thought of him as a monster since that first moment, yoi.”

Pausing momentarily to make sure that he was getting his point across, he glanced at Ace and saw him staring at Marco intently, eyes wide. “There are other monsters in this world, of course. You’ve met some of them, yoi. People who kill and enslave innocents,” He snorted to himself. Sometimes it was truly ridiculous how topsy-turvy the world could be. Pirates with a strong moral code and marines who wanted to murder innocent children. He shook his head. “But you’re not one of those. You’re a good man, Ace.”

Ace actually blushed slightly, eyes flitting away from Marco’s in embarrassment. “Not really.” He mumbled.

“You are,” Marco grinned at him. “You might be a monster in terms of strength, but to us, you’re perfectly normal. Fit in perfectly, as a matter of fact, yoi.”

Something knotted inside of Ace uncoiled at Marco’s words. “At least I’m in good company then.” He decided, grinning slightly.

“I knew I liked you, pineapple head!” Luffy laughed, slapping Ace on the back and almost knocking him off the branch. Freakishly strong indeed.

“We should get Ace back to the infirmary and take care of that head wound, yoi,” Marco announced, jumping down from the branch and landing lightly on his feet. “Did you finish all your shopping?”

“More or less.” Sabo answered, helping Ace climb down.

“Well, you can finish up later today, yoi,” Marco picked up half of the bags as Luffy sprang down. “You didn’t buy very much.”
“We don’t need that much. Plus, we thought it’d be a good idea to save some of the money you gave us.” Sabo answered, grabbing the remaining bags.

“You don’t need to worry about money. There will be plenty of ways for you to earn it on board, yoi.” Marco waited to make sure Ace was stable on his feet before turning and leading the way back to the ship.

It took them half an hour to reach the harbor. Ace was as pale as a sheet by the time it came into view, freckles standing out starkly on his normally tan face. It was fairly safe to say that he had a mild concussion, but he was still able to walk under his own power more or less.

“Uh-oh,” Sabo frowned when he spotted the small crowd of villagers gathered by the Moby Dick. “Bazooka man’s up ahead.”

Bazooka man was easy to pick out in the crowd, considering that he towered over the villagers by three entire feet.

“Bazooka man…? You mean Wash?” Marco asked in confusion, mouth twitching slightly at the nickname.

“Shoot, he’s spotted us!” Ace cursed under his breath as the villagers turned and stared heading towards them.

“Relax. You’re under Whitebeard’s protection. They’re not going to attack you when he’s standing thirty feet away, yoi.” Marco rolled his eyes and walked toward them.

The three brothers traded glances and reluctantly followed him, senses on high alert.

Ace glanced up at the Moby Dick and spotted Whitebeard standing on the deck by the railing, talking with one of the villagers, but keeping a watchful eye on what was going on below him. Blowing out a breath, Ace relaxed marginally and then mentally slapped himself. He was not relieved that Whitebeard was nearby in case things got hairy with the villagers. Not at all.

Bazooka man—Wash, stopped abruptly as soon as Ace, Sabo, and Luffy were a few feet away, head bowed. The brothers tensed, unconsciously expecting an attack despite Marco’s reassurances.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Wash said at last, lifting his head up to face them. He looked utterly ashamed. “I wasn’t told that you were traveling with Whitebeard. And when I saw you… I had friends. In the village that was destroyed. All I could think of was that you killed them and I wasn’t going to let that happen here. Izo told us that you actually tried to save the village. Please accept my most sincere and humble apology!”

“We’re sorry for throwing rocks at you!” A young teen called out from somewhere in the crowd. Staring at the kowtowing eight foot tall farmer in disbelief, Ace backpedaled slightly as he tried to comprehend what had just happened. This was not what he had been expecting at all! He glanced at Sabo helplessly, completely unsure how to respond to the man’s words. Was it a trick of some kind? Or had the Whitebeard forced them to apologize?

Glancing up at Whitebeard once again, Ace studied him for a moment. Somehow, he knew that Whitebeard hadn’t made them apologize. Talk to them, maybe. But not force them to apologize. It wasn’t his style.

Plus, Ace had become a pretty good judge when someone was lying or not over the last year and they didn’t appear to be lying. The regret shimmering in their eyes was far too sincere.
“We accept your apology,” Sabo said, eyeing the villagers curiously. They all seemed as equally apologetic and ashamed of their actions as Wash. “You had no way of knowing and it could have been a lot worse. It was just bad timing.”

“Thank you,” Wash smiled hugely and straightened up. “I hope you’ll come back to the village. We’ll take you to dinner—our treat!”

“Food!” Luffy grinned ecstatically. “Shishishi, you’re a good guy after all!”

“These three might eat you out of house and home, yoi.” Marco warned Wash with a knowing smirk, only half teasing.

“In that case, we’ll just have to prepare a feast!” Wash exclaimed, earning a wild cheer from Luffy.

Ace rolled his eyes as Luffy started chatting away with Wash excitedly about what kind of meat would be at the feast, practically drooling at the prospect of it. Whitebeard laughed heartily from his position on the ship.

As Marco dragged Ace back on board the Moby Dick to the infirmary, he had to admit that it wasn’t such a bad thing to be traveling with Whitebeard.

Normally, if they went to a town or village they’d end up being attacked and run out of town, or worse. It was strange to actually be welcomed, even if they’d had a rocky start initially.

As Haruta dashed over to him and started apologizing profusely and promising to make it up to them, Ace also had to admit that the Whitebeards were actually not so bad to be around. He bit his lip and determined to be more reserved around them. The last thing he needed was to get attached.

***

Two hours into the party, Sabo spotted a hooded figure walking through the crowd of villagers and Whitebeard pirates toward an alleyway. The figure paused and turned towards Sabo, gazing at him a moment before disappearing into the alley.

“You okay, Sabo?” Luffy asked him in between bites of food. “You’re not eating! Are you sick?”

“I’m fine,” Sabo answered distractedly, handing his plate over to Luffy who accepted it eagerly. “I’ll be back. Bathroom.”

Ace eyed him for a moment before turning his full attention back to his food, actually seeming to be enjoying himself.

Slipping away from the watchful eyes of the division commander wasn’t easy, but he was far more skilled in stealth than his brothers. He slipped around the buildings, cut through someone’s yard, and leaped over a fence, landing agilely in the alley.

“T ook you long enough,” The cloaked figure said with an exasperated huff, crossing her arms. “I was beginning to wonder if we’d have to stage a distraction of some sort to get you here.”

“Go easy on him, Koala,” On the opposite end of the alley, a fishman lowered the hood to the cloak he was wearing and slowly approached Sabo, eyeing him up and down. “Glad to see you’re okay. We were beginning to worry about you.”
Sabo glanced between the young woman and the fishman and grinned happily. “Koala, Hack, it’s good to see you! How did you know we’d be here?”

“We didn’t,” Koala answered, glancing behind her cautiously to make sure that they were alone before lowering her own hood. “We’re trying to reach an agreement with the mayor for supplies. When we heard that the Whitebeards had arrived, we decided to see what kind of trouble you guys have gotten into this time. Now, what happened? We thought you might have died!”

Hack and Koala listened to the story with wide eyes and their complete, undivided attention as Sabo told them everything that had happened.

“Whitebeard’s a great man,” Hack said at last, when Sabo was finished. “My people are greatly indebted to him. You can trust him.”

“What will you do if Ace actually joins him?” Koala asked, eyeing Sabo astutely.

Sabo frowned. “I’d be amazed if he did.” he hedged, mind racing with possibilities. What would he do?

“Well,” Hack exchanged glances with Koala. “The Revolutionary army is always looking for good men like you.”

“There’s a thought,” Sabo glanced upwards wistfully. “Maybe we’d get to work together—”

“No!” Koala shook her head vigorously. “Absolutely not. I have to babysit you enough already. If we worked together…” she grimaced.

She could see it all too clearly; Sabo would listen to orders only when they went along with what he had already decided he was going to do, causing trouble and endless headaches. He was as bad as his brothers in that way.

They’d first met Sabo two weeks after the brothers had set sail from the Calm Belt. They’d been sent to keep an eye on the brothers and to access their situation—in other words, to spy on them. Whether Dragon was concerned about his son or just wanting information on the actions the marines were taking against the newly minted ASL pirates, no one knew.

Even the more seasoned Revolutionaries had been shocked at the news that Dragon had a son. Ivankov had reportedly nearly had a heart attack at the news. Years later, Iva’s reaction to the news that Dragon had a son was still legendary.

There were rumors that Dragon had been secretly intervening to help Luffy immediately after he’d left Dawn Island since he had been in East Blue at the time, but no one knew for certain.

Koala and Hack had intervened several times the first week after the brothers had left the Calm Belt, when Cipher Pol assassins had targeted them, before they met Sabo. He had inadvertently stumbled onto them while they were dealing with another team of assassins. Since then, Sabo had secretly kept in contact with the Revolutionaries, mainly communicating with Koala and Hack.

No one in the ASL pirates knew that Sabo was in contact with them, not even Ace and Luffy.

“You should be getting back,” Koala dug around in her back pack for a moment and pulled out a stack of papers carefully folded into a square. “We found more for you.”

Eagerly taking the papers, Sabo unfolded them and quickly began reading. “This is horrible…” he murmured, brows drawing together angrily.
“That should have all of the information you wanted,” Koala placed a hand on her hip and glared up at Sabo. “Even with everything you’ve collected, there’s no way this plan of yours will work. If it was possible, Dragon would have already done it.”

Smiling tightly, Sabo carefully refolded the paper and tucked it into one of the pockets of his newly acquired navy trench coat. “Ah, but Dragon and I have different goals in this instance.”

“And what is your goal, exactly?” Hack asked, eyeing Sabo curiously. Sabo had never been entirely clear on why he had wanted their help collecting information.

The smile that spread across Sabo’s face was wolfish, dark and cunning. “Blackmail.”

“It’ll never work.” Koala shook her head and pulled the hood back over her head.

“You might be right,” Sabo conceded, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I won’t know until I try. Anyways, I should be getting back.”

“We’ll be in touch. Try to remember to keep us updated,” Koala punched Sabo’s shoulder. “Idiot.”

“Sorry to have worried you.” Sabo said, grimacing as Koala punched him again.

“As if I was worried about you,” Koala huffed, lying through her teeth. “Dummy.”

“See you soon, Sabo.” Hack grabbed Koala’s arm and gently pulled her away.

Watching them disappear down the alleyway, Sabo contemplated Koala’s question. What would he do if Ace joined the Whitebeards?

It wasn’t really much of a question. He knew what he’d want to do. He slowly turned and walked back toward the party whistling cheerily.

When he got back to the party, Ace had Thatch in a headlock and complaining loudly about something. Around him, the Whitebeards were laughing boisterously and cheering Ace on.

Sabo smiled a little wistfully. He’d never seen Ace take to anyone so quickly. It was strange, seeing him laugh and grin at someone other than him and Luffy. The Whitebeards had definitely taken a liking to all of them, but Ace especially.

Watching Ace give Thatch a noogie, ruining his pompadour and laughing at Thatch’s wild protests, Sabo slowly walked back over towards them.

He didn’t know if Ace would actually join, but he had a good feeling about it.

***

That night, after everyone else was asleep, Sabo pulled out the metal box Luffy had saved from the Romance Dawn and unlocked it. Inside was a worn notebook and hundreds of pages of papers crammed inside.

Pulling out the papers that Koala and Hack had given him, Sabo sat them inside and stared. Koala was right. It probably wouldn’t work.

But for Ace and Luffy’s sake, he had to try.
Well, I'm leaving on vacation tonight so I thought I'd get this posted before I leave!
I was editing this chapter last night and suddenly got the image in my head of Luffy
singing "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" to Ace lol. Just an image I'll throw out
there to all of you, haha.
Thanks for all of the awesome feedback for the last chapter! I'm so happy everyone
liked the conversation between Ace and Whitebeard at the end. I love hearing from all
of you!
Anyways, hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Comments/feedback are greatly appreciated!
Wiping sweat from his brow, Luffy slowly climbed up the steps toward the ancient stone pedestal. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the light pouring down on the pedestal and the priceless lump of gold crafted to look like a grimacing face. He tilted his head, shoved his fedora back slightly and reached out to pick up the golden idol.

“Wait, it could be booby-trapped—” Marco warned from behind him. The division commander took a step forward, but accidentally stepped on one of the floor tiles that triggered a trap installed in the floor. He easily dodged the poisoned dart that shot out from the wall, but didn’t manage to stop Luffy from picking the idol up.

Luffy heard his brothers groan and grinned to himself.

Nothing happened. Ace and Sabo exchanged glances and cautiously peered around the underground chamber.

“Maybe there wasn’t a trap installed there?” Ace asked hopefully, touching the brim of the fedora he was wearing in replacement of his cowboy hat.

All four of them were wearing matching fedoras at Luffy’s behest, although Luffy still had his straw hat tucked neatly inside his oversized fedora. Fedoras were good hats for treasure hunting, after all.

There was a terrible metallic clanking noise. The entire chamber started to tremble, showering the four occupants with dust. Sabo stumbled slightly, accidentally triggering another arrow that whizzed through Ace and clattered against the opposite wall, on fire.

“Oops.” Luffy mumbled, eyeing the ceiling nervously as cracks began to form.

“You just couldn’t wait five seconds for us to check it, could you Luffy?” Sabo edged backwards, blinking rapidly as dust rained down from the ceiling.

“Time to go, yoi.” Marco peered worriedly at the ceiling and grabbed the back of Luffy’s shirt, dragging him back the way they had come.

They sprang toward the entryway as the two pillars that supported the entrance to the chamber cracked and started to collapse. Marco and Luffy had to dive past the threshold as it caved in. Ahead of them, Ace and Sabo paused long enough to make sure that they cleared the collapsing entrance before sprinting on ahead.

It had taken them roughly thirty minutes to reach the chamber with the treasure they’d come to steal, all because of the numerous traps spread throughout the cave. Luffy had inadvertently set half of them off, but they had been mostly harmless. (To them, at least)

Now, their exit from the cave was turning out to be a little more hazardous than expected, although Luffy was thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Happy, Luffy?” Sabo asked as he leaped across the wooden poles that were spread out across a large pit that had jagged, deadly spikes at the bottom.
“This is great!” The newly minted fourteen year old exclaimed happily as he jumped from pillar to pillar with a reckless confidence that almost made Marco want to cringe. “Best birthday present ever!”

Luffy had only wanted one thing for his birthday; (besides an all he could eat buffet of meat) an adventure. It didn’t really matter to him what kind of adventure, as long as it wasn’t boring.

His brothers, in a move that was both clever and extremely practical for them, had suggested a treasure hunt. The chance to give Luffy an adventure for a birthday present and gain some much needed beli all at once. Whitebeard had heartily approved and even gave them some suggestions as to where they could gain some ill-gotten gold.

Marco probably should have guessed that there was a good reason that the rest of the ASL pirates had passed on coming with them, but he had brushed it off. After having them on board for almost two months, he really should have known better. He’d been secretly very pleased that they’d invited him along, out of all of the division commanders they’d befriended, so he hadn’t really thought put much thought into Wendy, Bam Bam, and Haru staying behind.

The only rule they’d really imposed on the three brothers was that if they were leaving the ship, they had to bring a division commander with them. Ace had complained for about a day and a half about the rule, but it’d been mostly halfhearted. After what had happened on the last two islands, he was able to see the wisdom in having someone with them to try and prevent some of the trouble they got into. Or just have extra backup in case a fight broke out.

Leaping from the last pole onto solid ground, Ace stumbled slightly as the ground rumbled and quaked beneath his feet. Dirt and loose pieces of the stone ceiling pelted him as he spun around to check on Luffy and Marco, just in time to see Luffy flying towards him an instant before the teen bowled him over.

“Come on, we have to keep moving!” Sabo tugged Luffy to his feet from where he’d been sitting on Ace’s stomach and gave him a light shove. He cast a worried glance at the ceiling and grimly noted that there were some dangerous cracks slowly spreading across it.

“You know, if I wasn’t convinced that the three of you would eventually destroy the ship, I’d probably order you to never leave it, yoi.” Marco said dryly as Ace scrambled to his feet and they resumed running.

“There’s plenty of trouble we could get into on the ship, anyways,” Ace shot Marco a cheeky grin. “Just face it; your lives are going to be a lot more interesting from now on.”

Grinning back, Marco wondered if Ace realized yet that he wanted to stay on the ship. “I suppose you’ll be useful in keeping us on our toes, at the very least.”

“I can be more useful than that!” Ace protested earnestly as they walked quickly across the extremely narrow stone bridge that was the only way across a dugout that undoubtedly had something extremely unpleasant at the bottom. Assuming that the fall itself wouldn’t kill you. The bottom of the trench was impossible to see, concealing whatever deadly traps awaited the poor soul who fell down into the darkness below.

“Does anyone else hear a weird rattling noise?” Sabo asked from his position at the back of the group.

“If you mean the stones instants away from crushes us to death, then yes.” Ace retorted with a snort, not sounding overly concerned at the prospect.
“You should really leave sarcasm to Haru—” Sabo’s words were cut off as an abrupt tremor threw him off balance. “Go, go, go!”

Ace, Luffy and Marco sped up as much as they could without losing their balance on the narrow bridge. Trailng behind them, Sabo struggled to regain his footing and follow them. Before he could, a rock hit his shoulder and sent him tumbling down towards the pit below.

“Sabo!” Luffy shouted in surprise, stretching out a hand to grab him. His hand brushed against Sabo’s trench coat, but he wasn’t able to get a solid grip.

Forcing himself not to panic, Sabo slammed his eyes shut and stretched out his senses with haki. It was only a twenty foot fall. He could worry about the numerous creatures he could feel at the bottom once he had landed without breaking his legs.

Above him, azure flames illuminated the bottom of the pit just as he hurtled toward the craggy floor. Sabo landed hard on his feet, rolling to help break his fall on the slimy ground.

He straightened himself gingerly took a few steps to test his legs. The rattling noise he had heard from the bridge was even worse now that he was at the bottom, sending chills down his spine.

“Are you alright?” Ace called out worriedly. “Marco’s coming to get you.”

Marco’s phoenix form was a brilliant beacon flying rapidly towards him as Sabo struggled to discern what kind of creatures were crawling around by his feet.

Something brushed against his leg as Ace shot a burst of fire down into the pit to provide extra light. The orange-red flames illuminated the pit and reflected brilliantly off shiny obsidian scales, revealing the deadly trap for those unfortunate enough to fall down from the bridge.

Vipers. Every inch of the pit was covered with snakes that were a strange hybrid of vipers and rattle snakes. They slithered past his ankles and rattled their tails threateningly as they eyed him hungrily.

“Snakes,” Sabo grimaced as one of the vipers hissed at him, giving him a glimpse of it’s deadly fangs. He instantly covered his feet all the way up to his knees in haki. “Why’d it have to be snakes.”

A trill from Marco tore Sabo’s gaze away from the snake posed to attack. Marco swooping down towards him, flames almost blinding in the gloomy pit. “How’s this supposed to work?” He wondered aloud, trying to figure out how Marco was going to carry him back to the top.

He didn’t have to wonder for long. Marco shifted back to his normal form, save for his wings. Crushing a snake under his foot as he landed in front of Sabo, Marco glared distastefully at the snakes as one nipped at his left haki covered ankle.

“Arms around my neck, yoi,” Marco glanced down at the snakes hissing at him. “Quickly.”

Not wasting any time, Sabo sprang onto Marco’s back as the ceiling began to collapse. Marco took off with a powerful flap of his wings, quickly managing to gain altitude despite the added weight. He flew them both out of the pit and to the other side before transforming his arms back to normal and dropping Sabo safely to the ground.

“Let’s keep moving.” Marco said urgently, pushing Sabo and Ace forward.

They barely made it out by the skin of their teeth, mere instants before the cave entrance collapsed. The four pirates flopped onto the grassy ground in complete exhaustion, lungs burning as they tried to catch their breath.
Luffy burst laughing almost at once, his exuberant chuckles punctuated with wheezes. “So much fun!”

“H-happy birthday.” Ace wheezed, wiping sweat and dust off his forehead.

No one was inclined to move for a while, not even Luffy. They were winded and their legs were burning, but they were still pleasantly buzzed from the high of the near death experience.

“Next time, Thatch gets to go with you,” Marco decided. “I’ll make it an executive decision.”

Ace glanced at Marco sideways and grinned mischievously. “What, we wear you out already old man?”

“I could still fly circles around you, brat,” Marco retorted, flicking Ace’s forehead as he sat up. “We should get back to the ship, yoi.”

“Already? Can’t we go hunting first? We’re not supposed to be back until tonight,” Luffy grinned. “I’m hungry.”

“Don’t you want to save room for your birthday dinner--” Marco caught himself and shook his head, smiling slightly. “Never mind. Go on, then.”

Letting out a cheer, Luffy grabbed hold of Sabo and Ace and dragged them deeper into the forest. They were a little too noisy considering they were hunting, but they were obviously very experienced.

Marco trailed behind them, content to watch their antics from a safe distance so that he wasn’t directly involved. Watching them, he couldn’t help but feel that all three of them had loosened up a little in the last two months, as though an invisible burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

He had no frame of reference for how they had acted before, but Marco was fairly certain that Ace definitely wasn’t typically as open and friendly with people outside of the ASL pirates as he was with the Whitebeards.

Ace had basically become Whitebeard’s shadow within the first full week that they had been aboard the Moby Dick. At first, Ace had trailed Whitebeard around because he’d wanted to see the Yonko’s true colors. But as the weeks passed, a familiar look of awe and disbelief had slowly replaced the suspicion.

It was extremely amusing to the entire crew, because many of them had gone through the same thing when they had first encountered Whitebeard. In many ways, Whitebeard seemed too good to be true. Still, whether or not Ace would actually join the crew was still unclear and he still had no idea about Sabo.

His musings was distracted by a jolt of awareness that there was someone else on the island besides the four of them. He stretched out with his haki and quickly recognized the presence of a group of Whitebeards, but there were several he didn’t recognize.

Before he could work to identify who exactly he was sensing, the sound of cannon fire rippled through the air in the distance. Marco leaped into the air and flew up above the tree tops, eyes instantly zoning in on the Moby Dick.

Below him, three boys froze in their tracks long enough for the boar they’d been chasing to escape.

The Moby Dick was where it was when they had left that morning, but they’d weighed anchor and
were in the process of unfurling the sails. There was no sign of an enemy ship nearby, but when Marco turned, he spotted a marine warship on the other side of the island.

The cannon had been fired to warn them. He didn’t waste any time diving to the ground and landing beside the three trouble magnets. “There’s a marine warship on the other side of the island. Time to go.”

Instantly, the three boys’ relaxed, happy mood evaporated. Not needing to be told twice, they broke into a run and hurried after Marco, all thoughts of a pre-birthday feast snack gone.

They were closer to the marine warship than the Moby Dick, but the presences he’d felt were still a ways off. If they hurried, they’d be able to get back to the ship without having to fight, not that Marco was worried. Vista and a group of Whitebeards were already heading directly toward them and he was confident that he and the boys could handle the marines.

They were almost to the ship when they felt it— someone was coming towards them at a remarkable speed, too fast to be a normal marine. What was more, the presence hurtling towards them felt… familiar. Not Akainu, or one of the other three admirals. It took him a moment to recognize who it was, but when he did cold urgency filled him.

“Get ready,” Marco warned, inwardly contemplating if he should break off from the three pirates and engage their pursuer before he the man could reach them. “It’s--”

Something tackled him from behind. Marco cursed and elbowed the marine in the face, quickly squirming out of the man’s iron tight hold. Whirling around, Marco delivered a punch that was powerful enough to send the old man flying and crashing into a cluster of nearby trees.

“Go on!” Marco growled, motioning the three teens to run. “I’ll catch up.”

Sabo caught a glimpse of white hair and the white coat of a vice admiral as he turned to chase after his brothers, surprised. He hadn’t expected them to actually run.

Marco and the other division commanders had drilled it into their heads over and over that if they were told to run, they needed to run. Whitebeard hadn’t given them many rules, but that was one of the ones he had been firmest about.

The thing was, none of them had ever been very obedient. Ever. They barely made it three yards before Luffy and Ace both stopped abruptly, causing Sabo to crash into them before he could stop himself.

The explosive sound of the fight could clearly be heard from behind them, echoing throughout the forest. Overhead, entire flocks of birds were bursting out of the tree canopy into the safety of the clear, endless sky. Animals darted away from it in all directions, desperately trying not to get caught up in the escalating fight.

By the sound of things, the old man they’d seen was giving Marco a run for his money.

“Did you get a good look at him?” Sabo asked, turning around and squinting back the way they had come to try and see what was happening.

“Dunno,” Ace answered slowly, stiffening slightly as a chill ran down his spine. “Hey, Luffy… Sabo. Remember the feeling we had right before--- right before he’d swooped in and beat us senseless?”

“Yeah,” Luffy shuddered and glanced around worriedly. “But, he can’t be here. Right?”
A flicker of unease flashed through them. They edged closer to each other and turned away from the raging battle.

“Yeah, Ace,” Sabo wrapped his arms around his torso. What was this impending sense of doom he was feeling? “That’d be ridiculous.”

“You’re probably right. I mean, Gramps would be really ancient by now—” Ace glanced at Sabo hopefully.

“Who exactly are you calling ancient? Idiot brats!” A voice directly behind them thundered, freezing the three brothers in terror. “Don’t disrespect your grandfather like that!”

Ace, Sabo, and Luffy practically jumped out of their skin, whirling around to face Garp the Fist in complete disbelief. Behind Garp, Marco sprang from tree to tree and landed protectively in front of them, eyes flashing dangerously. The right side of his face was on fire, no doubt healing from one of Garp’s infamous punches.

“We said his name and he appeared!” Luffy gasped, jerking backwards in surprise and unconsciously inching closer to his brothers. “How’d you find us?!”

Garp snorted. “Believe it or not, this is a coincidence. I was planning on taking my cadets here to drill them on survival training. I didn’t know you were here until we spotted the Moby Dick.”

Stomach twisting itself in knots, Ace forced himself not to start grinding his teeth. “Yet you still took your trainees here anyways?”

“Like I said,” Garp grinned wolfishly. “It’s survival training.”

“What are you really doing here, Garp?” Marco demanded, eyes narrowing sharply at the old man. It’d only been a few years since he’d last seen the old marine, but he hadn’t aged well. His presence and the condition of his body was as impressive as ever, but there was a bone weary exhaustion to him that weighed heavily on his shoulders. The circle under his eyes were so dark they almost looked like bruises.

Eyes flickering between the three boys behind Marco, Garp sighed heavily and shut his eyes. “I’ve come to talk to them. I haven’t come to attack or arrest them. Let me past.”

“Why didn’t you just say that instead of attacking Marco?” Ace growled, crossing his arms and eyeing the old man skeptically.

“I didn’t want to talk to him; I wanted to talk to you,” Garp rubbed one of his ears absently. “He was just in the way.”

“If you wanted to talk to them, you shouldn’t have brought a whole platoon of marines and instantly attacked me, yoi,” Marco snarled, barely managing to contain his temper.

“What do you really want?”

“I said I came to see them! I want to see my grandsons,” Garp said, voice softening slightly as he stared past Marco. “Stand aside.”

Marco blinked in surprise, eyeing the vice admiral warily. Grandsons? He had known Luffy was Garp’s grandson—Luffy was Monkey D. Dragon’s son, after all. What was shocking was that Garp apparently claimed all three boys as his grandchildren. He had never even considered that Garp might have any type of connection to Ace and Sabo.

Arching an eyebrow in surprise, Marco glanced back at them. The three teens exchanged glances
with each other before nodding reluctantly.

Marco stepped out of Garp’s way, but caught his elbow and stopped him momentarily. He glared threatening at the vice admiral and murmured: “Don’t even think about hurting them, yoi.”

“As if I would,” Garp jerked his arm free from Marco’s grip and slowly walked towards them with the solemnity of someone walking toward the gallows. “They’re my grandsons.”

The old marine came to an abrupt halt a few feet away from the three brothers, eyes staring at them with unwavering, sorrowful intensity. He struggled for words, unable to think of the right thing to say after so many years, after so many horrible things had happened to them.

He settled for: “Long time no see.”

“Long time no see?” Ace repeated incredulously, staring at Garp in disbelief. “That’s all you have to say to us? Long time no see?!”

“Ace…” Sabo gripped Ace’s arm tightly.

“You don’t just get to come here and say that! Where were you? Where were you?!” Ace shouted desperately, angry and hurt and confused. He saw the grief-stricken expression on Garp’s face and looked away. “Was it… was it because…”

“No!” Garp shouted, shaking his head vigorously and taking a step forward. “You’re my grandson. It doesn’t matter who your father is, you’re my grandson! And don’t ever forget it.”

“Then where were you?” Ace repeated again brokenly, desperate for an explanation that would explain Garp’s complete absence from their lives.

“I got there too late,” Garp said at last, unable to meet his grandchildren’s gaze. “Akainu had already destroyed Fuusha village, High Town, and half of Mt. Colubo by the time I got there. He would have destroyed the entire island if it hadn’t been… hadn’t been for your father, Luffy.”

The three brothers stared at Garp in surprise. They had been told that the entire island had been completely incinerated and they’d never questioned it, because they had seen the island burning. They’d seen High Town completely in flames as they’d sailed away, felt the devastating heat and choked on the ashes.

If the entire island hadn’t been destroyed, did that mean that Dadan’s bandits and the residents of the Grey Terminal had survived?

“My father was there?” Luffy asked uncomprehendingly.

“I thought the entire island was destroyed!” Ace breathed, mind racing.

“Who knows why he was there originally,” Garp shook his head and grit his teeth. “But from what I gathered from Akainu, Dragon stopped him from chasing after Ace and even helped you boys escape the island.”

Sabo felt his mouth drop open slightly at the news. He had known that Dragon had been keeping tabs on Luffy, but he’d never imagined that Dragon had intervened on their behalf in such a direct way.

“I searched everywhere for the three of you, but you were already gone,” Garp paused for a moment, hands clenching into fists. “By that point Cipher Pol was aware of my connection to the three of you.
If I had tried to find you, I would have led them straight to you… I’m just one old man. I couldn’t have kept you safe from the entire navy, and I wouldn’t have been able to help you hide. I had no choice but to trust that Rayleigh would be able to keep you safe until you were old enough to set out on your own, as much as it pained me to leave you in the hands of a pirate. As to why I haven’t come to see you sooner, Cipher Pol has had agents follow my every move since then. I couldn’t even sneeze without an agent making a note of it. There was no way I could approach you without causing you even more trouble.”

“But Cipher Pol’s been keeping an eye on us since we first set sail,” Ace said, rubbing his forehead. “Why didn’t you come see us then?”

“They’d have imprisoned you if you ever tried to come near us,” Sabo guessed astutely. “It’s a miracle you weren’t arrested for your part in saving Ace’s life when he was a baby and for hiding him and Luffy all those years.”

“Arresting me then would have brought unwanted attention to the whole situation,” Garp sighed heavily. “What Akainu did on Dawn Island was not sanctioned by the World Government. He was there investigating a hunch that I might have found Ace after the original search for him stopped. Dawn Island is different from Ohara, in that his actions were not approved by the Government. In fact, there was a Celestial Dragon in High Town that was killed during the shelling. If word reached the Celestial Dragons that one of their own was killed by a marine admiral…”

“It’d destabilize the World Government,” Sabo pulled out a small black notepad from one of his pockets and started taking notes. “No wonder they tried to cover that part up by blaming Ace.”

“Exactly,” Garp scratched his head and huffed. “My hands were tied. Approaching you only would have made things worse.”

Turning away from Garp, Ace ran a hand through his hair. The explanation was about what he’d expected, but still…

“I’ve done what I could for you from a far,” Garp said wearily, slowly uncurling his hands. “I convinced Sengoku to keep Akainu busy elsewhere and send Aokiji or Kizaru after you instead. I distracted Cipher Pol as much as I could from you, among other things.”

“We’d probably be dead by now if it had been Akainu gunning for us fully this entire time.” Luffy mused softly, eyeing Ace closely as he bowed his head.

“All that doesn’t change the fact that… I failed you. I thought I would be able to protect you from the World Government and help you become good, upstanding marines, but—that choice was stolen from you,” Garp held up a hand quickly to silence their objections. “Even if you would have chosen to become pirates on your own, that choice was still stolen from you. The World Government gave you no choice except to become criminals.”

“And yet, you’re still a marine, yoi.” Marco pointed out dryly, completely unaffected by the murderous glare that Garp directed at him.

“What good would leaving the marines have done them, or me for that matter?” Garp retorted sharply. “I’m semi-retired, but I still have sway with some of the top brass. Not to mention, I’m helping raise up a new generation of marines. If the marines are ever going to change, they’re the ones that will be able to accomplish it.”

Sabo eyed Garp thoughtfully. “It’s not really that much of a surprise that you didn’t leave the marines.” He said, absently flipping his fedora in his hands. He grinned slightly when Garp’s
“We all know that being a marine is your life. We wouldn’t have wanted you to leave just for us, anyways,” Luffy told Garp with a grin. “We wouldn’t want to quit being a pirate either, after all!”

Eyes growing suspiciously watery, Garp pursed his lips and said nothing.

“Well… if you have something else to say, I suggest you say it quickly, yoi,” Marco pinched the bridge of his nose. “Your marines are coming and more Whitebeards will be here at any minute.”

Ace, Sabo, and Luffy all stiffened. They’d never admit it, but they did not want to be separated from Garp so soon after finally reuniting with him. It couldn’t be helped, though.

They were pirates and he was a marine.

They stared at Garp expectantly as they waited for him to speak. The old marine’s hands clenched and unclenched, words failing him.

“I…” Garp fell to his knees and lowered his head to the ground. “Am so sorry!”

The three boys’ felt their jaws drop in shock. This was not what they had expected.

"I failed to protect you. I failed the promise I made to your fathers, Ace and Luffy,” Garp’s voice trembled. “I failed to protect you Sabo; you should never have been dragged into this mess in the first place—”

“Don’t you dare say I shouldn’t have been dragged into this! They’re my brothers! I chose to get involved with these two,” Sabo snapped, brows furrowing in anger. “No one forced me to go with them. It was my choice, and I don’t regret it for a second.”

Beside him, Ace twitched slightly and glanced away.

“That may be so,” Garp said slowly, eternally awed and grateful that Sabo had never wavered in his love and loyalty for Ace and Luffy. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I failed to protect the three of you. I don’t expect you to forgive me. But, please know that if it had been in my power to prevent what had happened, I would have.”

As a marine, what he could do to help them was almost non-existent. He was a marine; he couldn’t betray who he was any more than Ace or Sabo or Luffy could. And they didn’t expect him to. Still, he would never feel as though he had done enough to protect them.

“I understand if you resent and hate me.” Garp raised his head slightly and peered at his grandsons, their faces shadowed by their hats and their expressions unreasonable.

“Is that all you have to say?” Ace asked, knuckles turning white from clenching his fists so hard.

“Yes…” Garp sat up and prepared himself for the inevitable punches that were about to come. He could hardly blame them for being furious with him, after all. “That is all.”

For a moment, the three boys were completely silent. They glanced at each other, holding a silent conversation, faces unreadable. Garp flinched, preparing himself for their anger—their hatred, their fists. He deserved whatever they dished out, for what he hadn’t been able to do—Protect them. Help them. Shelter them from the terrible, unjustness of the world, if only for a little while.

“Then,” Luffy lurched forward as one with Sabo and Ace, punching Garp on the top of his head. “Fist of love!” They shouted in unison, grinning mischievously.
Garp stared up at them, speechless. Tears streamed down his face. For a moment he was completely thunderstruck, staring up at the bright grins he thought he’d never see again. “You brats!” He murmured, pulling them into a bone crushing hug.

“Ow!!” Ace halfheartedly tried to squirm out of the hug. “You’re crushing us, old man!”

“I’ve told you before, call me Grandpa!” Garp said with a laugh, pressing a kiss to Ace’s forehead.

“Gramps!!” Ace’s face turned bright, bright red as he struggled to escape Garp’s hold. Garp only tightened his hug.

“He’s trying to kill us after all!” Luffy grunted, completely squished between Ace and Sabo.

“At least you’re made of rubber.” Sabo wheezed, secretly touched that he was included in the hug.

Standing behind them, Marco sighed in exasperation and glanced past them. He smirked as an idea formed in his head. “Well… I suppose it’d be a shame if the four of you separated so soon after reuniting, yoi. Don’t you think?”

Stepping out behind a tree, Vista dabbed his face with a handkerchief and blew his nose. “Of course! It would be a shame to separate them so soon after their reunion.”

Behind Vista, several Whitebeards emerged, all sniffling and trying to hide the fact that they were crying.

“Not much we can do about that with the marines here,” Ace gave Garp a haki reinforced shove, sending the old marine sprawling to the ground. “Right?”

“I might have an idea, yoi.” Marco grinned wickedly, inwardly laughing at the disturbed expressions on the three boys’ faces at the sight of his smirk. They had much to learn. Thatch wasn’t the only one with a mischievous side, after all.

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Ace crashed through a web of low hanging vines and leaped over a fallen tree, panting heavily. Behind him, he could hear a voice that still haunted him in his dreams.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” Garp shouted, sending Luffy crashing into a cluster of trees. “Did Rayleigh teach you anything at all?”

“He really is a monster…” Ace grumbled under his breath, turning away as Luffy cried out for help and running in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

Where Garp was concerned, it was every man for himself.

Marco’s idea had seemed brilliant at the time, but now he wasn’t so sure. For one thing, it meant Marco, Vista and the other Whitebeards were separated from them as the pirates worked to drive away the marine cadets.

The plan was straightforward; make the marines think that Garp was engaged in a big battle with the ASL pirates and the Whitebeards, then drive them away temporarily. They wouldn’t be able to see Garp, but they’d hear the noises of a fight and assume that he was still busy fighting them. It would leave Garp with an alibi and allow them a chance to really catch up with him.

We might be dead by the time Marco and Vista get back. Ace thought glumly as Luffy was sent
flying into a tree. He tried to feel guilty about sacrificing Luffy to Garp, but couldn’t feel that bad. After all, he’d had to deal with Garp for longer than Luffy by a few years.

Gritting his teeth, Ace searched for Sabo as he continued running away from Garp as fast as he could. A bullet whizzed toward him and flew through his forehead, lodging itself in a tree behind him. “Rookies, huh?” Ace skidded to a halt and half turned towards the semi cowering group of marines trying to hide behind bushes. He grinned.

He was halfway over to them when he could feel Garp’s eyes zero in on him. The old man had Luffy upside down by the leg, but at the sight of Ace dashing towards his trainees, he tossed Luffy into a tree and started a mad dash toward him.

Grimacing, Ace increased his speed and launched a fire attack at the trainees, sending them scurrying. They were quick, Ace would give them that. He launched one more attack for good measure before whirling around to face Garp.

He turned just in time to see Garp’s fist a moment before it connected with his jaw and sent him crashing to the ground.

Groaning, he shook his head to clear the stars from his vision and blinked. He climbed to his feet, surprised by how quickly he was able to stand up after the punch. Either Garp was going soft on them, or all the times Whitebeard had tossed him around like a ragdoll the last few weeks was toughening him up.

Watching Sabo get tossed into a nearby boulder made him think it was the latter.

Sighing heavily, Ace rushed toward Garp to attack, knowing they still had to put on a good show for the marines.

The things they put up with for family.

Chapter End Notes

Well... I finally finished this chapter! I'm not sure how happy I am with the beginning of the chapter, but hopefully all of you like it! I was stuck on this chapter for almost a month, so at this point I just need to move on.

Garp finally makes an appearance! Please let me know what you think :)

Feedback/comments are greatly appreciated!
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“My ears are ringing,” Sabo complained, slapping them and grimacing. “I wish I could say I’d forgotten how hard he punches before we agreed to that, but I can’t.”

Ace pulled a twig out of Sabo’s hair and sighed. “I wonder who punches harder, Gramps or Whitebeard?”

“Don’t say that so loudly!” Sabo hissed, shooting Ace a reprimanding look and shuddering at the image of Garp challenging Whitebeard to find out. “Besides, you should know. You’re the idiot who chooses to have Whitebeard use you as a punching bag.”

“I think I’ve built up a tolerance to it,” Ace mused, gently running a hand through Luffy’s hair to check for injuries. “I can’t tell anymore.”

“Ace’s head has been hit too many times,” Luffy laughed softly, letting out a high pitched whine when Ace smacked him on the back of his head. “He has brain damage.”

“You both have brain damage, and it’s probably Gramp’s fault. When we get back to the Moby Dick, I’m having you checked over by a neurologist,” Sabo grunted. “Assuming I’m ever able to move again.”

“You have no reason to complain, Sabo. Gramps was going easy on you,” Luffy flopped an arm up to reach over and poke Sabo’s side, causing the older boy to groan. “Must be because you’re newer.”

“How am I newer?” Sabo asked in confusion. “I’m older than you are.”

“But I’ve been his grandson longer,” Luffy answered pithily. “Ace and I have been his grandkids longer, so you’re the newest.” He clarified, seeing his brothers’ bewildered expressions.

Ace guffawed and doubled over, shoulders shaking. “That’s true! You are newer.”

“So, Gramps went easier on me because I’m his newest grandson?” Sabo repeated incredulously. “It sure didn’t feel like he was going easy on me.”

“He was though. He only threw you into a boulder twice,” Luffy sat up with a grunt, stomach rumbling. “I’m hungry. What’s taking him so long?”

Normally it fell to them to go hunting after Garp had finished beating them senseless, but this time Garp had volunteered. They’d been so shocked that hadn’t managed to respond before Garp had run off in search of some poor creature.

Vista and the other Whitebeards besides Marco had chased off the marines temporarily, leaving them alone with Garp. Who had been gone for at least ten minutes now.

“We’ll go looking for him if he isn’t back soon.” Ace said, unwilling to move from his spot. “How long has it been since we just… relaxed like this?”

“Yesterday.” Luffy replied, fiddling with his hats.
“No I mean… this.” Ace tilted his head to glance at Sabo.

“It’s like the good old days.” Sabo said, lying down on the grass next to Ace and Luffy.

Beside him, Ace stared up at endless blue sky and sighed contentedly. “Do you think we would have done this? If everything hadn’t happened.”

“Stared up at the sky? Quite possibly—oof!” Sabo grunted as Ace elbowed his side. “Who knows what would’ve happened…”

“I’d be by myself,” Luffy said softly, feet swinging side to side. “The two of you would have set sail without me.”

That was a depressing thought. After everything that had happened, it was hard to imagine being separated from one another. They were silent for a moment, contemplating.

“Maybe we would have kidnapped you and took you with us.” Ace mused, smiling to himself.

“But we might have set sail separately. We talked about it, remember?” Sabo rolled over onto his side so he could face Ace and Luffy. “Maybe I kidnapped Luffy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ace said dismissively. “My birthday is first.”

“Luffy likes me better.” Sabo retorted, grinning wickedly at the enraged expression on Ace’s face.

“Does not!” Ace said sat up, face turning red in indignation.

“I’m nicer to him!” Sabo couldn’t help but laugh at the scowl on Ace’s face. He was really way too easy to tease when it came to Luffy.

“I’ve rescued his hat more times than you!” Ace crowed, grinning triumphantly.

“I’ve fixed his hat.” Sabo shot back, jerking back just in time to avoid Ace’s fist.

“Luffy! Tell Sabo that he’s not your favorite,” Ace twisted around and stared at Luffy expectantly.

“Shishishi!” Luffy’s grin was all warmth and sunshine. “You’re both my favorites!”

“You can’t just say that. You have to pick!” Ace complained, crossing his arms.

“I can’t! Ace is Ace, and Sabo is Sabo!” Luffy leaned forward and hugged Ace.

“What does that even mean?” Ace grumbled, ruffling Luffy’s hair fondly.

“It means you’re both my precious brothers,” Luffy grinned and picked up one of the fedora’s that had been discarded on the ground. “You’re both my favorite.”

A loud sniffling nose caught their attention. Their eyes darted to the right, where they spotted Garp standing half behind a tree holding a giant boar.

“I’m not crying!” He snapped defensively. He stomped forward and dumped the boar at their feet. “Don’t just sit there, get a fire started!”

Ace turned and sent a small burst of fire out toward the wood they had collected earlier. “Done.”

“Hnnmpt. Show off.” Garp mumbled on his breath.
The meal was surprisingly enjoyable—Garp wasn’t bad company when he wasn’t throwing them off cliffs or literally trying to pound it into their heads that they had to become marines. They spent over two hours filling him in on everything that had happened since they’d left Dawn Island and had now moved on to random stories about their time with Rayleigh.

“…And then Luffy got swallowed by a giant hippo and Rayleigh had to wrestle with it and make it spit Luffy out,” Sabo eyed Garp closely as he continued the story, watching as the old man’s gaze grew more and more distant. He exchanged glances with Ace. “But he didn’t have his hat and Rayleigh had already let the hippo go. So we had to fight all of the hippos in the lake to try to find the one that swallowed Luffy to get his hat back.”

“I didn’t know that the hat was Roger’s until then.” Ace said, absently picking flipping his fedora in his hands.

“Shishishi! Rayleigh was panicking the entire time.” Luffy chuckled, rubbing his stomach contentedly.

“Where is the hat? Did Luffy lose it again?” Garp said, fingers drumming restlessly on his leg.

“Nope! It’s right here,” Luffy pulled out his straw hat from the underneath the fedora and waved it around proudly for Garp to see. “See! I would never lose it—ahhh!”

A gust of wind blew the hat out of his hands toward the fire. Luffy, Ace, and Sabo all sprang up desperately to catch it, but they tripped over each other and ended up in a pile a few feet away from where Garp was sitting.

They all watched in horror as the hat hurtled toward the fire, but Garp reached up and snatched it out of the air just in time.

They sagged in relief.

“Luffy, one of these days…” Ace ran a hand wearily across his face.

“It won’t! It’s my treasure. It’s not going to get destroyed.” Luffy said vehemently, shoving Ace’s face into the ground.

“Your crew better have excellent reflexes, Luffy.” Sabo grunted, rolling off of Ace and Luffy.

“Get off!” Ace shook Luffy off and clambered onto his feet.

In front of them, Garp was slowly turning the straw hat around in his hands. “Roger lost it multiple times as well.” He muttered, handing the hat back to Luffy.

“Really?!” Luffy grinned to himself, excited to think that he had something in common with the pirate king besides the shared hat and Ace.

“That’s not something to get excited about,” Sabo said with a chuckle. “What will Shanks say if you actually do lose it?”

Luffy deflated slightly and flopped down to the ground.

“Anyways,” Ace sat next to Luffy, crossed his legs and bit his lip. “Have you… do you know how Dadan is doing?”
Scratching his head, Garp looked everywhere but at Ace. He wasn’t one to sugar coat the truth, but there were certain details that they were better off knowing. “She’s… doing as well as can be expected. The first year was very difficult for her, but she got under the protection of the Revolutionaries that have been imprisoned in Impel Down. Her health hasn’t been very good recently, but she’s alive. She could have easily been executed.”

Clenching his hands into fists, Ace stared down at his lap. In the back of his mind, he’d always thought about busting her out of Impel Down. He’d even discussed possible ways to break in and free her with Sabo, but it was far, far too risky for them.

“You’ve seen her?” Sabo asked quietly. He hadn’t known Dadan for very long, but she was more his family than his real parents.

“I go to visit her sometimes. Bring her the newspaper.” Garp said, staring down at his hands.

“She must hate us.” Ace murmured, running a hand through his hair.

“Hate you?” Garp stared at Ace in surprise. “Ace, the one thing that brings that woman happiness is that the three of you are alive and free. She lives for every newspaper clipping of you I can bring to her. Not that she’d ever admit it, though.”

Eyes stinging, Ace bowed his head and ground his teeth. He jerked in surprise when a large, callused hand came to rest on his head, but relaxed when he realized it was Garp. He glanced up.

“She doesn’t blame you and she doesn’t hate you,” Garp said firmly. “She doesn’t, Ace.”

Jerking back as Garp started to ruffle his hair, Ace forced himself to believe that Garp was telling the truth. Garp wouldn’t lie to them. Not about this, at least. “Have you been back to Dawn Island? Do you know if any of the bandits survived?”

“I haven’t been able to go back, so I don’t know. I left the island almost as soon as I got there because—well,” Garp braced himself for the next bombshell he had to give to them, hesitating only briefly. “I don’t know how many survived Fuusha village, but I do know that almost everyone in High Town was killed… including your parents, Sabo. I’m so sorry.”

Sabo blinked in surprise, but not for the reason Garp had been expecting. “You knew who my parents were?”

“Yes, I searched for them as soon as I met you.” Garp eyed Sabo in concern, not sure what to make of his lack of reaction to the news of his parents’ death.

“Eh, really?” Luffy tilted his head and glanced at Sabo.

“If you knew, why didn’t you take me back?” Sabo stared at Garp in confusion. It was one of the reasons he had been reluctant to tell anyone about his parents; he had always been terrified that someone would force him to go back.

“I met your parents.” Garp’s face darkened slightly. The sentence hung heavy in the air between them, his meaning clear: Meeting Sabo’s parents was enough for him to decide that Sabo was better off living with a group of bandits.

It was a sobering thought.

“If you wanted to get away from them enough to run away and live in a dump, I wasn’t going to be the one to force you back. Besides, I’m a selfish old man. You were good for Ace and Luffy, and I
didn’t want to separate the three of you,” Garp paused, eyeing Sabo closely. “Your parents were killed, Sabo. I’ve had it confirmed.”

“I’ve known for a while that they were most likely dead,” Sabo admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “They weren’t very good to me, but I made my peace with them a long time ago.”

It was an absurd understatement considering everything, but the truth.

“You’re taking this much differently than I had expected.” Garp murmured, relieved that the news hadn’t resulted in even more pain for him.

“How should he be reacting? They saw him injured and dying and did absolutely nothing! They left him,” Ace growled, surprised at furious he still felt about what had happened. He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. “They don’t deserve to be called parents.”

“What?! They abandoned my grandson?!” Garp demanded, surging onto his feet as a strange rustling sound came from a nearby tree. If they weren’t already dead---

“Calm down! What Ace said is true, but if it weren’t for my mother, we never would have gotten off the island. She paid someone to find us and brought a doctor to me. She even bought us a boat so we could escape. She wasn’t a good mother, but we still owe her our lives.” Sabo said, remembering the last words he’d ever had with his mother in the dank cave they’d been hiding in on Dawn Island.

They fell silent. Garp sighed and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Your adopted brother Stelly survived. He’s currently courting a princess.”

Sabo’s jaw dropped open. He stared blankly at Garp, before bursting out laughing slightly hysterically. “Of all the people who died that day, he survived? And he’s courting a princess. My parents would be so proud.”

“Is he that weird kid with the bowl head?” Luffy asked, nose wrinkling as he tried to remember who Stelly was. “Or was he the guy with the fish on his head?”

“Yes, Stelly’s the old man with the fish—of course he’s the bowl head!” Ace stared at Luffy in disbelief and shook his head.

“Oh,” Luffy absently picked his nose. “I didn’t like him. The fish guy was cool though!”

Sabo’s choked and sputtered. Beside him, Ace rolled his eyes and chuckled.

“Anyway,” Sabo said with a cough. “I appreciate that you took the time to find out what happened to them for me and… that you didn’t make me go back to them.”

“Believe me; I had no desire to separate the three of you, even though they were probably a bad influence on you.” Garp shook his head resignedly.

“I don’t they were as bad as you think,” Sabo grinned. “I did run away when I was five, after all.”

Something fell out of the tree that had been rustling earlier and crashed to the ground.

“Are you okay pineapple head?” Luffy exclaimed in surprise. Marco had been perched in the tree from the moment Garp had gotten back with the firewood, not making much effort to hide himself from them.

“Marco, if you’re going to be eavesdropping just come over here and join us!” Ace called out
exasperatedly.

The first division commander shuffled out from behind the tree, a small branch sticking out of his hair. He shambled over and sat across from Garp somewhat stiffly, shooting him a glare. Eventually, he shifted his attention to Sabo and cleared his throat. “You were five when you ran away from home?”

Sabo and Ace both rolled their eyes.

“Yes, I ran away from home to live in a dump for five years. I made a living robbing people and scavenging with Ace. After that, I moved into a shack with a group of bandits until we were forced to leave and ended up in the Calm Belt with the pirate king’s first mate,” Sabo chuckled at the mildly shell shocked expression on Marco’s face. “How Garp ever thought we’d end up as marines is truly beyond me.”

“Call me Grandpa!” Garp said ordered sternly, shaking his head. He sighed. “I really don’t know where I went wrong with the three of you.”

They all stared at Garp in disbelief.

“Anyways,” Garp coughed, cheeks flaming in embarrassment. He scratched his head, eyes flitting away from them. “I have it on good authority that they’ll be releasing the fact that the three of you are with the Whitebeards by the end of the month– along with an increase in your bounties.”

“Again?” Luffy asked, crossing his arms in consternation and pouting. “We haven’t even done anything! We were planning something big for our next bounty increase!”

“At this rate we’ll have to plan something bigger than raiding—er, never mind.” Ace muttered with a huff and a quick glance at Garp.

Marco stared at Ace in disbelief. “I don’t even want to know, yoi.”

Luffy snickered.

“They’re contracting bounty hunters and the warlords to go after you,” Garp paused, weighing his words very carefully before speaking. “I’ve even heard rumors that…”

“What? Rumors about what?” Ace demanded, drumming his fingers on his knee impatiently.

“They’re willing to do anything to keep the three of you from joining the Whitebeards—” Garp swallowed, struggling to get the information out in a way that wasn’t completely treasonous.

“Not me! I’m going to have my own crew and become the--!” Luffy began, eyes bright with excitement and chest puffing out.

“The king of the pirates. We know.” Ace, Sabo, Marco and Garp interjected in unison.

“As I was saying,” Garp said, shooting Ace and Sabo a glare. “They’re… fishing around for assets.”

“What kind of a fish is an asset?” Luffy murmured, glancing at Sabo for an explanation.

“It’s not a fish.” Sabo responded, rolling his eyes.

“Then why are they fishing?” Luffy frowned in confusion.

“If the three of you would just let me finish!” Garp growled, struggling within himself to spit the
words out. Treason. Never in his life had he imagined that he would commit treason for anything. He glanced at his grandsons’ faces and swallowed, resolve bolstered. It was treason to even be sitting here beside them. “They’re looking for assets inside the Whitebeards.”

All the color drained from Ace’s face.

“You can’t be serious, yoi,” Marco stared at Garp in disbelief. “They aren’t seriously trying to find a traitor.”

“They are,” Garp stared down at his lap. “Cipher Pol is already in contact with someone in the Whitebeards.”

Marco sprang onto his feet and paced restlessly. He scratched his head, mind whirling. “It’s not possible.”

“They’re pirates, Marco,” Garp rolled his eyes. “Can you honestly tell me that they all feel the same way about Whitebeard as you?”

Opening his mouth to reply yes, yes of course, Marco paused. Hesitated.

Ace turned away.

“I’m not saying it’s one of the division commanders. They’d die before they ever betrayed him. But, it’s a big crew. You can’t guarantee anything,” Garp swallowed hard and grimaced, like he had swallowed something bitter. “Even so, I don’t think you could do much better than Whitebeard.”

It took them all a moment to process his words. The moment it hit them, they stared at him, gaping.

“Wait, what?! Are you… giving us permission to join his crew?” Ace wondered if this day could get any weirder.

“Of course not! I’m just saying, even if he is a pirate, Whitebeard… Whitebeard is--” Garp sputtered incomprehensively, wishing the ground would swallow him up so he wouldn’t have to finish.

“Whitebeard is someone you can trust. He’d move heaven and earth if it meant protecting one of his own. I can’t protect you, but he can, if you let him. But I’m not giving you permission and I’m not encouraging you to join!”

“So, not your permission… your blessing?” Sabo stared at Garp in surprise as the old man continued to mutter denials under his breath.

“I think we broke Gramps.” Luffy stage whispered to Ace and Sabo.

Ace shook his head. “You didn’t need to say that. I can make up my own mind about Whitebeard.”

“Of course! You’re my grandson,” Garp scratched his head, expression still pained. “I simply meant-.”

“We know!” Luffy chuckled. “If Whitebeard was a bad guy, you’d tell us.”

“He’s a pirate--” Garp wondered when he’d completely lost control of the conversation. The beginning, probably.

Marco cleared his throat and glared darkly at Garp. “I would stop right there, if I were you, yoi.”

Their glaring match was cut short by the all too familiar sound of cannon fire.
Stiffening, Garp stood and dusted off his pants. “I have to go.”

“Already?” Luffy hopped up and stretched, pouting.

“Can’t risk my recruits getting themselves killed accidentally by the division commanders,” Garp grunted. “I said accidentally!”

“They know how to control themselves,” Marco said with a long suffering sigh. “I’ll give the four of you a moment alone.”

“Try not to fall out of a tree this time!” Luffy called out as Marco walked away.

Shaking his head, Marco disappeared into the forest.

Silence. Awkward shuffling. Goodbyes had never been something they’d been very good at.

Garp had never stayed for long with them on Dawn Island, but this had far too short. They’d barely been reunited for a few hours.

“Come see us again,” Ace blurted out impulsively, shifting on his feet. “We’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

Garp stared at the three of them, eyes growing slightly misty as he pulled them into his arms. “Nothing could keep me away.”

He reached forward and pulled them into a fierce hug and let out a slow, shuddering sigh. Leaning down, he kissed each one of his grandsons on the forehead and held onto them a moment longer before reluctantly letting go.

“Things are going to get even hotter for the three of you,” Garp fiddled with the sleeves of his admiral’s coat, feeling the full weight of what the coat represented heavy on his shoulders. “I don’t know how long you’re planning on traveling with them, but I recommend that you stay with them for the next three months at least.”

“We’ll be okay Gramps! No one can beat the three of us together.” Luffy declared with a laugh. Coming from Luffy, it didn’t sound over confident or cheesy, it sounded like a fact.

“Make sure you stick together in that case,” Garp patted Ace’s head. “Stay safe, idiots.”

Garp whirlered around and forced himself to start walking away while he still had the will to do so. It was more difficult than he had imagined to pull himself away from them.

“See ya, grandpa!” Ace, Sabo, and Luffy called out to Garp’s retreating back.

Jaw dropping in disbelief, Garp whirled around to tackle his grandsons-- only to see that they’d took off running desperately back to the Moby Dick.

“You brats get back here!!” Garp shouted, face turning red. “After all those years of trying to get you call me Grandpa and you do it like that?! Come back and let me hug you!”

“No way!” Ace shot back, running faster and passing Sabo and Luffy.

“Later Gramps!!” Luffy sped up and shot ahead of Ace for a few seconds before they were both passed by Sabo.
Shaking his head, Garp laughed. They hadn’t changed. In all the ways that mattered, they hadn’t changed. A little older, more mature, distrustful and jaded, but despite all of that, they were still the same precocious troublemakers they’d been as children. He’d have to tell Dadan. She’d grumble and complain about all of the trouble they’d caused her, but inside he knew she’d be relieved and incredibly happy. He certainly was.

Even with almost the entire world against them, all of the misfortune and tragedies they’d faced, they hadn’t let it change them. It’d only made them stronger.

“If you let anything happen to them while they’re in your care, Whitebeard, I’ll come take your head myself.” Garp swore, forcing himself to walk away.

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The sun was slowly sinking behind the Moby Dick into the ocean as they approached the shore, reflecting brilliantly off the water. Next to Ace, Luffy’s stomach rumbled as they approached the row boat where Fossa was waiting for them, earning a look of disbelief from Marco.

“I’m beginning to think your stomach actually is a bottomless pit,” Marco grumbled, nodding at Fossa. “Everything ready?”

Fossa only winked and put out his cigar, motioning for them to climb into the boat.

They crowded into the boat and shoved off, Fossa rowing them at a steady pace. Ace stared down at his lap, still processing everything that Garp had told them He glanced at Marco curiously, grimacing at the dark expression on the commander’s face. He was obviously worried about what Garp had said.

Ace’s stomach churned. The news that a Whitebeard was possibly a traitor working with the marines wasn’t surprising. With the bounty on his and Luffy’s heads and their parentage, it was to be expected. He’d always known that it was a distinct possibility, despite all of the reassurances he’d gotten from Marco and Thatch.

Peering subtly at the troubled division commander, Ace knew nothing had changed with Garp’s announcement, at least not for him. The small, hesitant trust he was putting in Whitebeard and the others was still there. Whitebeard wouldn’t betray him to the marines.

But… If someone betrayed the Whitebeards because of him… he wondered again how long Whitebeard would think Ace was worth all of the trouble he was causing them before casting him aside.

“Ahh, I’m hungry,” Luffy licked his lips, almost drooling at the thought of the feast Thatch and Marty had promised him. “I’m ready for food!”

“What we ate earlier was just a warm up.” Ace said, sitting a little straighter.

“Gotta stretch the stomach muscles,” Sabo patted his stomach and made a show of loosening his belt.

“The three of you scare me.” Marco said with an amused shake of his head.

They bumped into the side of the Moby Dick as one of the crewmembers threw down a rope ladder for them. Wordlessly, Marco climbed up first and disappeared from view before Ace and the others had even stood.

Exchanging glances, Ace and Sabo shrugged at each other as Luffy started up the ladder.
“Does it seem weirdly quiet to you?” Ace murmured under his breath as he climbed up behind Sabo. The silence was unnerving.

Luffy reached the answer before he or Sabo could reply and any response he might have said died on his lips. “Woah...!”

“What is it?” Sabo stared after Luffy as he rocketed himself up onto the deck and quickly followed him.

Heart pounding, Ace sped up and sprang onto the deck, prepared for a fight, but not for the sight that greeted him.

The Moby Dick had been transformed. Lights had been strung up, a mountain of presents had been erected, and laid out in front of them was the most food the three brothers had ever seen in their entire lives. A huge sign had been hung with the words, “Happy Birthday Luffy!” messily scrawled on thick canvas.

“Happy Birthday!” The pirates shouted, cheering and shouting wildly as Luffy stared at the food completely, spellbound.

Glancing around, Ace almost couldn’t believe his eyes. He’d never seen so many presents before, all wrapped terribly for the most part with crooked bows attached and more tape than wrapping paper. He glanced at the food and almost started drooling himself. He’d never even seen some of the food that had been prepared. It must have taken Thatch and the other cooks days and days to cook all of it!

“Welcome back, boys.” Whitebeard smiled warmly at them from his chair, eyes twinkling with amusement as he watched as Luffy was surrounded by a crowd of eager well-wishers.

Despite being more accustomed to the Whitebeards, Ace still shied away from the group patting Luffy on the shoulder and handing him presents and candy. He took in the bright twinkle lights and the various party decorations spread around the deck in growing astonishment.

Thatch and Marty ran over to Luffy and eagerly dragged him closer to the food, causing him to accidentally drop the large stack of presents that had been shoved into his arms. “All this food is for the three of you.”

“All of this is just for us?” Sabo’s eyebrows twitched upwards. There had to be enough to feed half of the Whitebeards spread out in front of them.

Luffy waited just long enough to wrap Thatch and Marty in a fierce hug before literally diving into the food. His face brightened even further as he started eating and sighed contentedly.

Slightly in awe, Ace stumbled over to Whitebeard. Marco was sitting on his knee and they were watching Luffy eat with amused fascination, murmuring quietly to each other.

“Just wait till they see the cake,” Marco chuckled, the dark expression that had been on his face mere minutes earlier melted away. “Thatch really over did it this time, yoi.”

“They deserve it.” Whitebeard answered, eyes flitting down to Ace. “Aren’t you going to join them? The food was cooked for all three of you. Some of the presents are for you and Sabo as well. You should go join Luffy. I dread to think what could happen if Luffy’s left alone with that much food, gurara!”

Ace searched for the rest of the ASL pirates and spotted them clustered together on the ship’s railing.
Wendy, Bam Bam, and Haru were chattering happily to one another and a few members of the Whitebeards, looking healthier and more relaxed than he could remember seeing them in months. They felt safe.

“We have the infirmary on standby just in case,” Marco said with a chuckle, watching Ace’s stunned expression knowingly. “Are you alright, Ace?”

Swallowing hard, Ace blinked back tears. When was the last time he’d gotten a present from someone other than his brothers or crew? When had anyone taken such painstaking care to ensure that they were happy? That they were safe?

When was the last time he had felt this loved and protected by someone other than Sabo and Luffy?

“Thank you.” Ace said, utterly sincere and completely floored. Those two words weren’t nearly enough to convey the awe he was feeling, but he could tell that Whitebeard understood the depth of his gratitude by the gentle smile on the old pirate’s face. “You’re welcome, Ace,” Whitebeard smiled and reached down and ruffled Ace’s hair before giving him a gentle shove toward his brothers. “Go on now. Before Luffy and Sabo eat everything.”

Ace managed a shaky grin and turned to join his brothers, savoring how safe and happy he felt. He could get used to this. And for once, he wasn’t scared.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is! The last chapter for 2016. It's hard to believe the year is almost over. My goal for the last two days of 2016 is to write 2,000 more words. That'll mean that I've written 80,000 words in a year :D

Hopefully this chapter isn't too sappy! Let me know what you think.

I'm glad everyone enjoyed the last chapter! Thank you so much for reviewing.

Feedback/comments are greatly appreciated!
Chapter Nineteen

The end of the month hurtled closer and closer like a ticking time bomb. With only four days to go, the ASL pirates waited tensely every morning for the newspaper to arrive to check and see if the other shoe had finally dropped.

This morning, like the last three that had preceded it, gave them another day of reprieve. The only news of any interest in the newspaper was that an island under the control of Big Mom had been attacked by a pirate crew of all Zoan devil fruit users.

“The six of you need to relax. Nothing’s really going to change once they release it,” Thatch patted Ace on the back before marching back to the kitchens. “We’ll just be attacked more often. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“You say that now.” Ace retorted, falling into step with him as they navigated the maze of hallways, Luffy, Sabo and the rest of the ASL pirates trailing listlessly behind him. “But I think you’re underestimating how much everyone hates me and Luffy.”

“A lot of people hate Pops too,” Thatch drawled airily. “You’re overthinking this.”

“I think Ace is right about one thing, Thatch,” Sabo interjected quickly, before Ace could say something that he’d regret later. “I think you’re all taking this a bit lightly.”

“Oh, trust me. Marco and Jozu and the rest never take anything lightly. They’re just better at not showing it than the six of you are,” Thatch said with a chuckle, stopping in front of the doors to the kitchen. “Now, shoo! You’re all still forbidden from entering the kitchens after the squash soup debacle, except for Wendy. And you’re never getting KP duty again. Ever. Except for Wendy.”

The ASL pirates, minus Wendy, all grimaced and slowly backed away from the kitchen doors.

“Never eating squash ever, ever again.” Haru swore under his breath, shuddering. Almost drowning in a vat of soup was not how he wanted to go, though it had been delicious. And traumatizing.

“Why is Wendy the only one not banned?” Luffy complained, crossing his arms. “She was with us the entire time.”

“Yes, but Wendy is the only reason the entire kitchen wasn’t burnt down, so she’s still allowed. Unlike someone else who decided that fighting fire with fire isn’t just a euphemism.” Thatch glared darkly at Ace, causing the teen to shift on uncomfortably on his feet.

“It wasn’t that bad.” He mumbled, crossing his arms defensively.

“The ceiling is still black from the explosion,” Thatch said flatly, shooting Luffy and Bam Bam a glare. “Black.”

“Well, thankfully it will never happen again,” Wendy said, before grinning ruefully. “Not in the kitchen, at least.”

Thatch let out a somewhat straggled noise and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want to think of it. I’m not thinking about it, I’m not thinking about it, I am not going to think about it.” He chanted under his breath. “Go on now. Ace, you’re late for your morning spar.”
“Oh, you’re right!” Ace grinned wildly, twisted around and dashed back the way they had come, causing a collective sigh from his crew.

“You just had to say something,” Haru sighed again. “He almost went a full morning without getting knocked unconscious or thrown off the ship.”

“They enjoy it,” Thatch laughed. “It’s good for Pops, too. Keeps him on his toes.”

There was a sudden crash, followed by shouts of: “Ace is overboard!”

“Business as usual I guess.” Sabo said, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

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Later in the afternoon, they were on their way to the library when Ace suddenly collapsed. Sabo and Luffy quickly caught hold of him and kept him mostly upright, his head rolling limply on his chest.

“How many does that make? His fourth?” Sabo frowned and adjusted his grip on Ace with a grunt.

“Seventh,” Luffy supplied, sliding under Ace’s arm to support him better. “Someone’s coming!”

“Quick, there’s a supply closet over there!” Sabo and Luffy half dragged, half carried Ace over to the closet. They crammed him inside and slammed the door shut.

Three members of the second division turned the corner, completely non-pulsed by Sabo and Luffy hovering awkwardly by a supply closet. They waved at them cheerily as they passed, patting Luffy on the back and inviting the two brothers to spar with them later.

The two brothers sagged in relief the moment they disappeared down the hallway.

Sabo and Luffy waited silently, leaning against the supply closet door as casually as possible while they waited for Ace to wake up.

“Do you think it was a sleep attack or cataplexy?” Sabo whispered to Luffy, brows knitting together in concern.

“Dunno,” Luffy stared down at the floor, playing with the hem of his shirt. “He’s getting worse, isn’t he?”

Grimacing, Sabo wrapped an arm around Luffy’s shoulder and tugged him close. Ace had slowly been getting worse since he’d lost his meds. It was getting to the point where the ASL pirates couldn’t leave him alone, not only because Ace still stubbornly refused to reveal his narcolepsy to the Whitebeards, but because there was a real danger he could injure himself if he had an attack when there was no one to catch him.

The Moby Dick was the safest place they’d been since they’d left the island in the Calm Belt, but it was still a pirate ship. There was any number of staircases or high places that Ace could fall off of, for starters. Not to mention that the Whitebeards weren’t always good at putting away their weapons. More than once they’d tripped over a sword or a battle axe that had been left lying around on the deck.

Mainly, they tried to have at least one member of their crew with him because the first two times Ace had a cataplexy attack aboard the Moby Dick, he’d ended up having a panic attack.

“If Ace doesn’t tell the Whitbeards or get discovered accidentally, we’ll have to raid a pharmacy
soon.” Sabo sighed.

They’d done it before. It wasn’t ideal. In fact, it was largely hit and miss, but they didn’t have a lot of other options. The one doctor they did trust was all the way back at the entrance of the Grand Line and they couldn’t go to anyone else. They’d learned that the hard way on several occasions. There was a reason they didn’t have a doctor on their crew, after all.

There was a terrible crashing sound from the closet, followed by a low groan. Luffy flung the door open and almost laughed; Ace was half covered in cleaning supplies, expression comically bewildered. He must have jerked and hit one of the cabinets when he woke up.

“Why am I in the closet?” Ace grunted, peeking out from the fringe of a mop that had fallen on top of his head.

“Yes, why is Ace in the closet?” Jozu asked from behind them, arching an eyebrow.

“Jozu!” Sabo’s mind whirled wildly as he tried to think of an excuse, any excuse, to explain why Ace was sitting in a supply closet with half of the contents laying on top of him. “Luffy accidentally destroyed one of the walls—we were hoping we could find something to repair it before the shipwrights found it.”

Next to Sabo, Luffy shuddered. The wrath of the shipwrights was not to be trifled with. Ace and Luffy combined had somehow managed to damage the Moby Dick more in a few months than the marines managed in years. He and Ace had been on their bad side for five consecutive weeks and it resulted in five all day safety lectures and swabbing. So much swabbing.

Mouth twitching upward in amusement, Jozu shook his head. “Put all of that back where it belongs and I’ll show you where we keep what you’ll need. How big a hole is it?”

“Luffy sized—maybe a little bigger.” Sabo sputtered, earning a glare from Luffy.

“It was Sabo’s fault,” Luffy declared, shooting Sabo a dark look. Luffy got blamed for everything. “He threw me.”

“Sabo… threw you into a wall?” Jozu repeated slowly, dark eyes sliding back and forth between the three brothers somewhat doubtful.

“He stole Sabo’s hat,” Ace replied hastily, shoving off boxes and a dustpan so he could stagger to his feet. “We take our hats very seriously.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Jozu said dryly, shaking his head. “Better hurry, before the shipwrights find the hole.”

The next thirty minutes was spent finding the repair tools and wood and wandering around the ship trying to ‘remember’ where the fake hole was, all for Jozu’s benefit. He just wouldn’t go away.

“Maybe it was actually back that way—” Sabo mused, pointing back the way they had come.

“No it wasn’t.” Luffy said flatly.

“Yes, it was,” Sabo shook his head. “Remember, we passed this fire extinguisher.”

Jozu’s expression was pained. “All of the hallways have fire extinguishers, Sabo.”

“I still think it’s this way.” Sabo crossed his arms and eyed Jozu expectantly. Any minute now…
“No, no. It was this way, remember? That way is where Luffy wrecked the wall last week.” Ace said, watching gleefully as Jozu slowly edged away from them.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Jozu said hurriedly, clearly tired of them fake arguing about where the hole was and whose fault it was and: “You should know better than to touch my hat, Luffy.”

They watched him practically run away from them in triumph. It was a miracle Luffy had lasted so long without giving them away.

“Finally!” Ace huffed, dropping the stack of wood he was carrying and running a hand through his hair. “I thought we’d have to actually bust a hole in a wall to get rid of him.”

“Come on, let’s put this back. It’s almost past your naptime.” Sabo motioned at the wood, earning a groan from Ace.

They finally reached the library an hour later than they had planned. Ace and Luffy both plopped down on the pile of pillows they’d dragged to the library during previous visits and almost instantly fell asleep.

Sabo smiled to himself and got to work.

The Moby Dick’s library was as diverse and odd as the crew that inhabited it, but as he’d methodically searched the library he’d found what he wanted; old, hand written journals, some dating back hundreds of years. Books that had been banned and all copies ordered to be destroyed, old newspapers dating as far back as fifty years ago. Just what he needed.

Notebook in hand, Sabo returned to his spot in the far corner where he’d stopped the day before and got to work, searching for anything that he could use for his plan.

He was sitting crossed legged on the ground, scribbling furiously when Marco cleared his throat and leaned casually against a bookcase. “Are you planning on telling us what you’re working on?”

“What makes you think I’m working on anything?” Sabo tore his eyes away from the old captain’s journal he’d found and rubbed his eyes.

Marco leaned down and picked up one of the newspapers he’d found and scanned the headline. “Marine captain accused of inciting fishman attacks? Not exactly light reading, yoi.”

Not bothering to answer, Sabo shut his notebook and stretched out his wrist. He’d been writing for so long that it was beginning to cramp.

“I can’t pretend to even have a guess about what you’re up to, but you should talk to Whitebeard,” Marco sat the newspaper back ground. “He might be able to help.”

“I’ve considered it.” Sabo said slowly. Really, in the end there was only so much he could do by himself. For the plan to work, he needed someone like Whitebeard or Shanks—possibly both of them, if it was going to work.

“Do they know?” Marco wondered aloud, glancing back at where Ace and Luffy were still peacefully sleeping. “About whatever it is you’re planning.”

“I haven’t told them yet. No point in getting their hopes up,” Or worrying them either, Sabo thought ruefully. “They know I’m working on something, but they trust me to tell them when I’m ready to.”

Marco sat down and eyed Sabo thoughtfully. “You’re a bit of a puzzle, Sabo.”
“I am?” Sabo chuckled. “You know a lot more about me now, after you eavesdropped on us while we were with Garp.”

“I don’t think the three of you will ever cease to surprise me,” Marco shook his head. “You’re a good man, Sabo. Loyalty like yours is very rare in the world. You’re all quite remarkable, yoi.”

“They’re my brothers. That might not mean much to some people, but to us, our bond of brotherhood is unbreakable,” Sabo eyes slide from his snoring brothers to Marco. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep them safe.”

Even destroy the world, Sabo mused, shuddering.

“So long as you’re with us, you don’t have to protect them alone,” Marco said softly. “And even if Ace doesn’t join, we’re not going to stop caring about all of you. If it’s within our power to help you, we will.”

Sabo blinked owlishly. “Just Ace? What makes you think I’m not going to join?”

“Call it a hunch, though he might not have much longer to decide. We’ll probably start heading toward Paradise by the end of next month. We have some business to take care of at Fishman Island, so we have to head out toward there anyways,” Marco winked at him and stood. “Think about what I said.”

“Marco—” Sabo broke off, staring down at the notebook resting on his knee. “Ace and Luffy think they’re the lucky ones, because they met me and because I’ve stuck with them through everything. But really, it’s the other way around. Being alone—being alone is worse than anything the marines could possibly throw at us.”

“I understand better than you think, yoi.” Marco murmured.

“Ace can be a stubborn idiot sometimes,” Sabo muttered, feeling a twinge of hurt remembering the fight with Ace he’d had before they left the Calm Belt. “It takes him a while to come around, if you know what I mean.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Marco gave Sabo a small, amused grin before standing and sliding the chair back in its place. “Haruta is hosting a game night you would all enjoy in the main dining hall after dinner.”

“We’ll be there.” Sabo told him, glancing at his pocket watch. It was past the time he usually finished in the library, but he’d had a late start and Ace hadn’t slept well at all last night.

Insomnia was another side effect of narcolepsy that was being left unchecked, after all.

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Game night got a little bit rowdy and ended in an all-out free for all brawl. As a result, they were all forced to stay up until the dining hall was cleaned and the tables and chairs repaired. They didn’t get to bed until almost five in the morning, barely managing to open the door to their room and stumble into bed.

It was well past eleven in the morning by the time that the three brothers finally stirred.

“I think I bruised my spleen,” Sabo groaned, rubbing his side and kicking off his covers. “Who knew Monopoly could be so brutal. Are you awake, Ace?”

“Shut up Sabo, ‘m still sleeping…” Ace grunted, shoving a pillow over his head.
“Mmmm… come back dragon… wanna eat you.” Luffy said smacking his lips in his sleep, one arm dangling over the edge of the top bunk all the way down to the floor.

Still half asleep in the bunk below Luffy, Ace blinked sluggishly and swatted at Luffy’s arm. “It’d swallow you up in one gulp.”

“Would not!” Luffy jerked upright and almost fell out of bed. “Bet it’d taste good.”

“You get swallowed by *everything* Luffy,” Ace shifted and exhaled slowly. His eyes drifted shut, already almost asleep. “Is there anything that… hasn’t swallowed you?”

Luffy opened his mouth to respond, eyes flashing in annoyance, but Sabo managed to speak first. “Can we not have a repeat of this argument please?” Sabo sighed and forced himself to sit up. “I need coffee. And food.”

“Breakfast!” Luffy grinned and tumbled off the bed, landing on the floor with a loud thump. His earlier annoyance was completely forgotten at the mention of food. “Wake up! Ace, wake up. Wake up, wake up, breakfast, wake up—”

“Luffy, shut up!” Sabo and Ace growled, hurling pillows, sheets and blankets at him irritably.

Laughing, Luffy dragged everything they’d hurled at him out of their reach. “I’m going to leave without you and eat all the food.” He threatened, using one of the pillows as a shield as Sabo tossed dirty socks at him.

“You can’t eat *all* the food—” Ace paused and rethought what he’d been about to say. “Ugh, fine. I’m more hungry than tired at the moment. Now give me my pillows back!”

Twenty minutes and two more pillow fights later, they were on their way down to the dining hall when the ship suddenly trembled beneath their feet, causing them to stumble and almost fall. Overhead, shouts and the sound of cannon fire crackled in the air, the peaceful morning shattered instantly.

“We’re under attack! Divisions 1, 2, 3, and 16 report on deck for counter attack. Divisions 4, 7 and 13 you’re on defense!” Marco shouted through the ship’s intercom.

“Come on,” Ace turned and dashed down the hallway that would take them up to the poop deck, Sabo and Luffy hot on his heels. “I have a feeling they finally released to the newspapers that we’re here.”

“It could just be a random attack,” Sabo wished they had time to double back to their room and grab his pipe, but it would take too long. “It’s happened before.”

“This is us we’re talking about here,” Ace grit his teeth. “Of course it’s because of us.”

They burst out onto the upper deck in time to see Fossa slice a cannon ball in half. The deck was abuzz with activity as the Moby Deck came about to broadside one of the six pirate ships circling it like over eager buzzards.

Six pirate ships and four ships that could only belong to bounty hunters. There was no way this didn’t have something to do with them.

Ace grabbed a discarded newspaper and unfolded it, scrambling to sort through the mixed up pages
to find the title page. “Told you.” He breathed, showing the headline to Sabo.

“We knew this was going to happen,” Sabo gripped Ace’s shoulder. “This doesn’t change anything, Ace. We knew this was going to happen.”

The railing on the starboard side of the ship exploded as a group of bounty hunters burst on board. They were dealt with quickly and efficiently, but Ace could see that three of the ten ships were circling around again to fire.

“We can’t just stand around here… Marco!” Ace spotted Marco giving orders to a few dozen members of the first and second division and ran over to him, motioning for Sabo and Luffy to follow. “Whatever it is you’re doing, we’re going to help.”

Marco glanced at the three of them and grinned. “You’re late. I was expecting you up here five minutes ago, yoi.”

“Haru just had to stop and get his hat!” Wendy almost collided with Ace’s back as she skidded to a halt, panting heavily. “Oh good, you didn’t run off and do something stupid without us.”

“I told you we had time for my hat.” Haru grumbled, stuffing a long, colorful scarf up his sleeves.

“Your hat does literally nothing! The hat trick is useless,” Wendy rolled her eyes and adjusted her grip on her twin frying pans. “What are we doing?”

“Ace and Sabo, I want the two of you to take command of the second division and split off into two teams. You’ll take two of the bounty hunter ships each. Try not to blow yourselves up or drown, yoi.” Marco said wryly.

The ASL pirates stared at Marco in surprise.

“Ask Atmos for transportation. He’s on the launch deck.” Marco said as he turned to issue orders to his division.

Over twenty of the second division gathered in front of Ace and Sabo, all eyeing them expectantly.

“Well,” Sabo said, mentally calculating how much of a detour it would be to grab his pipe on the way to the launch deck. “I suppose we should come up with a plan.”

Staring at the ships they were supposed to attack, Ace took in a deep breath as the familiar pre-battle excitement and adrenaline rush hit him. A slow smile spread across his face. “I think I have an idea or two.”

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Marco leapt up into the air and kicked a cannon ball away from one of the masts. Flipping around, he shoved two bounty hunters off the ship and swooped down to tackle a third. Tossing the bounty hunter overboard as easily as he would toss a sack of potatoes, he glanced up in time to see Whitebeard swing his bisento and blow fifteen of the attackers into the ocean.

It was painfully clear that the bounty hunters and multiple pirate crews attacking weren’t allied. They were focusing their attacks on the Moby Dick and largely ignoring each other, lacking the strategic advantage they might have had if they were working together.

He shook his head. The pirates and bounty hunters were putting up a fairly good fight, but so far there hadn’t been any significant damage or injuries to the Whitebeards. They weren’t weak by any
stretch of the imagination, but they were no match for the Whitebeards. They were up against the crew of a Yonko, after all.

“How are they doing?” Izo asked, firing one of his pistols even as he reloaded the other.

Marco squinted, trying to spot the four ships he’d sent the ASL pirates and the second division to attack. “Nothing’s exploded yet.” Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, he couldn’t decide.

The four ships were obviously under attack, but the ship was too far away to see what was happening clearly. Not that he was worried. They were more than capable of defeating them.

As he watched, one of the ships suddenly changed course. It veered hard to port and fired on two of the other ships. It was chaos.

It happened in an instant; two of the bounty hunter ships came along either side of the one that had been captured, obviously intending to board it.

There was a blinding flash of fire erupted. Fire—Ace’s fire, exploded out from the captured vessel and punched a huge hole into the side of one of the ships trying to board them. A moment later, the other ship burst into flames as another jet of fire slammed into the wooden hull and incinerated instantly. The flames burst through the ship and out the other side, sending pillars of steam billowing into the air. Both ships sank almost instantly.

The last of the bounty hunters’ ships desperately tried to put some space between themselves and the one that Ace and the others had commandeered, but it was pointless. Even as its sister ships disappeared into the ocean, the last ship exploded, a blazing pyre as it sank beneath the treacherous waves.

Beside him, Izo whistled. “Not bad. Was it your idea or Pops’ to have him lead the second division?”

“Pops might have mentioned that Ace would get along well with the second division, yoi.” Marco grinned viciously as he tore into a pair of boarders, easily defeating them.

He leaped forward and cut three grappling hooks with his talons, mopping the floor with six of the boarders. He glanced around and saw that battle was over. The enemy ships had been destroyed and the boarders repelled or captured, all in less than an hour. Not bad.

He stepped over one of the defeated pirates and turned toward the starboard side of the Moby Dick to give orders to Izo. He froze when he spotted two more ships heading towards them, just appearing in the horizon.

There was a chorus of groans and complaints from several of the Whitebeards.

“Not more! It’s lunchtime. Thatch was supposed to be making my favorite today,” One of the pirates grumbled, backhanding one of the boarders without even turning his head to look. “Lasagna with those great little garlic rolls.”

“I don’t like lasagna. Too much cheese,” Atmos grunted, corralling a group of boarders over to Haruta who made quick work of them.

“It’s the Maelstrom Spiders and the Sun Pirates!” One of the look outs shouted in surprise. “It’s Squard and Jinbei!”

Marco unconsciously glanced over to the ship that Ace and the others had commandeered. They had come along side one the last ship still in the fight and was in the process of boarding it, bright bursts
of flames marking their progress.

“He knew, right? Squard knew about Ace.” Izo demanded breathlessly as the last of the boarders were cleared from the Moby Dick.

Watching as the ASL pirates and the second division sunk the final ship, Marco swallowed, an uneasy feeling settling into the pit of his stomach. “If he didn’t know before, he knows now,” Marco licked his lips, sweating despite the sudden drop in temperature and air pressure. A storm was brewing. How apt. “Tell Thatch to get up here.”

Nodding uncertainly, Izo grabbed the nearest member of his division and passed on the order to get Thatch. Pulling out one of his pistols from his waistband, he grimly reloaded them. “If he didn’t know…”

“Either way, we knew this day would come,” Marco stared up at Whitebeard, who was calmly watching the ships approach. “Get someone to start cleaning up the deck. I’m going to go make sure Ace and the others didn’t accidentally drown themselves when they sank that last ship.”

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Izo murmured, shaking his head and grimly watching the ships approach.

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It was refreshing to end a battle without having a ceiling fall on top of him or being thrown overboard or into a wall. It was also refreshing to win, which hadn’t happened as often as Ace would want to admit recently. His main sparring partner was the strongest man in the world, after all.

They were currently all crammed back into the small ship Atmos had given them to use and were heading back to the Moby Dick. Most of them were still jittery from the remnants of the adrenaline rush from the battle, laughing and congratulating each other on their success.

Ace glanced over at the members of the second division and grinned, heart pounding from the excitement of the victory. “Not bad for a bunch of mangy scalawags.”

Sira, one of the top fighters in the second division grinned back, knuckles bloody from the numerous brawls she had gotten into during the fight. She punched him hard on the arm. “I could say the same to you, brat. It’s been a while since we’ve gotten to fight without one of the other divisions. I almost forgot how much fun it was.”

“Why hasn’t Whitebeard picked out a new second division commander?” Luffy asked from where he was comfortably lounging against Sabo.

“There was one guy who almost took over, but he left and started his own crew about six months ago,” Sira explained, shrugging. “Not everyone wants to be a division commander and Whitebeard’s fairly picky about who he chooses.”

It was hard for Ace to believe that the position had been left open for so long, but he could understand why in a way. In addition to all of the added work and responsibility, becoming a division commander basically meant painting a big red target on your back.

“I hope you end up in the second division, Ace. We could use the firepower, heh.” Sira chuckled at her pun and slapped the person next to her on the back. It looked painful.

Ace jerked in surprise. “I never said I was joining, Sira.”
“Aren’t you?” Sira said with a knowing smirk, hazel eyes twinkling. Frowning, Ace stared at Sira for a moment before shifting slightly in the boat to turn away from her, feeling unsettled.

If Ace was honest with himself, he hadn’t given much thought about joining, or leaving. Thinking about it meant that he’d have to make a decision, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to yet.

What if he actually did join the Whitebeards?

He loved the ASL pirates, but he’d always known that they would be temporary. Luffy would set sail and eventually Sabo would realize that he wasn’t content to just be a pirate.

Sabo was different from Ace and Luffy in many ways, but the chief among them was that Sabo would never be content leaving the world as it was. He chaffed at all of the injustices he saw in the world, in a way that Luffy and Ace didn’t. It was only a matter of time before he finally snapped and went off to do something about it.

When that day came, Ace was fully ready to support him. But that left Ace alone with a crew of misfits that most likely never should have become pirates to begin with.

He glanced over at them, anxiety sky rocketing. Just like always, Wendy, Bam Bam, and Haru were clustered next to each other, sitting close to Sabo, Luffy and him. He’d wondered what they’d do if he actually joined the Whitebeards. Would they join too, or would they set out on their own? Luffy would stay on the Moby Dick until he was ready to set sail. Whatever Sabo went off to do would probably be extremely dangerous, so there was no way Luffy would go with him. Luffy would spend the remaining years until he turned seventeen safe with the Whitebeards. The Whitebeards clearly adored him even if he did cause a ridiculous amount of trouble; they would happily allow him to stay.

I’m not even sure if I want to join. Why am I thinking about this now? Ace frowned, stress doubling as he felt then familiar heaviness settle into his neck and arms. He was about to have an attack, in front of half of the second division.

Heart pounding, he reached over and as subtly as possible tapped Sabo’s arm three times, alerting him to what was coming. Then without a word, Ace leaned against Sabo, crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

He didn’t always get a chance to position himself for a cataplexy attack in time, but when he did, Sabo and Luffy were good at covering for him–much better than when he randomly collapsed with no warning.

Of course just as the attack hit him was when Marco swooped in and carefully landed on the side of the ship. He felt Sabo stiffen, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn’t lift his head and he was fairly certain that the attack was affecting his facial muscles as well.

"Ace fell asleep?” Marco asked.

“Luffy’s asleep too,” Sabo said, shifting slightly. “Who is that pulling alongside the Moby Dick?”

“It’s one of our allied crews and the Fishman Pirates. Apparently one of our islands is being attacked. As soon as you get back we’re setting sail, but I wanted to tell the three of you something first,” Marco paused. “Can you wake them up?”

“Good luck with that,” Sabo said lightly, squeezing Ace’s arm reassuringly. “They aren’t exactly easy to wake up when they’re sleeping.”
It wasn’t even a lie, really.

Marco sighed heavily. “Squard, the captain of the Malestrom Spider pirates has… history with Roger.”

Ace’s blood ran cold and his breath caught in his throat. Something ugly and bitter inside of him said finally, finally, finally. He felt like throwing up.

“History,” Sabo repeated slowly, sounding how Ace felt. “Meaning…?”

“Roger killed his old crew,” Marco stopped for a moment, measuring his next words carefully. “Squard’s held a grudge against him ever since. To be fair to Roger, Squard attacked Roger’s crew. I don’t know all the details, but Roger never took kindly to anyone who attacked his men. For him to kill Squard’s entire crew… he wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t been provoked. Roger was reckless and stubborn and he never knew when to back down from a fight, but he wouldn’t do something like that. Pops wouldn’t respect him as a rival if he was that kind of man. Ace is more like him than he realizes, not that I’d ever tell him that. He’d probably bite my head off.”

The comparison with Roger wasn’t flattering for a number of reasons, but the admiration and respect in Marco’s voice took Ace by surprise.

“So, how bad is this going to be?” Sabo asked, grip tightening around Ace’s arm.

“Squard might be angry, but he’s not going to hurt Ace. Not without going through everyone on the Moby Dick. We swore that we’d protect you while you’re with us and we take that seriously,” Marco said reassuringly. “We care about Ace, Sabo. It’ll be alright.”

Head jerking slightly, Ace reached up to rub his neck, trying to act like he was waking up from a nap. He blinked his eyes open and stared. “Marco?”

“I have something to tell you, yoi.”

Chapter End Notes

Squard has finally showed up and Jinbei is back!!! Things are going to go a lot differently with Squard than what happened in cannon.
Hope all of you enjoyed this chapter! I could have done a bigger fight scene, but considering what’s coming in a couple of chapters I decided against it.
Hopefully everything is clear in the section where Marco watches Ace and the others destroy the bounty hunter ships. I had to go back and edit that scene a bit.
Comments and feedback are greatly appreciated!!
Squard and Jinbei were already on the Moby Dick when they got back to the ship.

After a great deal of discussion, Ace managed to convince Marco that hiding from Squard wasn’t going to be good for anyone. Better to get it over with, Ace argued. Unable to refute Ace’s point, Marco led the way back through the ship to the quarter deck, knowing that was where Whitebeard and Squard would be.

Word that Squard was on the Moby Dick had spread like wildfire. They picked up quite an entourage of Whitebeards on their way through the ship, all of them offering him reassurances that everything would be fine. Ace felt something loosen in his stomach at the sight of them and he couldn’t help but smile; it was clear that any move against Ace would not be tolerated. Period.

It set him at ease even as it filled him with an entirely different feeling of dread. The last thing he wanted was to cause additional problems within the Whitebeards. If there was contention within their ranks, the marines, not to mention the other Yonko, would undoubtedly take advantage of it.

He wouldn’t be the reason the Whitebeards were destroyed.

Ace was visibly vibrating as they climbed up to the deck, Luffy and Sabo hovering protectively on either side of him. He shot them a glare and motioned for them to back off, finally fed up with them repeatedly bumping into him. “Don’t crowd me.” He hissed, motioning again for them to move back.

Instead of giving Ace his space, Sabo and Luffy merely grinned cheerfully at him and pressed closer.

Shaking his head, Ace drew in a sharp breath and climbed up the last steps to the quarter deck.

Thatch, Izo, Jozu, and four of the other division commanders were standing in front of Whitebeard’s chair, in deep discussion with him. Standing with them were three Maelstrom Spider pirates, a fishman Ace didn’t recognize, and Jinbei.

“Jinbei!!” Luffy would have tackled him in a hug if Sabo hadn’t held him back.

“Luffy! It’s good to see you.” Jinbei turned and flashed a brief smile at him before his attention was drawn away to the man standing next to him.

One of the men turned. His stormy eyes zeroed in on Ace instantly, expression darkening as his gaze connected with Ace’s.

Squard.

Ace met his glare unflinchingly, chin jutting out defiantly.

Squard said nothing. He scrutinized Ace’s face, undoubtedly looking for traces of Roger. For a long moment, they simply stared at each other as Squard reconciled whatever preconceptions he had with the teenager standing in front of him. Apparently, what he saw unsettled him, for some of the hostility left his eyes and he seemed distinctly uncomfortable and troubled.

The tension grew so heavy Ace was almost surprised Squard didn’t keel over under the weight of all the glares directed at him. Jinbei in particular looked ready to punch Squard if he so much as
twitched the wrong way.

He could get away with it easier than the Whitebeards, after all.

After a moment, Squard turned back toward Whitebeard, unfazed by the scowls directed his way. “It has to be Kaido, Pops. He’s the only one that would think building an army entirely of Zoan users a good idea.” He said, picking up the conversation as if there hadn’t been any interruption at all.

“They can’t all be Zoans. Some of them must be Minks, or something else.” Jozu countered, relaxing slightly and uncrossing his arms. Squard choosing to ignore Ace was better than the alternative. “It’d be suicidal to have a crew made up of all devil fruit users.”

“This is Kaido we’re talking about,” Thatch muttered, as Marco, Ace, and the others slowly moved over to stand next to him. “He’s not exactly the picture of good mental health.”

“What’s going on?” Marco asked Whitebeard, keeping his eyes fixed watchfully on Squard.

“One of our islands is being overrun by what seems to be the same all Zoan pirate crew that’s been attacking us for the last three months,” Whitebeard explained, brow furrowed contemplatively. “The Maelstrom Spiders received word and were heading there when they spotted us.”

“What about you, Jinbei?” Luffy asked, torn between his excitement at seeing Jinbei and the tension they were all feeling from Ace and Squard.

“I was actually coming to visit you and your brothers,” Jinbei said, smiling down at the boy fondly. “My crew is very eager to meet the three of you.”

“He wouldn’t shut up about you so we got curious. I’m Aladdin, Jinbei’s first mate.” Aladdin was a formidable presence, even standing next to some of the most powerful pirates in the world. He eyed Luffy with thinly veiled curiosity, as if he could figure out what Jinbei saw in the boy simply by staring at him.

“Are you a fishman too? Do you—ow, Sabo!” Luffy groaned and punched Sabo in the side in retaliation for the elbow in the stomach that had interrupted him.

“Yes, he is a fishman,” Jinbei chuckled, easily guessing what Luffy had been about to ask. He leaned down to whisper in Luffy’s ear. “Yes, he does.”

“Anyways,” Thatch coughed and clapped his hands together. He had been privileged enough to have been present when Luffy had asked Namur that same question, so he knew what Luffy had been about to ask. “Getting back to the subject at hand…”

“There has to be more of them than we initially thought. We’re dealing with more than one ship, according to reports from the island.” Squard mused, darting a quick glance cagily at Ace. He seemed as wary of Ace as Ace was of him. “That would explain how they managed so many attacks against our fleet in such a short amount of time, considering how spread out it is.”

“We’ve let this go on too long, Pops,” Thatch exchanged glances with Izo. “If it is Kaido, he can’t be allowed to continue these attacks.”

“Let’s deal with the fools attacking one of our islands first,” Whitebeard said, staring down at Squard. “I trust Ace’s presence here won’t be a problem, Squard?”

Ace’s breath caught in his throat as Squard once again turned toward him, face unreadable. Next to him, Sabo and Luffy pressed closer to him protectively and glowered darkly at Squard.
“You look like your father,” Squard growled abruptly, jamming his hands in his pocket. “Gol.”

“My name is Portgas,” Ace answered flatly, forcing himself not to fidget and meet Squard’s piercing, soul penetrating gaze. “Not Gol. I’m nothing like him. And I have just as much reason to hate him as you do.”

Eyes widening in surprise, Squard seemed to reevaluate Ace. A smirk slowly spread across his face. “It seems we have something in common after all, then.” He said slowly, tension slowly draining from his body. He glanced up at Whitebeard and everything changed; all the aggression and bitterness slowly drained away in the face of unconditional love. “As Pops has explained to me, a child should not have to pay for the sins of the father. So long as you stay out of my way and do nothing to endanger the Whitebeards, we won’t have a problem.”

Even the Whitebeards seemed surprise by this pronouncement. Whitebeard himself merely smiled proudly at Squard, giving him an approving pat on the back.

Ace grimaced slightly. His very presence on board the Moby Dick endangered the Whitebeards, which meant one way or another, there would be a problem.

“I’m relieved to hear you say that, Squard,” Marco reached over and squeezed Ace’s shoulder. “Ace would never knowingly do anything to harm us. His presence brings a certain amount of danger, but it’s nothing we’re not willing to face, yoi.”

“Regardless of what happens when the marines come after Ace and Luffy, it won’t be their fault,” Thatch declared earnestly, earning a nod of agreement from Whitebeard. “We accept the risks.”

Ace appreciated the sentiment, but wondered if they would feel the same way when something did, inevitably, happen.

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Smoke was thick in the air as they approached the island of the Winds, wafting towards the Moby Dick even though they were still miles away. The island was burning, dark smoke covering the island like dense, swirling storm clouds.

“We’re going to have to put out the fires as quickly as possible,” Marco muttered grimly under his breath. “If the winds pick up, the entire island might burn down.”

“Winds? Don’t you mean wind?” Ace asked with a frown, peering through a spyglass in search of the attacking ships.

“This island has more than one, don’t ask me how. It’s the Grand Line,” Marco drummed his fingers on the railing of the crow’s nest impatiently. “See them?”

“There,” Ace handed the spyglass over and pointed. “I might be able to help with the fires.”

“Three ships,” Marco shook his head and pocketed the spyglass. “I don’t like this, yoi.”

“We don’t know what’s on the other side of the island. There could be more ships,” Ace pointed out, unease slowly growing. “I don’t like this. If Kaido is on the island—”

“We’d know if he was there,” Marco interrupted. “He’s hard to miss, yoi.”

“Why hasn’t Whitebeard done something to stop the attacks? You all know that it’s Kaido, even if you don’t have concrete proof yet.” Ace glanced down at where Whitebeard was seated, in deep
“Listen to me, Ace,” Marco turned to face him, brow furrowing in thought. “A war between the Yonko is costly, not just to us, but to those under our protection as well. In addition to all the lives that would be lost—men and women who Pops considers to be his children, the islands under our protection would be in danger. Big Mom has been after a number of our islands for years, most prominently Fishman Island. If a war actually broke out, she’d certainly try to claim several of our islands while we were too preoccupied to protect them. And that’s just our people. A war between two Yonko could destabilize the power structure of the entire New World if it got out of hand, which is precarious enough already. That’s not something we’re going to rush into.”

“I understand,” Ace said softly, glancing downward. “I didn’t mean to imply anything—”

“I know,” Marco smiled and slapped him on the back. “You’re not the only one impatient with how Pops is handling this. But we all trust him enough to know that if he does something—or doesn’t do something, in this case, he has a good reason for it.”

“So he has a good reason for inviting me to join the crew?” Ace eyes skittered away from Marco as he spoke, shoulders stiffening unconsciously. “What happened today was nothing compared to what’s coming.”

“Pops wants you to be his son. That would be reason enough for us. He’s grown very fond of you over the past few months, you know,” Marco paused, absently staring up at the sky. “I don’t think you realize how much he enjoys your “sparring” with him or all of the breakfasts and late night talks together. But, you know what, Ace? We like you too and want you to be our brother, yoi.”

Ace blushed and ducked his head, cheeks, ears and neck all turning bright red. “What about Squard? Whitebeard talked to him apparently, but do you honestly think he won’t have a problem with me if I actually joined?”

Cocking his head sideways, Marco studied Ace curiously. A slow smile, pleased smile spread across his face. “I don’t think he’ll cause any problems, but his opinion doesn’t matter in the end. We’d accept you in seconds if you decided to join.”

“I—uh, that means—” Ace broke off, at a loss for words.

“I know, yoi,” Marco grinned at him and ruffled his hair. “We should head down and formulate a plan of attack before we actually reach the island.”

Gazing out towards the island, Ace frowned. “They’re going to know we’re coming. The Moby Dick isn’t exactly inconspicuous.”

“Surprise attacks are usually not our forte,” Marco said thoughtfully, glancing down at where Jinbei, Aladdin and Luffy were talking. “But we can have Jinbei and Squard take their ships around to the other side of the island to prevent the ships from escaping.”

“Oh maybe…” A grin slowly spread across Ace’s face as a plan blossomed in his mind. “How far does that river go inland?”

“All the way to the middle of the island, where the biggest town is—oh,” Marco grinned back at Ace as he realized what the teen had in mind. “You, my friend, are a genius, yoi.”

“Let’s go tell Jinbei and Po—uh, Whitebeard.” Ace blanched at the slip up, eyes widening in dismay at the implications of it.
“Ace--” Marco reached out, but the teen dove off the crow’s nest before he could stop him.

Grimacing as he landed roughly on the deck, Ace spotted Sabo and made a beeline toward him. Ace practically tackled him in his panic and immediately dragged Sabo away from where he’d been talking with Thatch and Curial.

“Ace, what the---” Sabo stared at Ace’s frantic expression worriedly, adrenaline spiking. “What happened?! 

“I almost— I almost called— I said ‘Pops,’ ” Ace hissed, glancing around furtively to make sure no one was close enough to hear them. “I said ‘Pops’ Sabo! We have to leave--”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Sabo pulled Ace closer to the ship’s bow and away from the bewildered division commanders he’d been talking to moments ago. “Calm down.”

Nodding, Ace sucked in several rapid breaths and tried to force himself to stop panicking. He searched for Marco and spotted him standing next to Thatch, watching them with obvious apprehension. Thatch and Curial were also eyeing them in complete bafflement, their concern for Ace and Sabo palpable and very, very genuine.

Realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

“I’m attached. I’ve gotten attached to them, Sabo.” Ace breathed, heart pounding wildly in his chest. He hadn’t noticed it right away because in his entire life it’d only truly happened a couple of times; first with Sabo and Luffy, and then much more reluctantly with Wendy, Haru and Bam Bam. When it did happen, it was rare and precious and wonderful, but this time… this time he didn’t know what to think.

“Oh, Ace,” Sabo sighed heavily and placed a warm hand on Ace’s shoulder. “Is that really a bad thing?”

Ace’s eyes skittered over to Whitebeard. “I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe you just realized this now,” Sabo sighed and ran a hand across his face. “I hate to be the one to break this to you, but it’s been fairly obvious to everyone else.”

“It has?” Ace did a double take. True, he’d grow to trust the Whitebeards and become much more comfortable around them, but he hadn’t realized how deep the trust, respect and affection he felt for them had grown. Hadn’t wanted to let himself realize it.

“Blatantly obvious. I’ve never seen you get so attached to anyone so quickly but me and Luffy,” Sabo stared at Ace contemplatively. “Ace, do you trust them? Really trust them?”

“Yes,” Ace muttered after a moment, almost grudgingly. “I guess I do.”

“Then you need to tell them about your narcolepsy.” Sabo declared firmly but quietly, after visually confirming that no one was close enough to overhear him.

“What?” Ace demanded, taken aback from the sudden change of direction the conversation had taken.

“You need your medication. Your narcolepsy has to be treated, Ace. Your symptoms have been getting worse and worse, to the point that it’s dangerous to leave you alone,” Sabo hesitated, eyes flickering over to Whitebeard. “If you don’t trust them enough to tell them that, then you shouldn’t
join their crew. After what happened on Glass Island, I know it’ll be hard for you to trust a doctor. It’s hard for me, too. But you have to, Ace. It’s too dangerous for you to leave your narcolepsy untreated.”

Swallowing hard, Ace stared down at his feet. “I can’t believe I’m even considering this. I never thought I’d actually want to--” He broke off abruptly and glanced up at Sabo searchingly.

“Luffy and I will support you, whatever you decide, Ace. I just hope that you don’t let your stubbornness get in the way of something good,” Sabo’s gaze turned toward the vast, endless sea, something almost wistful in his expression. “I trust them to take care of you, if you do decide to join.”

“What will you do? If I join,” Ace asked, eyeing Sabo knowingly. “Join the Revolutionaries?”

“How--” Sabo stared at Ace in surprise for a moment, and then laughed. “I don’t know, honestly. Probably. I’ve been in contact with them, you know.”

“We know. Considering how much time we spend together, it’s kind of obvious when you sneak off to do something on your own,” Ace sighed heavily. “Things are going to be so different if I do—you know--”

“Join?” Sabo’s eyebrows arched dolefully. “Everything would change anyways in a few years, when Luffy sets out on his own.”

“I know that,” Ace sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I know.”

They both fell silent, lost in their own thoughts.

“It is weird to think that one day we’ll all go our separate ways. I’m so used to the two of you always there.” Sabo flipped his hat off his head and absently brushed some lent off it.

“A little distance won’t be enough to break our brotherhood if the entire world can’t,” Ace managed a shaky grin, tugging Sabo into a hug. “You’re right though. If I can’t trust them enough to tell them about my narcolepsy, I shouldn’t join.”

“Well,” Sabo patted Ace on the back and turned him around until he was pointed toward where Marco and Thatch were standing. “Go on then.”

Ace took exactly two steps before he balked.

Sabo rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Ace--”

“I’ll tell them after the battle. They have enough on their minds already,” Ace said, backpedaling desperately as he started panicking again. “I don’t even know if I’m really ready to decide if I want to join them or not, either.”

“Fine, we’ll talk about this after the battle,” Sabo shook his head and rolled his eyes again. “But even if you tell them, it doesn’t mean you have to join. You need your meds, Ace. We don’t have a doctor on our crew, so we need to get your meds before we leave the Whitebeards, if that’s what you decide.”

“I know,” Ace sighed. Forcing himself to stop thinking about what he’d almost blurted out to Marco, he tried to focus on the task at hand. “Hey, Sabo, feel like a swim?”

“Oh boy. You have a terrible idea, don’t you?” Sabo grumbled, though his mouth was quirking
“Definitely,” Ace grinned. “Where’s Jinbei—Jinbei! How would you and your crew feel about a little swim?”

Jinbei exchanged glances with Aladdin. “We’re always ready for a swim, especially if it helps the Whitebeards. What are you planning?”

Ace grinned. If Jinbei had known better, he would have been very, very worried.

“How much further, Jinbei?” Sabo asked, rotating awkwardly in the bubble. Next to him, Aladdin reached over and carefully pointed his bubble in the right direction before he could collide with Bam Bam.

After a brief discussion, it had been decided that the bubbles would work better for the plan instead of traditional diving suits. Ace couldn’t remember what they were actually called, but they were the same bubbles that they had used to travel around on Fishman Island. They allowed better freedom of movement in the water than regular diving suits and could simply be popped once they surfaced, saving them the trouble of getting back out of the suits.

“Finally,” Haru breathed, wiping sweat from his brow. “I think I’m running out of air.”
“You’re not running out of air. Calm down.” Wendy scolded, bumping into his bubble and causing Haru to shriek.

“You breathe.” Bam Bam ordered serenely as she floated past him, the only one of the ASL pirates not struggling with the bubbles. She might as well have been doing summersaults compared to the rest of them.

“It’s not going to burst, Haru. And even if it did, one of these guys here would just whisk you up to the surface, right guys?” Wendy motioned at the twenty fishman swimming around them.

“It’s not going to burst,” Ace stated firmly, just as he jerked out of the way of an abnormally large turtle with a sharp nose. “Probably.”

“I feel so much better.” Haru grumbled sarcastically.

It didn’t take them very long to swim up the river. The fishmen were incredibly powerful swimmers and had no trouble propelling the bubbles along.

Catching one of the fishman staring at Luffy again, Ace nudged Sabo through the bubble and gestured at their brother with a jerk of his head. Luffy was making quite the impression on the fishmen, after apparently hearing about him from Jinbei for months.

Chuckling, Sabo shook his head. Watching Luffy charm people was a favorite pastime of theirs.

Twenty minutes after they entered the river from the ocean, they reached the edge of Wind Island’s main town, Gale. Even under water, they could hear the screams of the townspeople and the sound of battle.

Sucking in a deep breath, Ace popped his neck and glanced at Jinbei and his brothers. “Ready?”

Everyone nodded.

Casting one last glance at his brothers, Ace gave the signal.

All around him the fishmen burst upwards out of the river, causing the surface of the water to become completely distorted. It was a sight to behold; almost enough to make Ace forget that Jinbei and five other fishmen were about to launch him and the other ASL pirates out of the water. Jinbei waited exactly five seconds before carefully taking hold of Luffy’s bubble and launching him out of the water, Ace, Sabo and the other ASL pirates shooting up beside him.

The moment Ace burst up from the water, he leaned forward and summersaulted in the bubble. The motion propelled him forward to the river’s edge and he bounced a couple of times as he hit the grassy riverbank.

Using his momentum to bounce one more time, Ace flipped midair and landed on the back of a giant Zoan user that looked like a wolverine. Wrapping his legs around the creature’s neck, Ace popped the bubble and twisted his body.

As they fell to the ground Ace punched him in the face and knocked it out, untangling himself and rolling away seconds before the massive body would have crushed him.

Springing to his feet, Ace jumped into the fray.

It was a tougher battle; even with the Sun pirates helping them, they were still outnumbered, and many of the Zoan users were bigger and physically stronger than even the fishmen.
Before they’d even left the Moby Dick, Ace and Jinbei had divided their group into teams of three; Luffy, Wendy and Haru along with a six fishmen were assigned to protect and evacuate the civilians to a triage camp that the Whitebeards were going to establish. Another group was tasked with getting the fires under control, while supporting everyone with long ranged water attacks. The last group, with Ace, Sabo, Bam Bam, Jinbei and Aladdin and four other Sun Pirates were the offensive team, tasked with defeating the attacking pirates and driving them out of the town.

The rest of the Sun pirates had split up to hit several strategic locations by using the island’s tributaries to get inland, while the Whitebeards and the Maelstrom Spider pirates attacked the ships and took the beaches.

It took some adjusting to get used to the Sun Pirates’ water attacks, but after a few minutes Ace came to trust their aim. It helped that he was already slightly familiar with Fishman karate from his fight with Jinbei and numerous sparring sessions with Namur and a few of the other fishmen on Whitebeard’s crew.

Launching his fire fist attack, Ace glanced down as a sword passed harmlessly through his chest. Covering his hands with haki, he pulled the sword forward and sent a burst of flame along the blade to the handle and twisted it out of his would be killer’s hands.

As the pirate—a skinny man whose Zoan fruit looked like some kind of jackal, howled in agony, Ace sent a burst of flame that sent him crashing into one of the nearby stone houses with enough force to crashing through the wall.

Rubbing ash and sweat off his forehead, Ace turned to find his next target, but something sharp cut into his shoulder and shoved him dangerously close to the river.

Blinking in surprise, Ace pressed a hand to his arm even as he stumbled to a stop two steps away from the river. His hand came away bloody, but he had no time to process it before the next strike came.

He raised a fist to hurl an attack at whoever had managed to hit him, but whoever it was facing was fast, much faster than he had been anticipating. He wound up on his back, claw marks on his chest and neck and the wind knocked out of him.

Sputtering and coughing, Ace touched his neck and grimaced. If he hadn’t managed to mostly dodge whatever had gone after his throat, his jugular would have been torn out.

“Ace!” Luffy shouted in alarm, even as Ace avoided another attack by mere inches.

“Stay back!” Ace scrambled away from the water and caught sight of Luffy on the other side of the river. “We need you to take out the pistoleers!”

Luffy’s nose crinkled in frustration, eyes sharp and hard with determination. He wasn’t happy about being left out of the main part of the action, but after a brief hesitation Luffy moved off to deal with the pistoleers.

The moment of distraction cost Ace, but as the yellow blur’s claws dug into his back, he managed to twist around and land a flaming back kick. He also finally caught a good look at who was attacking him and managed to identify the fruit.

“A cheetah fruit, huh?” Ace murmured, scowling as the pirate disappeared in the blink. “You can’t be that fast.”

Three more attacks proved him wrong, but Ace grinned even as blood continued to drip from his
numerous wounds. “Got you.”

He shut his eyes and blocked out everything, the gunfire, the screams, and the roar of rushing water. Everything but the single, vapid voice he was listening for. He sensed the next attack before the cheetah was even close to him and whirled around with perfect timing to slam a flaming fist into the creature’s face.

The cheetah tumbled backwards. Ace didn’t give him a chance to recover and slammed him through a store’s large front window with a swirling flame attack.

Growling, the cheetah stumbled out of the store with difficulty, swaying unsteadily. Patches of his fur was burnt and smoking and he had numerous cuts from being thrown into the window, but he was still conscious and moving.

Sighing, Ace charged forward. Fire spread from his fist all the way up to his shoulder as he pulled his arm back for another fire fist attack.

His quarry disappeared moments before he let loose the surging flames, causing him to stumble and struggle to maintain control of the fire. The last thing the town needed at the moment was more building on fire.

Ace sensed the fist coming and jerked backwards. His retaliatory kick was dodged, as he had expected. The swirling burst of flames wasn’t.

The cheetah’s howl of pain was drowned out by the crackling roar of fire. He fell to his knees, charred and bleeding.

“I’m actually doing you a favor by knocking you out.” Ace muttered, punching him.

Satisfied that the devil fruit user wasn’t going to get up anytime soon, Ace brushed his hair out of his face and quickly took stock of the battle.

Sabo and everyone else seemed to be doing well, but Luffy was in trouble. Unable to keep out of trouble as usual and trying to protect two little children, Luffy had picked a fight with a giant wildebeest Zoan user.

For a moment, instinct took over and Ace took several steps forward before he caught himself. Gritting his teeth, Ace watched as Luffy dove forward and curled protectively around the two children. Ace’s hands curled into tight, white knuckled fists as he watched as the wildebeest’s hoofs trampled on Luffy.

He watched as Luffy sat up slightly, twisting his neck around to glare darkly at the wildebeest, eyes dark and dangerous with fury.

Luffy stood to his feet and calmly dusted himself off, sucked in a deep breath, and charged.

The wildebeest was more than twice Luffy’s size, but what Luffy lacked in height he more than made up for in speed and almost inhuman strength, even at his young age. He easily evaded the wildebeest’s attack and stretched out his arm to punch the Zoan user in the face.

The beast reeled back, stunned by the unexpected strength of the blow. Huffing and growling, he regained his balance and glared murderously at the tiny fourteen year old. Stretching out his arm and swinging it around rapidly, Luffy lunged forward. “Gomu, Gomu Pistol!!” he shouted, slamming his fist into the wildebeest’s stomach.
“How many times do we have to tell you not to call out your attacks!” Ace hissed, face palming. He and Sabo had told him over and over not to shout out the names of his attacks, but despite all their warnings and lectures he was still insistent on it.

Even with Luffy announcing all of his attacks, he still managed to land most of them. The wildebeest most likely didn’t have haki, otherwise the fight would have gone quite differently.

Though Ace didn’t doubt that Luffy would have been able to handle it even if the wildebeest was able to use haki; Luffy had been the one to figure out the best way to counter observation haki during their training with Rayleigh.

Luffy grunted as a hoof clipped the side of his head, but he caught himself in time to roll underneath the wildebeest legs.

Turning around, the wildebeest snarled and dug his feet in the ground and charged.

Standing his ground, Luffy stretched out an arm and tripped him. Rapidly retracting his arm, Luffy lunged forward and leaped into the air.

“Gomu Gomu Rocket!” Luffy shouted, smashing both fists into the wildebeest’s head.

The wildebeest flew backwards and collapsed boneless to the ground. He twitched but didn’t get back up.

Letting out a breath Ace hadn’t realized he’d been holding, Ace glanced around until he spotted Jinbei. He dashed over and blasted away three Zoan users with a dazzling eruption of fire. “How’re we doing?”

“We’ve evacuated most of the villagers and almost defeated all of the pirates in this area, but the fire is still out of control in the forest.” Jinbei said, karate chopping a Zoan user that appeared to be some type of iguana on the back of the neck. “You said you had an idea about how to deal with the fires..?”

“I have a theory,” Ace swallowed, glancing at the blazing forest. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he forced himself to stay in the present and not think about Dawn Island. “I could end up making things worse.”

“I seriously doubt it could get any worse, Ace,” Jinbei stepped over the pirate he’d just downed and walked over to Ace’s side. “At this rate, even if we get the fires in the town under control it won’t matter because of the forest.”

Ace nodded and licked his lips, mind abuzz. As a Logia user, he could create and control his own flames however he pleased. Fire that didn’t belong to him was a completely different matter. And this wasn’t a measly campfire or even something contained in one area; the entire island was on fire.

The fire consuming the forest was angry and foreign. Uncontrollable. Not at all like his own warm, friendly flames that danced across his skin and eagerly obeyed his every thought. This fire in front of him was hungry in a way that his wasn’t, destructive in ways that his fire had never been, not even when he had first eaten his Devil Fruit.

He would have said it wasn’t possible for him to put out fires on such a large scale that weren’t his own, if not for a late night conversation he’d have with Luffy.

Ace knew that most people who met Luffy were quick to peg him as stupid, or at the very least not very bright. But what Luffy lacked in common sense and regular ‘intelligence’ as most people
viewed it, was more than made up for with his out of the box ingenuity, quick thinking, and hair
brained, yet somehow brilliant strategies.

Which was why, when Ace had explained one night that he was trying to practice controlling fire
that wasn’t his, Luffy had sleepily suggested that Ace should simply make the fire his own.

The idea, so simple and brilliant, had been something Ace had been meaning to practice in safer
conditions for a long time, but he’d never had a chance.

Now, if things went wrong Ace could end up blowing up the entire town—maybe even the entire
island, if things went really bad. Still, there wouldn’t be anything left to blow up if the forest fire
wasn’t dealt with soon. There was only so much the Sun pirates could do to hold it back.

“Pass the word to everyone to go to the other side of the river,” Ace breathed, resolve solidifying.
“Just in case this doesn’t work.”

“What about you?” Jinbei asked, frowning. “If whatever it is you’re about to attempt is that
dangerous…”

“The fire can’t hurt me.” Ace said, turning to face the Warlord and offering him a shaky grin.

“Well.” Jinbei clasped Ace’s shoulder briefly before turning away to corral his crew to safety.

Lacing his fingers together and cracking his knuckles, Ace breathed in and breathed out, stretching
out all his senses to the crackling flames. He’d either succeed or burn the entire forest down. No
pressure.

“Everyone is safely on the other side.” Jinbei announced, coming up behind Ace.

“Good. You should move too,” Ace glanced back at him and sighed when the warlord didn’t move.
For a moment he was tempted to tell Jinbei to move somewhere he could see him, instead of standing
behind him, but he stopped himself. He could trust Jinbei. He could trust Jinbei to watch his back
instead of stabbing it. Besides, if something went wrong
Jinbei would be much safer behind him. “Okay, fine. Stay there and don’t move.”

Shutting his eyes, Ace imagined himself as a living flame. As a fire that could not be quenched.
Warmth and light. Beautiful, but deadly.

Ace opened his eyes. His entire body transformed into flame, eyes aglow with crimson.

Raising his arms, Ace stretched out and expanded, covering the forest in a sheet of blazing fire. He
stretched and spread for miles, from one end of the island to the other. He touched the foreign flames
and mingled and blended until they were all in tune with him-- until he was the fire blazing
throughout the island.

For a moment, the fires grew brighter and fiercer, pulsating in time with his heartbeat. Then he
inhaled and drew all the fire back into himself, decreasing and shrinking until he was back in his own
body, dizzy and exhilarated and strangely detached from his own skin.

The fires had been put out, smoke and ash still heavy in the air.
Ace fell to his knees, exhausted. Strong arms caught him before he could fall face first to the ground,
tethering him back to his body.

“Y-yeah,” Ace stared down at his hands and was surprised for a moment that they were flesh and blood instead of flame. “That was— I can’t believe it actually worked.”

“That was truly amazing! I’ve never seen anything like that,” Jinbei smiled in relief. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Ace nodded wearily. “Just completely drained. Help me up—”

“Ace! That was awesome!!” Luffy shouted, practically tackling his brother in his excitement to reach him.

“You were pretty awesome yourself earlier,” Ace grinned and shakily ruffled Luffy’s hair. “Not bad for the future Pirate King.”

“Shishishi!” Luffy beamed at him and wrapped an arm around Ace’s shoulder. “Well, of course!”

“Do you think you can stand, Ace?” Jinbei asked, one hand still resting on Ace’s shoulder. “We need to regroup and contact Marco to let him know our status.”

“Yeah, give me a hand,” Ace was shakier than he’d expected, but between Luffy and Jinbei they managed to help him get to his feet. “Where’s Sabo?”

“He’s taking the last group of townspeople to the triage camp.” Luffy responded, keeping a hand on Ace’s elbow.

“Good.” Ace looked around, but only spotted unconscious bodies scattered around and half a dozen fishmen working on tying up all of the rogue pirates.

Jinbei pulled out a mini telephone snail and dialed. “Marco, we’re finishing securing the area now.”

“Was that fire we saw cover the island Ace?” Marco asked.

“Yes, he put out all of the fires on the island at once.” Jinbei answered, sounding deeply impressed.

“Excellent work, yoi,” Marco said, voice slightly distorted over the telephone. “Perfect timing, too; Squard is near your position and he needs some back up.”

“We can leave now, but will he even accept my help?” Ace asked, scratching his head.

“He’s in too dangerous a position to object at the moment,” Marco replied. “He’s stubborn, but he’s not stupid enough to refuse help.”

“Right. Aladdin should stay here and keep an eye on things while we’re gone. Have him tell Sabo to come meet us,” Ace glanced at Jinbei, who nodded and handed him the telephone snail before going off to talk to his first mate. “You feel up for another fight, Luffy?”

“But of course! As if I’d let you leave me behind and hog all of the fighting!” Luffy grinned, cheeks smudged with dirt, ash, and bruises. “You’re the one who can’t stand up on his own.”

“I can!” Ace tugged his arm out of Luffy’s grip and stood on his own for exactly five seconds before he tilted sideways.

“Ace, if you’re hurt you should head to the triage camp right away! Jinbei is more than capable of helping Squard,” Marco’s voice rose in alarm, surprising both brothers. They’d forgotten he was still on the telephone line. “Did something happen?”
“I overdid it a little, but I’m not hurt,” Ace caught Luffy glaring at him and sighed. “I’m mostly not hurt. But I can still fight. Trust me.”

Marco’s sigh resounded clearly over the telephone line. “Trust me, he says. Alright, but if you’re not telling me the whole truth we’re going to have a very long conversation when you get back, yoi.”

Smiling to himself, Ace absently wiped at the blood dripping down his neck with the sleeve of his shirt. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m alright then. The last time you lectured me I almost fell asleep.”

“Ohoho, I should sic Jules on you for that one,” The telephone snail smiled menacingly, mirroring the expression that must have been on Marco’s face. “I seriously doubt you’d fall asleep during one of her lectures, yoi.”

“I fall asleep during Marco’s lectures too!” Thatch shouted somewhere close to Marco, followed by a loud thunk and a shout of pain.

“Ah,” Ace grimaced. “That won’t be necessary.”

“I thought not, yoi.” Marco said, sounding distinctly amused.

“Everything’s ready.” Jinbei announced, walking back to them.

“He won’t,” Marco said confidently. “Take care of your brother, Luffy.”

“Hey! I take offence from that--” Ace huffed in frustration when Marco hung up while he was still midsentence. “Rude.”

“Shishishi! You heard Marco,” Luffy grinned and patted Ace’s back a little harder than necessary, causing Ace to stumble forward unsteadily. “Hmmm… this will be hard. You always get into trouble.”

“You’re the one who always gets into trouble!” Ace stared at Luffy in disbelief, torn between amusement and wild frustration. “You’re the one who’s impossible to keep out of trouble.”

“You’re just as impossible!” Luffy retorted, starting to walk in the wrong direction until Ace and Jinbei both turned him around. “You’re almost always with me when I’m getting into trouble, so maybe it’s been you all along.”

Ace gaped at Luffy and sputtered, because he actually kind of had a point. It was rare for Luffy to ever be without at least one of his brothers, but he still managed to get into a colossal amount of trouble. “That—that’s beside the point! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Walking next to them, Jinbei chuckled. “I’m afraid you’re both hopeless trouble magnets.”

Both brothers glared at him, looking like they both wanted to argue the point. Instead they both huffed and walked on in silence, sulking slightly.

“Luffy’s still more of a trouble magnet that I am.” Ace said at last, almost pouting.

“Am not!”

Beside them, Jinbei just laughed.
Writing the scene with Squard was really interesting, because the circumstances are so different from what happened in cannon. Whitebeard telling Squard about Ace before the newspapers released that the ASL pirates were with them and talking to him about Ace really helped him be prepared to meet him.
So far I've been super productive with my writing this year! We're starting to get closer to the end of this story.
Thanks for all of the awesome comments on the last chapter! You guys are awesome.
Comments/feedback are super appreciated!
Chapter Twenty One

They were halfway to Squard when Ace suddenly collapsed to his knees, face pale and breathing ragged.

“Ace!” Luffy shouted, crouching next to his brother in an instant.

“I’m okay,” Ace panted, feeling drained beyond anything he’d ever felt before. “Just need a minute.”

Pressing a hand against Ace’s forehead, Luffy winced. “You’re not okay. You feel cold.”

“I just need a minute,” Ace repeated stubbornly, using a tree to prop himself up. Almost instantly he was hit with a wave of dizziness. “Or five.” He muttered, sinking back to the ground.

“It has to be that technique you used to put out the fire,” Jinbei said, pressing two fingers to Ace’s wrist to check his pulse. “You need to sit and rest.”

“We don’t have time. Squard needs our help,” Ace bit his lip. “You need to go ahead without me.”

“I’m not leaving you alone like this!” Luffy objected instantly, crossing his arms defiantly.

“Luffy, you have to. Squard will just hate me more if he finds out I’m the reason he didn’t get back up,” Ace grimaced at the thought. “Some of the Whitebeards could die. You have to go. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I’m not sure about this--” Jinbei shook his head, regretting that they hadn’t taken any of the other Sun pirates with them. The three of them should have been more than enough backup for Squard, but apparently Ace hadn’t realized exactly how bad he was feeling.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Ace leaned back against a tree and sighed, clenching his eyes shut and digging his fingers into the ground as another wave of dizziness washed over him. “Sabo will be coming along any minute.”

Pursing his lips, Jinbei nodded reluctantly. “I’m calling Marco to send someone to come get you. Luffy, you stay here and watch over him. I can handle this myself.”

Ace grimaced, somewhat offended. “That’s really not--”

“I’m staying,” Luffy declared, ignoring the glare he got from Ace. He stomped over to Ace’s side and flopped down on the ground, crossing his arms and folding his legs underneath himself.

Jinbei nodded and stood. “I’ll be back soon.” He promised. With a final glance at the two brothers, Jinbei disappeared into the forest.

The two brothers remained silent for some time, Ace too tired and dizzy to muster the energy to speak. He shifted over to Luffy until his head was buried in Luffy’s shoulder and groaned miserably.

He blanked out, mind drifting in a haze of exhaustion. The next thing he knew he was laying on the ground, his head on Luffy’s lap. “Did I black out?” Ace asked, rubbing a hand over his eyes blearily.
Luffy still, one hand buried in Ace’s hair. After a brief pause, he resumed stroking his hair. “You were talking just now.” He said slowly, staring down worriedly at Ace.

“Oh,” Ace blinked. “How long has it been?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Luffy answered, hands balling into fists. “You’ve had four attacks already.”

“Oh. Guess I really need that medication, huh?” Ace thought about sitting up, but decided that he didn’t have the energy.

His eyes slipped shut and he grimaced. Increased daytime drowsiness combined with all his other narcolepsy symptoms and the absolute exhaustion from trying out an untested technique was hitting his body brutally and it was all he could do to stay awake.

He zoned out for an undiscernible amount of time, jerking up slightly as he came back to awareness in the midst of a mild cataplexy attack affecting his facial muscles.

“You’re an idiot, Ace,” Luffy said, trembling slightly. “The Whitebeards are good guys. They wouldn’t hurt you and they don’t care who your father is. Some of them even think Roger was a cool guy, just like me! Stop being a stubborn idiot. You need your medicine.”

Staring up at Luffy in surprise, Ace chuckled. “I know, Luffy.”

“Good.” Luffy grunted, shifting slightly and gently shoving Ace back down onto his lap.

“Roger wasn’t cool though.” Ace muttered under his breath, drowsiness already dragging him back under.

“He was too! He was super cool! He was the freest man in the world and Whitebeard and Shanks both like him,” Luffy exclaimed exuberantly, ignoring Ace’s attempts to shush him. “He had good taste in hats.”

Choking back a laugh, Ace flicked Luffy’s leg and rolled over slightly so he could see Luffy’s face. “Well, I can’t say anything to that without threatening our brotherhood, so I’ll let it slide.”

Luffy chuckled and opened his mouth to say something, but froze when he saw Ace stiffen abruptly, the traces of sleep disappearing from his face. He listened intently and heard it; the sound of multiple footsteps approaching them, stomping their way through the charred forest.

Shoving himself up into a sitting position, Ace put a finger to his lips and concentrated. “Three people coming this way.”

Standing silently, Luffy cautiously peered around the tree they were sitting under. “It’s more of the Zoo pirates.”

“Zoo…?” Ace pinched the bridge of his nose and bit back a chuckle. He decided it wasn’t worth the energy to correct him. “We have to take them out.”

Luffy chuckled and opened his mouth to say something, but froze when he saw Ace stiffen abruptly, the traces of sleep disappearing from his face. He listened intently and heard it; the sound of multiple footsteps approaching them, stomping their way through the charred forest.

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“Right. Leave it to me—” Luffy cracked his knuckles, stood up and took a step forward, but was pulled back by a firm hand on his shoulder.

“You’re not taking them on by yourself,” Ace stated firmly. “We’ll do it together. You go around that side and I’ll take this side. I’ll be fine.”
Luffy squinted at him skeptically, lips curling downward in disapproval. “Stop lying.”

“Alright, fine. I feel like I’m about to keel over any second now, happy?” Ace said with a scowl. “But I’m not letting you take them on without me.”

He clambered unsteadily to his feet and slipped around the tree, pausing just long enough to make sure the coast was clear before darting forward a few feet until he was in a better position.

He’d been on his feet for less than thirty seconds and he was already struggling to stay upright. It was only three of them, he reminded himself firmly. He could do this, despite the increasing dizziness and fatigue he was feeling. There was no way he could leave Luffy to handle pirates from the New World all by himself.

The last time he’d exhausted himself this badly was when they’d still been training with Rayleigh, but that hadn’t been because of his devil fruit. He’d over done it while practicing using his still developing armament haki in combination with his Conqueror’s haki to test his limits. He hadn’t been able to move very far for almost two days after that.

He wished that he’d had his devil fruit when they’d still been with Rayleigh. He’d never expected to eat one so he’d never paid much attention to what Rayleigh had tried to teach Luffy about them, which he deeply regretted now. They hadn’t visited him on Sabaody when they’d stopped there since they had been trying to keep a low profile, so he hadn’t been able to ask him then either. He silently determined that as soon as he was back on the Moby Dick, he’d talk to Whitebeard or Marco about it.

His narcolepsy wasn’t helping the situation any either. He’d had at least five attacks since Jinbei had left and there was a very real possibility that it could hit him again during the fight.

Normally adrenaline was enough to keep him from suffering an attack during a fight, but he felt completely drained. Even the danger of the approaching pirates wasn’t enough to kick start his adrenaline.

“Fast and quick.” He murmured, gritting his teeth and peering around the tree.

Peeking around the tree, he motioned for Luffy to wait for his signal to attack. Assuming they weren’t discovered first.

Sweat trickled down his forehead. He pressed the back of his hand to his face, shivering even as he was sweating profusely. His vision was wavering in and out and his limbs felt heavy and uncooperative.

A branch snapped. The pirates were close to them now, close enough for him to spring out behind of the tree and attack them.

Instead of attacking, Ace collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

***

Antsy for Ace to attack, Luffy leaned over to glance at the tree Ace was hiding behind in time to see his big brother collapse to the ground.

He didn’t hesitate. He sprang out from behind the tree and punched the nearest Zoo pirate in the face with his rocket attack, sending the sheep man flying into the monkey person beside him. He punched them again and again until he was sure they were knocked out, before shifting his attention to the third pirate that had escaped his initial attack.
The other pirate—a gorilla? An Ape? Luffy was never able to tell the difference—pounded his giant fists on his chest and charged.

The ape man was faster than Luffy had counted on and he had to roll out of the way to avoid being trampled just in the nick of time. The ape man’s arm smashed into the tree Luffy had been hiding behind and snapped it in half.

“Why is everyone in the New World so big?” Luffy grunted out loud as he dodged the ape man’s attacks, darting worried glances in Ace’s direction.

A fist caught him in the stomach in his moment of distraction upon discovering that Ace was still down for the count. The blow sent him flying backwards away from his helpless brother and crashing into a tree with enough force to knock it over.

Springing to his feet, Luffy weaved and dodged and found himself caught in a rare moment of indecision. He was torn between running to Ace to check on him and fighting the rampaging Zoan user in front of him, but there really was no choice. Luffy had to end the fight quickly; otherwise Ace would end up being crushed by him, or worse.

Decision made, Luffy decided that he was tired of dodging. He stopped moving and planted his feet into the ground and raised his fists. “Gomu gomu gatling gun!!”

The ape man staggered back, but otherwise seemed mostly unfazed by the attack. With an ear deafening roar, he charged headlong at Luffy, his eyes red with bloodlust.

Luffy stretched out one of his arms and pulled himself up into a nearby tree, narrowly swinging over the ape man’s head as he charged past. Leaping from a branch to branch, he grabbed onto a vine and swung down as the Zoan user paused to find him.

“Ahhahhhahhh!” Luffy cried out, swinging around the tree twice before slamming both feet into the ape man’s face.

The ape man teetered backwards, hand clutching at his nose. He growled and lurched forward, blindly lashing out with one of his giant fists.

Seeing the fist coming, Luffy released his grip on the vine and tried to twist around to avoid it, but he wasn’t fast enough. The blow hit him like a ton of bricks and sent him flying backwards into another tree. It shattered and snapped in half from the force of Luffy’s impact, sending wood splinters in all directions and toppling the tree with a terrible groan.

Half buried beneath a branch covered thickly with leaves, Luffy blinked and shoved it off with a grunt. He sprang to his feet and leapt backwards as the ape man’s foot stomped on where he had just been, stretching out his leg for his whip attack. He smacked the ape man in the stomach with all his might, but the ape man merely grunted and charged forward.

Leaping backwards until he had a good distance between himself and the ape man, Luffy struggled to come up with an idea to defeat the Zoan user. In terms of strength alone, Luffy could tell that he was outmatched. If he were a few years older, it would have been different. As it was, he doubted that he was strong enough to do enough damage to actually knock the ape man out. Not to mention the ape man hit hard enough to hurt him even though he was rubber.

“Fight smarter, not harder, Luffy. If you can figure out your enemy’s weakness, you can even the playing field, giving you a chance to defeat even those stronger than yourself.” Rayleigh’s words from one of their private training sessions echoed in his mind, spurring him to not just depend on the
strength of his fists.

He ran away until he was a good distance away from the pursuing pirate stopped and pressed a hand to his head, concentrating on coming up with an idea that he could use to defeat his enemy.

“Mmhmmm…” Luffy bent over, eyebrows creasing together in deep thought. His head hurt from thinking too hard, but he pushed through it. “Mmmhmmm… bananas! No, no… something else--”

“Just give up, little brat. There’s no way you’ll be able to defeat me.” The ape man growled, gaining rapidly on him as he smashed headlong into trees with enough force to bulldoze whatever was in his path.

Luffy yelped and took off running.

The ape man chased after him doggedly as Luffy ran desperately through the forest, still trying to think up something—maybe a new technique or anything else at all that he could use to gain the upper hand.

Twisting his neck around, Luffy glanced behind him to make sure the ape man was still chasing after him, which was why he almost didn’t see the cliff in time.

Untwisting his neck, Luffy’s eyes widened in surprise the moment he spotted the cliff, and the water below it. Planting his feet into the downward slanted ground, Luffy struggled to stop in time, arms wind milling wildly.

Desperately looking around for something to grab, he spotted a rock a few feet away and stretched out, wrapping both arms around it. He slid halfway over the edge before he finally came to a stop, legs dangling precariously.

Heaving a huge sigh of relief, Luffy allowed himself to catch his breath for a moment, not bothering to pull himself up.

The loud thudding of the ape man’s footsteps drew Luffy’s attention upwards in time to see his opponent skid and stumble down the hill straight towards him. He didn’t seem to realize that he was charging straight toward a cliff until it was much too late. Deep tracks formed in the soft, grassy ground as he tried to stop, but it was useless. He wouldn’t be able to slow down in time and there wasn’t anything in reach to stop himself.

With an ear shattering roar, the pirate seemed to decide that if he was going to fall down the cliff, he would take Luffy with him.

Catching on to his intent, Luffy waited until the ape was almost close enough to grab him before pulling himself up to the rock he was still holding onto. The ape man lurched forward and tried to clamp onto him, but just managed to rip part of Luffy’s t-shirt.

The ape man plunged over the edge with a cry of dismay, followed by a large splashing sound.

Unwrapping his arms from around the rock he’d been holding onto, Luffy wiped sweat from his brow and gingerly walked back over to the precipice. He almost slipped and lost his footing, but he caught himself just in time. Falling to his knees to Luffy crawled the rest of the way to the edge on his belly.

He peered down and winced; the water was only up to the ape man’s knees and he was already struggling to get out of the water. Despite the terrible drain that he had to be feeling, he was slowly inching laboriously toward the shore, stumbling and panting. But all of that wasn’t what had Luffy
climbing to his feet excitedly-- the moment he had hit the water he had transformed back into a rather wimpy looking human, at least to Luffy's eyes.

Luffy didn’t wait a moment longer to watch the ape man struggle to reach the shore; he was already glancing around for a safe way to get down to the shore.

It would only take the Zoan user a few minutes to crawl out of the water, so he had to act fast. He had to knock out the pirate before he crawled out of the water.

Spotting a tree that was almost as tall as the cliff, Luffy ran along the edge until he reached it. With a great jump, Luffy sprang down onto the tree and leapt rapidly from branch to branch, ignoring the scratches and scrapes he gained as he raced down.

The now puny looking pirate had just managed to half drag himself out of the water when Luffy landed lightly in front of him. The pirate’s eyes widened and he froze instead of changing back into his ape form. Not because he was surprised that Luffy had jumped down in front of him, but because of the dark, stormy expression in the boy’s eyes. Eyes that were thunderous with anger, electric and mesmerizing in their intensity. Steel and something even harder and more unbreakable flashed in his eyes, holding the older pirate in place.

These were not the eyes of a simple boy. The Zoan user had been in the New World long enough to know that only too well.

He hesitated.

Luffy didn’t.

“Gomu, gomu… ROCKET!!” He shouted, hurtling his rocket attack straight into the Zoan user’s stomach.

The man went flying backwards, all the way across the shallow pond of water to the other side, where he slammed into unyielding stone that gave way from the sheer physical strength behind the blow. The cliff face cracked from the force of impact, sending shards of stone flying in all directions as the man fell limply to the ground, unconscious.

Grinning triumphantly, Luffy waited a few minutes to make sure that the Zoan user didn’t get back up catching his breath. Finally, when he was satisfied that the pirate was down for the count, he turned and started to climb back up the way he had come.

It only took Luffy a few minutes to reach the top of the cliff, but his problems only grew from there.

Realization hit with a terrible sickening dread as his eyes scanned the unfamiliar forest; he wasn’t sure if he remembered the way back to Ace. His flight through the woods had been full of winding turns and twists, which meant that trying to backtrack would be almost impossible since he didn’t see any sign of footprints.

Growling in frustration, Luffy took off running. “Wait for me, Ace!”

It took him the better part of thirty minutes to find his way back to the tree that they’d been sitting by when they’d first heard the pirates approaching them. There was no sign of the other two Zoan pirates that Luffy had knocked out, but he didn’t fully process the ramifications in his eagerness to reach Ace.

“Ace, are you awake?” Luffy shouted, dashing over to where he had seen Ace collapse. “I beat that ape guy--”
Luffy slid to a halt and stared down at where Ace had fallen in disbelief and panic.

The only sign that Ace had ever been there at all was an orange cowboy hat lying abandoned on the ground. Ace was gone.

***

Awareness was patchy at best, but Ace could tell that he was being dragged by his legs. His skin was scrapped and bruised as he was carelessly pulled across the muddy ground.

He would do something about it, but he was having a cataplexy attack. It was all he could do to breath.

The world went dark for a moment and the next thing he knew there were voices washing over him.

“This was not part of the plan, you idiots!” A deep, gravelly voice snarled, somewhere above Ace. “The rest of your fleet isn’t ready yet.”

“I thought grabbing him was the plan,” Another voice snapped. “You made an alliance with us, you do things our way.”

“No, it isn’t the plan at all, you idiot!” The gravelly voice said. “For this alliance to work, you have to listen to what I say. The plan was to wait until Kaido—”

Static filled his ears and he must have passed out or had a sleep attack. He twitched, body still largely unresponsive.

“—don’t know. He’s been snoring.” One of the voices said.

Something nudged him in the ribs. Ace forced himself to remain motionless as he struggled to take stock of the condition his body was in.

“Snoring? He’s asleep?” Another man asked, surprise coloring his gruff, guttural voice.

Ace was roughly kicked in the head, sending him hurtling back into unconsciousness.

“Better safe than sorry, zehahaha!” The gravelly voice said as Ace’s awareness disappeared beneath a sea of darkness.

***

Luffy groaned in frustration as he once again failed to locate Ace with his patchy observation haki. He just didn’t have enough control of his haki yet to search for Ace, especially since Ace wasn’t anywhere near Luffy.

He never should have run! But if he hadn’t, Ace might have gotten hurt and Luffy wouldn’t have been able to knock out the ape man.

He’d hoped that Sabo would have come after them by now; something must have stopped him from following them. He’d have to find Ace on his own.

He was just about to pick a direction at random to search for Ace, when Jinbei and Squard burst into the clearing he was standing in. They were panting and had obviously just come out of a hard fight, but they had come back for them.

“Jinbei!” Luffy burst out, practically in tears as he flung himself at the warlord. “Ace is missing!”
The warlord and the pirate captain next to him both blanched, exchanging looks.

“What happened?” Jinbei demanded, kneeling down so that he was eyelevel with Luffy.

It only took a few minutes to explain everything. When Luffy was finished, Jinbei was even paler, expression grim.

“Calm down, boy. It’s possible he left to look for you and the two of you missed each other.” Squard said, walking over to the tree that Ace had collapsed by.

“He would’ve found me if he had gotten up on his own,” Luffy protested, heart pounding in his chest as he tugged urgently on Jinbei’s kimono. “And he wasn’t feeling good enough to walk very far. I would be able to sense him.”

Jinbei stood and instantly pulled out his mini telephone snail and dialed Marco, while Squard knelt by where Ace had collapsed.

“He was dragged,” Squard murmured, eyebrows creased together in concentration. “I might be able to track him, Jinbei.”

“Really?!” Luffy asked, hopping from one foot to the other anxiously. “Let’s go, then!”

“Jinbei, we’re going ahead.” Squard announced, standing to his feet and swiftly following a trail that only he could see.

“I’ll catch up in just a moment,” Jinbei answered, busy apprising Marco of the situation. He also had to contact Alladin and by extension Sabo, if the teen was still with him. “Don’t go too far without me.”

Luffy and Squard muttered their agreement, but neither of them had really heard Jinbei. They were too intent on tracking down Ace. They followed the faint trail as quickly as they could, pace quickening the moment they realized that whoever had Ace was heading toward the ocean. By the end, they were outright running.

“I can feel him!” Luffy exclaimed, zeroing in on Ace’s presence. “Someone else is with him.”

Squard glanced over his shoulder. “Jinbei’s still a ways behind us.”

“I’m not waiting for him.” Luffy declared, leaping over a small creek and ducking under a low hanging branch.

“I wasn’t going to suggest it,” Squard replied, panting heavily.

Luffy glanced at him and realized for the first time that Squard was injured; he had numerous cuts and bruises all over his torso and arms and blood was still sluggishly dripping down the side of his head from a cut. He was also limping a little bit as well, but he wasn’t letting it slow him down.

He looked just as determined to find Ace as Jinbei did.

Mentally categorizing Squard as not such a bad guy after all, Luffy raced onwards, closing in on Ace and whoever was with him.

Luffy rounded a large oak tree and spotted them. Ace was on the ground, unconscious. Standing over him with a hand to Ace’s throat was a massive, dark haired man with a scruffy beard, crooked nose, and dark, dangerous eyes.
The man glanced up at him and Luffy felt a chill run down his spine. This man was bad. Very, very, bad.

He didn’t hesitate for a second. Luffy flung himself forward and punched the man as hard as he possibly could.

The man staggered back, groaning and coughing, but he was still too close to Ace for Luffy’s liking. Luffy pulled back his fist to strike him again, but before he could, Squard grabbed hold of his arm.

“Brat, calm down! This is Teach, one of our allied captains,” Squard said quickly, eyes narrowing in scrutiny. “What are you doing here, Teach? I didn’t know that you were in the New World.”

“Zehaha,” Teach laughed breathily, dark gaze sliding from Squard to Luffy. “I was in the area and decided to help Pops, of course! Found him and took out Kaido’s men who had him.” He gestured to Ace and then over to two men who were laying a few feet away from them.

Luffy jerked in surprise at the sight of them. They were obviously dead, necks twisted horrifically at an unnatural angle. Their eyes were still open, faces still showing the surprise that had flashed across their faces before they had died.

“How can you be sure that they’re Kaido’s men?” Squard asked, frown deepening.

Teach took a step back toward Ace, a slow smile spreading across his face as Luffy instantly stepped in front of Ace protectively. What surprised both of them was that Squard followed Luffy’s example and walked over to stand in front of Ace as well, arms crossed and expression threatening.

“I thought everyone knew it was Kaido. He’s been ordering his crews to attack the Whitebeards for months.” Teach said slowly, taking a few steps back.

“No one has found any evidence to link Kaido to the attacks,” Squard’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What makes you so sure it’s him?”

“Come look,” Teach ambled over to one of the men he had killed and pulled back the man’s sleeve. “See?”

It was Kaido’s mark, the tattoo a staunch contrast against the man’s colorless skin.

“We’ll have to let Pops know right away,” Squard murmured grimly, heart heavy. “In the meantime, we have to get Ace back to the Moby Dick for medical attention.”

“Agreed. I’ll help you carry him--” Teach motioned toward Ace, but was immediately cut off by Squard.

“That won’t be necessary. Either Jinbei or I will take him, if Luffy is willing to let me.” Squard glanced at Luffy for permission, who studied him for a moment before nodding sharply.

“Are you sure you’re up to that, Squard? Your leg is swollen.” Teach sounded genuinely concerned, but Luffy didn’t trust him for a second.

“I’ll manage. Jinbei will be here any second--” Squard was just about to bend over to pick Ace up, when Jinbei burst into view, panting harshly.

“There you are! I alerted the Whitebeards. You found him--” Jinbei froze when he spotted Teach standing a few feet away from Ace. “Oh, Teach. I’m surprised to see you.”
“Jinbei, it’s good to see you again,” Teach smiled brightly, ignoring the growl emitted from Luffy as he stepped around him and Ace to greet the warlord. “I heard what was happening and my crew and I came to help. I got here just in time to stop those two over there from killing Ace.”

“You have my thanks, friend. It’s fortunate you were in the area,” Jinbei said, walking over and kneeling next to Ace. “We have to get him to the infirmary.”

Luffy chewed on his lip and squatted down by Ace’s head. He brushed a strand of Ace’s hair out of his face and very gently patted Ace’s cheeks, desperate for him to wake up.

“Ace. Ace!”

Everyone sighed in relief when Ace’s eyes fluttered open. He blinked in confusion and tried to sit up, but was stopped when Jinbei pressed a large hand against his chest to keep him still.

“Ace, are you okay?!” Luffy asked, practically vibrating with nervous energy.

“What happened?” Ace mumbled, brow pinching together in confusion as he tried to piece together his blurred memories.

“Luffy said you collapsed,” Jinbei pressed a hand to Ace’s forehead and frowned. His skin was clammy and cold to the touch. “Do you feel ill? Are you hurt anywhere else that we can’t see?”

Blinking owlishly, Ace shook his head slowly. “Just… really tired. And confused. How did I get here? Was someone… dragging me?”

“Two of the Zoo pirates grabbed you,” Luffy explained, oblivious to the confused looks he gained from the three adults. “Ace, why didn’t you stop them?”

“Couldn’t move,” Ace said, mind still sluggish. Had the voices he heard been real or a hallucination? “Had an attack.”

“Attack?” Squard repeated, exchanging concerned glances with Jinbei. “What kind of attack?”

Ace glanced up at him and noticed Squard for the first time, shoulders stiffening instinctively. “Uhh…”

“Squard’s not a bad guy,” Luffy said confidently, patting Ace reassuringly. It wasn’t the same as saying he was a good guy, but it was still a vote in Squard’s favor. “He helped Jinbei and I find you.”

“Are you able to stand?” Jinbei finally moved his hand to allow Ace to sit up.

“Yeah, I’m okay now I think,” Ace responded, gingerly sitting up. He winced when he was immediately hit with a wave of dizziness. “Maybe not…”

Jinbei didn’t hesitate. He bent down and pulled Ace into his arms, lifting him with ease. Ignoring the teen’s embarrassed protests, Jinbei began walking. “You’re not heavy at all, Ace. Let me carry you. The sooner we get you to the Moby Dick’s infirmary the better.”

Sighing in frustration, Ace nodded reluctantly. He was obviously dizzy and started to look a little nauseous as Jinbei started walking, but after a moment he sagged slightly in the warlord’s arms. His lingering tension drained away as Luffy began chattering about the fight after Ace had passed out.

When Ace fell asleep again Jinbei and Squard both panicked and ran faster, thinking he had passed
out. Luffy knew better.

If Ace didn’t say something about his narcolepsy when they got back to the ship, he would.

***

It took them half an hour to reach the shoreline and the boat that Marco had sent to pick them up. Ace slept for most of it, the combination of bodily exhaustion and his regular day time drowsiness making it almost impossible for him to stay awake.

Jinbei and Squard were both bordering on frantic by the time they reached the Moby Dick, barely sparing any time at all to let the gathered Whitebeards know what happened in their rush to get to the infirmary. It would have been slightly endearing to see the two veteran pirates freaking out over his wellbeing if Ace had been able to stay awake long enough to enjoy it.

Teach slipped away as they burst into the infirmary, muttering something about needing to check on his crew. He promised to come pay his respects to Whitebeard later, but no one really heard him.

Whitebeard was waiting for them in the infirmary, eyes shining in concern as Jinbei laid Ace on the bed. “What happened out there?”

Ace tuned out Jinbei’s explanation and focused on staying awake, freckles more pronounced on his pale skin. He felt alright, just exhausted and a little banged up from all the fighting. He honestly couldn’t remember ever feeling such bone deep weariness before.

“Is he okay?” Sabo burst into the infirmary panting heavily, eyes searching desperately for his brothers. “Ace! What happened?!” he immediately began to run to Ace’s side, but was held back by Whitebeard.

“Stand back so the nurses can do their jobs.” Whitebeard said quietly, patting Sabo’s back reassuringly.

“Ace, how are you feeling?” Jules asked as she gently shoved Luffy aside and took Ace’s pulse, eyes cataloging every bruise and scratch.

“Exhausted,” Ace replied honestly, more alert than he had been the last time he’d woken up. “Dizzy. But I’m okay—”

“You’re not okay, Ace,” Jules cut him off sharply, concern flashing in her eyes. “You passed out and nearly got kidnapped. Jinbei also told me you passed out multiple times after they got to you. That is not okay, by any stretch of the imagination.”

Jules launched into an interrogation session of any and all possible causes for Ace passing out as she examined him. It was quickly established that whatever technique Ace had used to put out the fire was the main culprit of the dizziness and exhaustion.

He had majorly overdone it. Putting out the fires on the entire island would have been exhausting enough as it was, but he had never done anything like it before, so he hadn’t been prepared for how hard the after effects had hit him.

It wasn’t quite enough to explain why he kept passing out, or more accurately, kept falling asleep though.

Ace watched the faces of the people around him carefully as Jules drew blood from his arm and got him started on an IV, continuing to ask questions about how he was feeling and his medical history.
“Does anyone in your family have any medical conditions that I should know about?” Jules questioned distractedly as she ordered one of the nurses to have an analysis run on Ace’s blood.

“Uh... Roger had some kind of terminal disease, but I’m not sure what it was,” Ace muttered, wishing he had asked Crocus what Roger had when he’d had the opportunity. “I was told by his doctor that the chances of me catching it are almost nonexistent though.”

“I see,” Jules scribbled something on Ace’s medical sheet. “What about your mother?”

Ace squirmed where he was propped up against a pile of pillows, guilt spiking at the mention of the woman who had died to ensure that he had the chance to live in a world that never wanted him to be born in the first place. “I don’t know. She died after giving birth to me.” He mumbled, rubbing his forehead absently.

“What about you? Any medical conditions you haven’t told us about?” Jules asked, glancing up at Ace expectantly.

Ace exchanged glances with Sabo and swallowed hard, gaze dropping to the sheets clenched tight in the hand that wasn’t being bandaged by one of the nurses.

“Ace...” Whitebeard trailed off, head tilted sideways as he eyed him with an almost pained expression. “You can trust us.”

Peering up slightly, Ace was surprised at the almost sorrowful expression on the old pirate’s face. Whitebeard knew that Ace wasn’t telling them something and it was paining him to know that Ace still didn’t trust them enough with something as important as his health. The realization caused Ace’s eyes to sting.

He didn’t want to hurt the old man, or see him sad because of something Ace had done. It was painful. *Don’t look at me like that. You’re not supposed to be sad because of me.* Ace thought desperately, mind flashing back to his conversation with Sabo and the ultimatum.

Tell them or leave. It hurt to think about leaving the Whitebeards. He wasn’t ready yet. He wasn’t ready to decide if he wanted to join, but he desperately didn’t want to leave. I don’t want to go because of something like this.

“We’ll have to monitor him closely for the next twenty four hours,” Jules said at last, drawing Ace’s attention outwards as she stared at him, brow creased together thoughtfully.

“It’s possible he hit his head. I’m going to run a few more tests, so you might as well clear out. It’ll be a while.”

Whitebeard exhaled slowly and nodded. “Keep a close eye on him. Try to cooperate with Jules and the nurses, Ace. I’ll come back down when the battle is over to see how you’re doing.”

*It’s now or never.* Ace realized, sensing instinctively that if he couldn’t bring himself to reveal it now, he never would. He watched as Whitebeard turned away and started walking out of the infirmary. I don’t want to leave. The realization settled deep inside him. *I can trust them. I can.*

“Wait!” Ace blurted out, breath stuttering in his chest. He waited until Whitebeard had walked back to him to continue. “I uh... I know why I kept falling asleep.”

“Wait?” Jules repeated, eyes widening in surprise. “Jinbei said you passed out.”

“Asleep?” Jules repeated, eyes widening in surprise. “Jinbei said you passed out.”

“Now that I think about it, I thought I heard him snoring!” Squard said in surprise, scratching his
“It didn’t make sense for him to be asleep during a time like that, so I brushed it off.”

“Sleeping, hmm?” Whitebeard came as close to Ace’s bed as he could and knelt so that he could see Ace better. “Is that the D’s trait of falling asleep? Or something else?” Whitebeard had given Ace a perfect out. Staring up into Whitebeard’s wise, compassionate eyes, Ace knew instantly that he didn’t want to take it.

“I—when I was eleven I was diagnosed with narcolepsy,” He explained, words growing a little steadier the more he spoke. “I haven’t had any of my meds since the Romance Dawn sunk and—my emotions were pretty high today between Squard showing up and all of the battles and that can trigger it. Whatever I did to put out the fires only drained me more, so the symptoms hit me harder than what’s normal, even without the meds.” He explained under his breath, glancing at Sabo for approval and support.

Sabo offered Ace his proudest, widest grin and gave him a thumbs up. He probably would’ve been jumping up and down cheering for joy if he wasn’t next of the strongest man in the world.

Luffy on the other hand had no such constraint. “Finally!” He exclaimed, knocking into one of the nurses as he rushed other to hug Ace. “You did it! See, that wasn’t hard, was it? You trust them!”

“Shut up, Luffy.” Ace huffed in annoyance, even as he wrapped his arms tightly around him. He glanced up at Whitebeard and tried to gauge his reaction, watching him with a wary expression.

“What exactly is narcolepsy?” Whitebeard asked, glancing at Jules for an explanation.

Inhaling sharply, Jules regarded Ace with new found understanding in her eyes. “It’s a neurological disorder,” She said, pausing a moment before launching into brief summary of the symptoms.

Ace tuned it out, having had all of the information available about narcolepsy drilled into his head by Crocus on multiple occasions and focused on calming himself. Hugging Luffy was almost therapeutic, he thought to himself as Luffy nuzzled him lovingly.

Whitebeard grew still, face grave as he listened intently. When Jules was done, he turned to Ace, eyes still bright with concern. “How many of the symptoms have you experienced, Ace?”

Ace ducked his head, heart pounding rapidly. He didn’t like feeling this raw and exposed in front of other people. His narcolepsy was in many ways the most vulnerable secret he still had. The sleep and cataplexy attacks he suffered from left him defenseless in a world that was clamoring for his death and made his life even much more complicated and perilous than it was already.

Narcolepsy had felt like a death sentence when Crocus had first diagnosed him when he was eleven. In some ways it still did. But he’d learned accept that it was extremely likely he’d die in his sleep—or paralyzed from a cataplexy attack.

Mercifully, adrenaline was enough to keep him awake during fights and cataplexy was less of an issue when he was taking medication, but there was really no way to prevent one of the symptoms from effecting him at the wrong time.

He still remembered the first time they’d realized that something wasn’t right while they were in the Calm Belt; he’d fallen asleep sitting in a tree hiding from Rayleigh and broken his leg, something that would never have happened normally.

Rayleigh had set out to get Crocus, the doctor who had traveled with Roger during his last voyage, after treating Ace’s leg as best he could. They’d known something was wrong, but it was during the month that Rayleigh was gone that Ace started experiencing more and more of the symptoms.
He still wasn’t sure which was worse, being paralyzed and unable to move or the hallucinations. By the time Rayleigh returned with the doctor in tow, he’d been suffering from frequent panic attacks and Sabo and Luffy were utterly distraught.

“All of them.” Ace answered with a grimace.

“All of them?” Jules repeated incredulously. She shook her head ruefully. “I’m afraid you have terrible luck, Ace. You’re in the minority of narcoleptics and your case seems to be a severe case to begin with. I wish you’d’ve told us sooner.”

“Ace had good reason to be cautious about trusting you with this.” Sabo said somewhat defensively, stepping closer to Ace so he could squeeze his shoulder reassuringly.

Swallowing hard, Ace looked up at Whitebeard. “We had a doctor for a while on our crew. For about three months, everything was fine. Then one day, while we were on Glass Island, we were attacked by marines. Sabo was severely injured and I wasn’t much better off. The doctor… he--”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Ace’s hands curled into fists as all too familiar anger flooded back as if it had never been gone. “He almost killed Sabo with an overdose of sedatives.”

“He didn’t wake up for three days,” Luffy mumbled, hands absently reaching up to the brim of his hat. “It was terrible.”

“The doctor also poisoned my medication,” Ace shuddered. “Not enough to kill me, but enough to leave me completely helpless. Then he called the marines and told them our location. Except it wasn’t enough to keep me down because he didn’t take into account my fast metabolism, so when I tried to get help he stabbed me in the back. If it wasn’t for Luffy, Wendy, Haru, and Bam Bam we would’ve been…”

He didn’t need to finish the sentence. They’d have all been executed. Sabo probably would have simply never woken up; the IV had still been pumping sedatives into his body when they’d realized what the doctor had done. Ace probably would have bled out before the marines even arrived.

That week was one of the worst of Ace’s life. The poison left him in terrible pain, throwing up and dangerously feverish for days. He’d almost died from blood loss. Luffy and Wendy had put him in the bed across from where Sabo was sleeping comatose. They’d both been bedridden for days even after Sabo finally woke up.

“That’s why we don’t trust doctors,” Sabo said, rubbing his eyes as sudden exhaustion hit him. “Ace was poisoned one other time by a doctor before that. And we had to be careful not to tip off the marines that Ace had narcolepsy, so getting his medication was incredibly challenging.”

“And then you came aboard the Moby Dick,” Whitebeard murmured slowly, understanding in his eyes as he gazed fixedly at the three brothers. “With no way of getting the medication unless you went to one of our doctors.”

They nodded, expressions glum and somewhat miserable.

“Did you kill the doctor?” Jules asked roughly, furious that a doctor could do such terrible harm to his patients.

“No.” Ace shook his head. “He betrayed us, but he had an actual reason to do it. He was being blackmailed. He had a kid—a family, but he was a pirate. The marines said they’d pardon him and let him go back to them if he handed us over. If he didn’t they’d kill his family. Even if he—even if he almost killed us, I couldn’t… I couldn’t be the one to leave that kid fatherless. Besides, I don’t like
killing in cold blood. We let him go and we arranged for them to be hidden.”

Ace had killed before and he knew logically that he been the reason that children had lost a parent or became orphaned, but there was something about the absolute pain and devastation in the doctor’s eyes, the desperate way he had pleaded for his family, that had stayed his hand.

The pain a parent felt being separated from their child wasn’t something Ace could understand. But it had made him wonder if either of his parents had ever felt that way about him. If Roger had cared about him at all as he went to his execution, even though he hadn’t been born yet or if his mother had died cursing the life that had cost her own. Rayleigh and Garp had both assured him that they had loved him deeply, that Roger and Rouge had been ecstatic when they found out they were having a child, but it was difficult to believe when he would never be able to find out for himself.

Ace glanced up and found the Whitebeards and Jinbei stared at him in astonishment, their expressions making him shift uncomfortably.

“Ace, listen to me,” Jules said after a moment. “I know that you have good reason not to trust us, but we want to help you. You need your medication. You have my word that the medication will be safe. You can even watch us prepare it if you want.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Ace said honestly, relief flooding him. “I do trust you. I’m trying.”

Jules reached over and squeezed his hand. “You’re a brave man, Ace. Now, if there’s nothing else, all of you but Luffy and Sabo should leave. We have some tests to run.”

Jinbei and Squard reluctantly cleared out of the room, expressing their relief that Ace was going to be okay. Whitebeard remained where he was, watching Ace thoughtfully.

His eyes were shining brightly, the pride and love in them taking Ace aback for a moment. “I’m proud of you, son.” He said simply, smiling down at Ace affectionately.

“Thanks.” The word ‘Pops’ lingered on the tip of Ace’s tongue as his eyes watered suspiciously, but something held him back.

There was still one more thing he had to do before he told Whitebeard that he wanted to join his crew. It would probably be one of the hardest things he ever did, but he knew instinctively that he had to deal with it before he joined the Whitebeards.

It was time to disband the ASL pirates.

Chapter End Notes

Hope all of you enjoyed this chapter! I know my take on Squard might not have been what you were expecting, but I hope you still liked it.

This story is officially a year old!! I can't believe it lol. It's so much longer than it was supposed to be it's kind of laughable. I was originally planning to have it be around 50,000 to 75,000 words, but now I'm at 132,000 and I'm still not quite done!

February and March have been amazingly productive for me. I'm almost done writing this! Only one or two more chapters left to write and an insane amount of editing to go!

Thank you all so much for all of the kudos and awesome comments! You're all amazing
and I've loved hearing from all of you :D
Ace missed the end of the battle and the subsequent cleanup and repairs to the island. He was locked in the infirmary for two days before the medical staff finally deigned to release him, after numerous medical tests and a new prescription for his narcolepsy.

He hadn’t had a chance to get bored during his forced stay in the infirmary, thanks to constant visits from the Whitebeards, Jinbei, some of the Sun pirates, and of course Luffy, Sabo and the rest of the ASL pirates.

It was the morning of the third day, right before he was released that Squard came to visit him. He shuffled into the infirmary hesitantly, almost balking before coming to a stop a few feet away from Ace’s bed.

“Are you looking for someone?” Ace asked needlessly, forcing himself to sit still.

“How are you feeling?” Squard shifted from foot to foot, question and mannerisms awkward and screaming discomfort.

“Better. Thanks for uh, asking.” Ace glanced toward the door and wished desperately that one of the nurses or his brothers would magically appear.

He watched wryly as Squard sat down on one of the chairs next to Ace and stared down at his feet. Ace suppressed a sigh. He had hoped that Squard would just leave him alone and tolerate him from a distance. Luffy had told him how Squard had helped them find Ace and even proclaimed him ‘not a bad guy.’ Different from calling him a good one, but a vote in his favor nevertheless. Squard coming to see him wasn’t a good sign.

The minutes stretched by as Ace absently fiddled with the edge of the page of the book Sabo had brought him. It was a swashbuckling adventure about pirates, treasure and a princess, interesting enough to keep him entertained. He’d been reading it aloud to Luffy and Whitebeard, who both enjoyed anything and everything to do with pirates.

Staring down at the worn spine of the book, he bit his lip. “Do you want something?” Ace asked restlessly, unable to stand the silence any longer.

“I came to tell you that…” Squard paused and glanced up at Ace for the first time since he’d sat down, eyes surprisingly earnest. All of the hostility and hate that had flashed in his eyes the first time they’d met was completely gone. “That I hate your father. I doubt I’ll ever stop.”

Ace stared at him in confusion. “I thought we’d already established that--”

“Wait, let me finish,” Squard held up a hand and inhaled sharply. “I hate him, but I don’t hate you. I did at first. You were easy to hate and it was easy to believe every single lie that the World Government spewed, easy to project all of my hatred for Roger onto you. But that all changed, the day Pops called me and told me that you and your crew would be staying on board the Moby Dick and hopefully becoming one of his sons.”

Shifting slightly, Ace couldn’t help but feel surprise that Whitebeard had told Squard that he wanted Ace as his son from the start. He wondered if Squard was here to tell him not to join the
Whitebeards, stiffening uncomfortably at the thought.

Not that Squard disapproving could really stop him.

“I was furious with him. I regret almost everything I said to him on that call, but most of all I regret that it took me so long to understand his words,” Squard straightened slightly in his chair. “We are all children of the sea. Who your birth father was won’t matter if you decide to become Pops’ son. It won’t. I’m not going to pretend that I suddenly like you, but— if you did decide to stick around, I wouldn’t object to it.”

Ace’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. “You—you don’t?”

“You’d be an idiot not to, honestly,” Squard said with a huff. “You’re not the only one that has a terrible parent, though you probably have all of them beat, even Big Mom’s kid.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” Ace demanded in bewilderment.

“Whitebeard’s planning to start heading back to Paradise tomorrow,” Squard stood, watching Ace closely as he spoke. “If you’re going to join the crew, you should do it soon.”

“That’s not an answer!” Ace scowled and crossed his arms as Squard walked toward the door.

“You interest me,” Squard said at last, pausing at the doorway and glancing back at him. “It’d be a shame if you didn’t join simply because you thought one of your future brothers hated you.”

Squard left the infirmary without bothering to look back, leaving Ace in stunned silence.

Thatch and Haruta came by to visit him twenty minutes later and he was still too shocked to speak, worrying the two division commanders. It wasn’t until they threatened to call the nurses that he managed to respond, and even then he was flustered and completely distracted.

He was still flabbergasted by the whole conversation when he was finally released in the afternoon, multiple bottles of pills for his narcolepsy and occasional bouts of insomnia stuffed in his pockets.

Ace entered the cabin he shared with Luffy and Sabo and slept for four hours straight. When he woke up from his nap, he gathered the ASL pirates.

They were still anchored off the shore of Wind Island, so it was rather gusty as they sat down in a big circle and made themselves comfortable. The section of the deck they were occupying was usually deserted because it was where Stefan, Whitebeard’s dog had his dog house. The area was perpetually covered in a thick layer of white fur, so it wasn’t a popular spot among the Whitebeards.

Stefan himself was dozing comfortably at Whitebeard’s feet, which meant they had the place to themselves, perfect for Ace’s intentions.

He listened to them chatting together happily, completely at ease with each other. They talked about any random thought that came to mind for half an hour, enjoying the light breeze and the warm sunshine and above all, the company.

After a while, they all began to cast expectant glances in Ace’s direction. Luffy, as usual, was the first to lose his patience, blurtng out, “What’d you want to talk to us about, Ace?”

“Yeah, Ace,” Sabo smirked, eyes sparkling in excitement. They’d already talked about it beforehand in the infirmary. “Do you have something to tell us?”
Shooting Sabo a glare, he glanced between the faces of his brothers and crewmates. This was going to be hard. He wasn’t just joining the Whitebeards, he was disbanding the crew.

“I don’t really know where to start,” Ace said slowly, scratching his head. “All of you… All of you have been so amazing. I never thought I’d meet anyone like you. I owe you my life—all three of us owe you our lives.” He gestured to either side of him where Sabo and Luffy were sitting and paused.

He was not going to get emotional. He wasn’t.

“You stood with us when the whole world was against us. We owe you a debt we can never repay-..” Ace blinked in surprise as Wendy sprang to her feet and motioned for him to stop talking.

“Hold on—just wait a minute. You don’t owe us a thing. None of you do. The whole world is against you, but I had no one in the world. No one cared about me. No one even cared that I left with you,” Wendy swallowed hard. “It’s the same for Haru and Bam Bam You gave us a place in the world and we love the three of you for it. Yes, there was danger and we almost died more times than I can count, but… the five of you are my family. That’s more precious to me than all of the safety and comfort I might have had if I’d stayed.”

Haru and Bam Bam both nodded solemnly.

“You guys…” Ace shook his head and swallowed hard. Any protest he might make about what he owed them would just be rejected, so he decided to let it go. “This—this is hard. I’ve… When we came on board, I was so sure about what we were going to do. We’d stay with them just long enough to get back to Paradise, maybe find a way to get some money to buy a ship, and leave. I didn’t think twice about joining; at the time, I didn’t think Whitebeard was serious when he asked me. But now…” He trailed off.

A part of him was still afraid to believe that Whitebeard actually wanted him to join his crew. Become his son. Ace could imagine it so clearly—going to Whitebeard’s cabin, asking him if he could join and being rejected. That Whitebeard would finally realize that Ace wasn’t worth it. Realize that Ace actually was a monster; tell him he didn’t deserve to live.

But there was a larger part that dared to believe that Whitebeard would embrace him with open arms. He yearned desperately for Whitebeard’s affection and trusted not just him, but his crew. He trusted them. It was a miracle, but it was true. He trusted them enough to reveal his narcolepsy, the most vulnerable secret he had left.

He didn’t want to leave. His desire was more than just wanting to join the crew—he wanted to become Whitebeard’s son.

“I’m going to join the Whitebeards,” Ace announced, the words feeling incredibly right as they left his mouth. “All of you are welcome to join as well, but I realize several of you have different goals that will probably mean going our separate ways, for a while at least. That is why Sabo and I, as co-captains of the ASL pirates, both agree that the crew should be disbanded today.”

There were several sharp intakes of breath, but it wasn’t from surprise or disappointment. Glances around at the faces next to him, dearer to Ace than his own life, he could see that disbanding was just as painful a concept for them as it had been for him.

“As co-co-captain, I agree as well,” Luffy grinned a little wobbly. “Ace really likes Whitebeard, pineapple and everyone and they’re good guys. They like Ace and don’t care who his dad is and Ace is really happy here! It’s good.”
“Ace, I’m so proud of you!” Wendy declared fervently, sniffling and rubbing her eyes. “I’m going to join too. Thatch has already told me I’m welcome in his division and he needs another chef—not that I was going to join if you decided you didn’t want to!” She hastened to add, sniffling increasing.

“I know, Wendy,” Ace smiled gently at her. Wendy had given up her old, peaceful life out of love for them. She’d barely met them and she’d given up everything to follow and protect them. Her common sense, stalwart loyalty, and excellent cooking had saved them all more than once, and in many ways had opened the way for Haru and Bam Bam to join. "I’m glad to hear that.”

“Well, if we’re disbanding I suppose I’ll go back to the circus, for a while at least,” Haru murmured thoughtfully. “Being a pirate was fun and all, but I think I’ve had more than my fill of adventure, at least for a while.”

Luffy made a disgusted noise and shook his head in disbelief. “How can you be sick of having adventures? Being a pirate and going on adventures with your friends is the best! There’s nothing better.”

“What happened to fulfilling your dream of becoming the best escape artist in the world?” Wendy asked curiously, gratefully accepting a handkerchief from Sabo.

“I’ll go back to the circus, stay for a few weeks, get arrested, thrown into Impel Down, and escape!” Haru explained, voice deadpan.

“Right,” Sabo shook his head and glanced at Ace. “Well, we’ve had someone we wanted to break out of there for a while. We’ll just have one more reason, I guess.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Haru shook his head and tutted. “Just wait. I’ll even rescue that bandit of yours. Dadan, right? You’ll read about it when it happens.” He steadfastly ignored the skeptical glances, mind already planning his grand escape.

“What about you, Sabo?” Wendy turned toward him curiously, her attempt at sounding cheerful somewhat forced.

“Well,” Sabo rubbed his forehead, almost knocking his top hat eschew. “Join the Revolutionaries, probably.”

“I thought your dream was to have your own pirate crew. What changed?” Haru asked.

“I’m not going to stand by and watch as the World Government tries to kill the two of you for no good reason and people are being enslaved and murdered and treated like trash just because they won’t born nobles or because of the blood running through their veins. I love the idea of being a pirate, but I can’t just… do nothing. Not with what I know. I’ve been doing research and some of the things I’ve learned…” Sabo trailed off and shrugged, the intensity that had blazed in his eyes dying down like embers of a fire about to be stoked.

Expression softening, Ace sighed heavily. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from Sabo’s face as a passion took hold of him that he and Luffy couldn’t quite understand. He’d seen it in Sabo over the last few years, a tiny seed of discontent, of restlessness. The need to do something more, to be something more than just be a pirate.

“I can’t just do nothing.” Sabo repeated desperately, eyes searching Ace and Luffy for understanding.

“Sabo is a hero,” Luffy said abruptly, earning surprised looks from both of his brothers. “A pirate just wants freedom for themselves and their crew, but a hero wants freedom for everyone.”
Sabo’s expression twisted into something sour and his ears turned red. He glanced away, mouth turning downward unhappily. “I—I don’t know about being a hero—”

“You are though,” Ace interjected, a slow smile spreading across his face. “A big, stupid hero who wants to save the world from the World Government. You’ve certainly saved us enough times to qualify.”

“Yup!” Luffy nodded in agreement. “We’d both be dead without you.”

“Anyways,” Sabo coughed into his hand, still bright as a beet as something flickering in his expression that sent alarm bells off in Ace’s head. He almost looked… ashamed.

Ace opened his mouth to demand answers, but Bam Bam spoke first. Her voice was so quiet they had to strain to hear her. “I’ll be going with Sabo.”

Everyone looked at her in surprise. They knew very little about what transpired before she joined the crew, just that she’d been a Cipher Pol agent and her team had been killed because they refused to obey an order they morally objected to. How she had survived and what the order had been was a mystery. They really shouldn’t have been surprised by her proclamation, Ace realized. She had an every reason for wanting to take down the World Government.

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to have an ex-Cipher Pol agent join the ranks,” Sabo said thoughtfully. “You probably have information they could use.”

Bam Bam nodded. “I do.”

They fell silent for a moment, contemplating the separate paths that stretched out before them. It was lonely, knowing that they wouldn’t be together like before.

“So, that only leaves who gets Luffy.” Haru said at last, glancing between Ace and Sabo.

Ace reared back in surprise. “I thought he’d stay with me. He’ll be safest with the Whitebeards.”

“That might not be entirely true,” Sabo protested, equally taken aback. “He wouldn’t be any safer here than he would with the Revolutionaries. He could meet his father—”

“If he was safe with the Revolutionaries then why’d he give him to Garp?” Ace demanded, crossing his arms.

Sabo frowned and shifted a little so that he could face Ace without craning his neck. “Luffy could ask him that himself if he came with me—”

“What do you want to do, Luffy?” Haru interrupted quickly, poking him in the shoulder. “Do you want to stay with Ace or go with Sabo?”

“Hmmmm…” Luffy’s gaze darted rapidly between them, face crinkling in concentration as he tried to decide. He pressed a hand to his forehead and fell silent, face turning red from over thinking.

“Now look what you’ve done, you broke Luffy!” Ace scowled at Haru for a moment before turning back to Sabo. “He wants to be a pirate, not a Revolutionary. He should stay here.”

Chuckling, Sabo shook his head. “That is true. Luffy, I think Ace needs you more than I do anyways. Someone has to stay and help Wendy keep an eye on him, after all.”

Luffy nodded in agreement and grinned, sagging in relief that he didn’t have to choose between his brothers. “That’s true! Shishishi, not even all of the Whitebeards will be able to keep him out of trouble, so they’ll need some extra help!”
“You’re just as bad as me, Sabo!” Ace snapped, groaning. “If you took him whatever kind of secret base the Revolutionaries have would be destroyed within a week!”

“True,” Sabo grinned wryly. “Luffy’s not really cut out for the covert lifestyle anyways.”

“Just watch, he’ll declare war on the World Government a week after he forms his own crew,” Haru chuckled at the thought, but sobered quickly. “Don’t do that Luffy, seriously.”

“Everyone always blames all the trouble that happens on me, but Ace and Sabo are just as bad!” Luffy complained, pouting slightly. “We’re always together when trouble happens. It’s not always my fault!”

Ace and Sabo sputtered incoherently as Haru, Bam Bam and Wendy burst out laughing.

“He’s got you there!” Wendy shook her head. “Poor Luffy. Blamed for years and years for all the trouble you’re brothers have gotten into.”

“He gets into enough trouble all by himself without being blamed for ours.” Ace grumbled, sharing a disbelieving look with Sabo.

They laughed and continued talking and teasing each other for the rest of the afternoon. Dusk fell and they went to dinner, temporarily eschewing the company of the Whitebeards in favor of one last day as the ASL pirates.

As they finished their meal, Haru glanced over at Ace and asked quietly: “When are you going to talk to Whitebeard?”

“Tonight,” Ace shifted nervously in his seat before answering. “Right after he turns in.” He’d do it sooner, but Whitebeard’s bedroom had more privacy than out on the deck in case… just in case.

“We should do a toast,” Haru declared, raising his glass. “To commemorate.”

They nodded in agreement and scurried off to refill their glasses. Returning to the table, they all squashed together as close as possible, not wanting anyone else to overhear.

“I made jokes about being tired of adventures and sick of running for my life, but the truth is, I’m going to miss it,” Haru glanced at the faces around him and sighed. “I’m going to miss all of you. So much. It’s kind of ridiculous.”

“You have to come see us as soon as you break out of Impel Down to celebrate,” Wendy said, squeezing his shoulder. “Promise?”

Haru nodded. “I promise. Ace, Sabo, Luffy… please don’t let me rot in there for too long if things go wrong.”

“We’ll break you out.” Sabo promised solemnly.

“Write us a letter before you get yourself imprisoned. We’ll figure out a way to come get you and rescue Dadan at the same time.” Ace said, determining in his heart that he’d find a way to get Dadan out by the time Luffy turned seventeen. Together, the three of them would to bust her out. They owed her that much, at least.

“Now that my alternative escape plan is settled, a toast,” Haru said, raising his glass. “We might be going our separate ways, but we’ll always be family. A little distance and time won’t change that. To the ASL pirates!”
They clanked their glasses together, spilling juice all over the table. “To the ASL pirates!” They repeated solemnly. And just like that, the ASL pirates were disbanded.

None of them noticed the greedy, devious gleam in the eyes of the man sitting with three strangers in the far corner of the mess hall. The Whitebeards saw him, but thought nothing of it. He was a member of their crew, after all.

***

Whitebeard retired early that night. Ace walked to his cabin alone, heart racing in a combination of excitement and sheer terror. Despite his brothers’ reassurances that everything would be fine and Whitebeard would accept him without hesitation, Ace couldn’t help being nervous.

Though the excitement outweighed the nervousness and fear, he was still jittery and sweating. He glanced up at the starry sky, steps faltering. He thought about all of the clear nights like this one where he’d sat with Whitebeard and listened to the old man tell stories for hours. He was the best story teller Ace and his brothers had ever encountered and even held Luffy and his short attention span enraptured. It had rapidly become routine to seek him out in the evenings for stories, sometimes with blankets and hot chocolate on colder nights.

Whitebeard lavished his time and love on him in a way no one else had in his entire lives and Ace enjoyed every second with him, soaking it up eagerly. Ace adored him for it.

He’d hated the idea of having to spend an hour with Whitebeard every time they sparred for about a week. After that, it hadn’t seemed quite so terrible as Ace followed Whitebeard around and saw how he interacted with his crew on a daily basis. By the end of the first month, Ace would sometimes attack Whitebeard multiple times on purpose just to ensure that he could spend time with him. Whitebeard was undoubtedly aware, but had never said anything. More than that, he genuinely seemed to enjoy Ace’s company and even went out of his way to spend time with him.

“Pops,” Ace murmured to himself, a goofy smile lighting up his face. “Pops.”

Shaking his head ruefully, Ace started walking again.

He was less than ten feet away from Whitebeard’s door when a voice called out to him. “Hey, Ace. Do you remember me? I haven’t had a chance to say hello and see how you’re feeling, with all of the work being done on the island, zehahaha!”

Ace turned and spotted the bearded man that he had seen briefly on the island. “Oh, hey. You’re Teach, right?”

“That’s me!” Teach jumped down from the ship’s railing and walked over to Ace, eyes gleaming in the bright moonlight. “I wasn’t sure if you’d remember me. You were pretty out of it.”

“Yeah, I’m—better now,” Ace shifted uneasily and glanced at the inviting light slipping out from the bottom of Whitebeard’s door. “Thank you for stopping those guys from just dragging me off.”

“So of course! I might have my own crew now, but I’m still allied with the Whitebeards. Any friend of theirs is a friend of mine,” Teach smiled, but in the moonlight half covered in shadows it was far more sinister than it was probably meant to be. “Are you going to talk to Whitebeard?”

“Yeah. I should get going actually. I’ll see you around?” Ace took a few steps back, but Teach closed the gap and drew even closer.

“You will. I’m leaving tonight, but you’ll be seeing plenty of me,” Teach paused, head tilted and
gaze measuring. “Tell me, what do you think of Whitebeard?”

“He’s the greatest man I’ve ever met.” Ace said sincerely, glancing again at Whitebeard’s door.

“Zehahaha! I see he’s gotten to you too,” Teach grinned again. “It’s a pity he’s so sick.”

Ace froze, eyes widening in surprise. “Sick?” He repeated dumbly. He’d seen all of the medical equipment and the dozens of nurses swarming around him every day, but he’d never even dreamed that Whitebeard might be seriously ill. He was too full of life—too larger than life to actually be that sick. Right?

Nodding gravely, Teach moved closer to Ace and leaned down, as if he was about to tell Ace something secret. “Yes. They don’t like to talk about it much, but he only has a few more years left. It’s part of the reason I’m glad he took you in.”

“What?” Ace stared at Teach uncomprehendingly. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Ace,” Teach said slowly, the measuring look back in his dark eyes. “I don’t really mean anything by it. It’s just that I’m glad he’ll have the chance to die in battle, instead of wasting away from an illness. He deserves to go out in a blaze of glory, protecting someone important to him, not slipping away in a hospital bed.”

Ace felt like he’d been punched in the gut. He reeled backwards, eyes stinging. He felt like he was going to throw up. “And—he’ll get that chance because… because of me?”

“Yes! Fighting the World Government to protect someone precious to him… there’s no better way for the old man to go out,” Teach leered, gazing grimly down at Ace. “Don’t you think?”

*I’m going to be sick.* Ace stumbled backwards a step, but Teach grabbed hold of his arm and held him in place. *I can’t let him die because of me. I can’t. And if he’s sick— I can’t join. I can’t do this to them. I can’t be the reason he dies.*

“Ace—don’t think anything of it. I shouldn’t have said anything,” Teach paused for a moment. “There’s something else you should know.”

Ace forced himself to glance back at Teach as the huge man leaned down. He tried to take a step back, but Teach still had an iron grip on Ace’s arm.

Skin crawling, Ace tried to twist out of Teach’s grip, fight or flight instinct hitting him like a lightning strike. “Let me go.” He growled.

“Not before telling you this.” Teach insisted and this time Ace didn’t pass off the sinister look on his face as the fault of the shadows. He accessed his devil fruit and willed a burst of flame to flare up, but nothing happened. He kicked Teach in the stomach, but the man only grunted and didn’t budge an inch.

Something hit the back of Ace’s neck. Blinking in confusion, Ace yanked whatever it was out with his free hand. Vision blurring, Ace opened his palm and saw a tranquilizer dart. “You…”

Knees giving out, Ace fell into Teach’s waiting arms, tongue heavy and useless in his mouth. Ignoring Ace’s feeble attempts to fight him off and the incoherent cries for help, Teach roughly pulled Ace up until their faces were inches apart. “The Whitebeards have a traitor,” he hissed, breath foul. He laughed haughtily. “I just thought you should know.”
Hefting Ace’s limp body onto his shoulder, Teach climbed over the rail and jumped down to the small, dark ship waiting below. Tossing Ace down carelessly, he laughed again, louder this time as the ship pulled away from the Moby Dick. “Don’t worry, Ace. You won’t be alone for long. Your brothers will join us in a few minutes.”

***

“Danger! Danger! Wake up!” Someone shouted frantically from inside his room, jerking Edward Newgate out of the light doze he’d fallen into while reading.

He was on his feet in an instant, a feeling of unadulterated dread hitting him. He caught a glimpse of a vague outline of someone with a wooden hammer a moment before it ran through a wall, chilling him even further.

Edward knew that figure and what it meant that she had appeared to him.

The wall that the shadowy figure had disappeared into rumbled and exploded in a shower of wood shards and flames. The force of the explosion hit his bed and all destroyed it, throwing its smoking remains into the air.

His haki screaming at him was the only reason he was able to react fast enough to duck down in time, eyes fixed on the blast as the flames licked the floor and ceiling, charring it back as it hurdled toward him. Sweating and half blinded by the black spots dancing across his eyes, Edward quenched the flames threatening to consume him out of sheer will, a blue film spreading out from his body and quieting the flames.

He didn’t so much as twitch until he was certain that the fire was out. Climbing wearily onto his feet, Edward swept in the remains of his room and felt his face harden into something too dark and dangerous to be a mere scowl.

A bomb. Someone had planted a bomb in the room next to Edward’s, a wall the only thing separating the bomb from his bed. It was betrayal. Only one of his children would know to place the bomb in that exact location.

He burst out of the room as dozens of his children ran toward him to put out the remaining flames from the explosion. “Jiru, spread the word. We need to search the rest of the ship as quickly as possible for any other bombs or signs of sabotage.”

“On it, Pops.” Jiru nodded and ran off to alert everyone.

Edward glanced out at the ocean and for a moment he thought he saw a ship with a dark sail moving away from them, but before he could do anything a second and third explosion rocked the ship— one from the lower bowels of the ship and the other from one of the masts, fire lighting up the night sky and momentarily blinding him.

He blinked rapidly and when the spots finally cleared from his vision, the ship he had seen was gone. And as he stretched out with his haki to search for intruders, he realized with sickening dread that so was Ace.

***

It was just a coincidence that Thatch was walking by Ace, Luffy, and Sabo’s cabin that night.

He spotted the man kneeling down by their door, covering it with a thick towel and some kind of contraption that was sending white smoke into their room and didn’t hesitate. He drew his swords in
one smooth motion and charged, shouting.

The man turned his head and Thatch realized why no one had noticed that there was an intruder on board with horrible clarity; it was one of Teach’s crewmembers.

“Traitor!” Thatch growled, rushing forward in a blind rage and swinging his swords upwards to strike.

Something hit his chest, sending him reeling backwards in surprise. He glanced down and stared at the growing red spot on his chef’s coat.

He collapsed to the ground, coughing and gasping.

He heard shouts coming from somewhere nearby, but to him they seemed to be coming from a great distance. The man who had been kneeling at the boys’ door, filling the room with poison or who knew what else glanced past Thatch and ran.

The man disappeared down the corridor, followed by someone else with a long sniper’s rifle in hand. He stepped over Thatch and dashed down the hallway without glancing back once.

“Thatch!” Someone shouted, footsteps rushing toward him.

He struggled to push himself upright and failed miserably. He resorted to pointing with a shaky hand toward the most eminent danger. “The door—the door—” Thatch’s strangled, breathless words were cut off as a terrible, ear shattering explosion rocked the ship, sending Thatch tumbling sideways as the aftershocks reverberated in his bones and the wood beneath him.

Someone—Jozu, Thatch realized in his last burst of consciousness, threw himself on top of Thatch’s body protectively as a second explosion rippled through the air.

Jozu’s weight on top of him and the explosions still ringing in his ears was too much. Thatch passed out with his brother screaming his name over the din of shouting and the sound of water flooding the lower decks.

***

A wave of icy water hit Marco’s legs, sending him tumbling to his hands and knees as his strength was sapped from his body. Strong arms wrapped around his chest and heaved him backwards until the encroaching water was only a small puddle lapping at his feet.

“Thanks,” He breathed, turning to face his rescuer. “We have to get the devil fruit users evacuated from the lower levels right away.”

Izo nodded, the bottom half of his kimono wet from having to go into the water to fish Marco out. “We’re already combing the levels that are flooding. You need to get out of here, Marco. Leave this to us.”

“I know, I know,” Marco pressed a hand to his head and glanced helplessly at the flurry of activity taking place down the hall as the carpenters desperately tried to stop the ship from sinking. “Thatch was shot.”

“What?!” Izo grabbed Marco’s right arm and tugged him further down the hall and up a flight of stairs. “What happened? Is he going to be okay?”

“He must stumbled onto whoever Teach sent to get Sabo and Luffy,” Marco grit his teeth, Garp’s
warning flashing in his mind. “They shot him and escaped in the chaos of all of the explosions. He’s in surgery now and Sabo and Luffy are still unconscious. The doctors think it was just knockout gas, not poison.”

“Has Ace been found yet?” Izo asked worriedly.

Marco shook his head and punched a fist into a wall. The moment they’d realized that Ace was missing, they’d sent out ships to search for him, but it was already too late. The ship that had carried Ace away from them, Teach’s ship, was long gone. He’d been prepared for a speedy escape. “I can’t believe he did this! He was with us for decades. I don’t understand how he could do this to Pops. To Ace.”

“Try not to make another hole in the ship,” Izo urged quietly, expression a painful mixture of fury and sorrow. “We’re going to get him back.”

“We are,” Marco agreed, steely determination flashing in his eyes. “I have to find Pops. We have to go after him now and the Moby Dick is in no condition to go anywhere.”

Izo nodded. “We’ll get the leaks under control. We’re not going to sink.”

“If you see Atmos or Curiel send them to the command room, yoi.” Marco clasped Izo’s shoulder before jogging to his next destination.

Jinbei had departed yesterday, so he wouldn’t make it back in time to be of help. Squard had left earlier that morning, but he couldn’t have gotten that far since the wind had been almost nonexistent all day. They could call him back and use Squard’s ship to chase after Teach. The damage to the Moby Dick was too great; they wouldn’t be going anywhere. The rudder had been severely damaged and one of the masts had been destroyed in one of the explosions, leaving the other two in bad shape. It would take a miracle to get the ship sea worthy in a few weeks and they only had hours.

The command room was a flurry of activity when Marco stepped inside it. Several of the shipwrights were in the process of updating Pops on the damage reports coming in, while all of the communications officers were desperately alerting the fleet.

One of the shipwrights was actually arguing with Whitebeard, a feat that was not unheard of, but extremely unusual, especially in a crisis. “Pops, I really think you should reconsider! If we wait a few hours, one of our other ships can come and—”

“Can it be done?” Whitebeard interrupted, a dark, foreboding look in his eyes.

“Yes, but with the damage to the hull, if we set out now doing what you’re suggesting—” The shipwright looked around wildly for support, but received only helpless shrugs instead.

“We can’t afford any further delay. Go to the supply master and make the preparations.” Whitebeard ordered, a heavy weight settling on his shoulders as he spoke.

The shipwrights muttered an affirmative and silently left the crowded room, heads bowed and faces grim.

“Can we call Squard back and take his ship, Pops. We don’t have to risk the Moby Dick more than we have to, yoi.” Marco urged quietly as he approached the old man’s side.

“We had a ship in Kaido’s fleet two hours ago, along with all of our other ships in the area,” Whitebeard said, staring intently at the large map spread out on the table and the position
of all of their ships spread out across it. “Jinbei is on his way, but he’s a day away. I’m not going to risk Ace’s life by waiting.”

“This can’t be a coincidence, yoi” Marco murmured grimly, eyes flickering over the map as well. “Teach appearing right when one of our islands are under attack by Kaido, Ace being kidnapped three days later…Could Kaido and Teach be working together?”

“The notion has occurred to me,” Whitebeard’s hands clenched into fists. “I think Teach intends to turn Ace into the marines.”

Marco shook his head and cursed. It was tactically brilliant. With the Moby Dick damaged and the rest of the fleet under attack by Kaido, there’d be no one to stop Teach in time to do Ace any good. “What about Shanks?”

“We haven’t managed to contact him yet and we don’t know where he is,” Whitebeard sighed heavily. “If we’re going to save Ace, the Moby Dick is our only option.”

Neither of them mentioned the smaller vessels in their possession. It was too risky to send them out against Teach with Kaido’s fleet on the prowl. They would need the full weight of the crew to rescue Ace, especially if the marines were sending a fleet to get Ace.

“Even if we can get the leaks under control, we won’t have enough speed,” Marco’s frown deepened as he finally caught an inkling of what Whitebeard had in mind. “Pops, you can’t be serious—there has to be another way! If we used them the Moby Dick would be destroyed. You can’t seriously be considering it, yoi.”

“I’m deadly serious, Marco. I don’t see that we have another option. They have a good head start on us already and we can safely assume that Teach had a rendezvous location with the Marines planned well in advance,” Whitebeard turned his gaze to Marco, gaze burning with a familiar fury that Marco hadn’t seen in years. “I have a bad feeling about all this, Marco. A very bad feeling. We haven’t kept tabs on Teach as we should have when he left and apparently he’s been keeping his true character secret from all of us.”

“The Blackbeards,” Marco murmured, shaking his head at the name that Teach had chosen for his crew—and the moniker he was going by. “Shanks had some inkling about his true character, but I never would have imagined this…”

Whitebeard stood and walked out of the command room onto the quarter deck, motioning for Marco to follow him. “There will be time to process everything later. Right now, we have to go after him and rescue Ace. I’m not going to break my promise to that boy, Marco.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Pops.” Marco stopped walking as Whitebeard approached the mast that was the most intact, stretching out a hand to touch the weathered wood.

Marco glanced away, giving Whitebeard a moment of privacy as he silently stroked the mast. The bond between captain and ship was precious to begin with, but the Moby Dick had been their ship for decades. It was as much a part of the crew as anyone else in their ranks.

“What do you say, old girl?” Whitebeard murmured, leaning his forehead against the mast. “This will be risky, but I’m not going to give up so easily on you just yet. We’re going to go out together, remember? It’s not our time yet.”

The wind picked up. If Marco closed his eyes and strained to listen, he could almost hear a soft, almost familiar voice in the wind, as if he had heard it before in his sleep.
“Can’t leave our son in that man’s hands, can we?” Came the soft whisper of the wind. “I will carry you to him.”

Marco shivered and glanced up. For a moment he saw her; a small body sitting on the right side of the mast above where Whitebeard was standing, legs dangling down like a child and a tender, bittersweet smile spread across her face.

A Klabautermann. Marco thought he had seen her before a few times. Once when he’d been so badly injured it had taxed his devil fruit’s healing ability to its limits and another time when Whitebeard had been injured and the ship badly damaged. He knew several other crewmembers that had spotted her as well, though Whitebeard undoubtedly had seen her the most, even compared to the shipwrights.

It showed how badly the Moby Dick was damaged this time. Showed how dire the situation was.

There was a commotion behind them as Sabo, Luffy and the rest of the remaining ASL pirates burst out on the deck and charged frantically towards Whitebeard.

“How big was this slip before?” Marco demanded without glancing up, voice strained.

“About this big,” Sabo answered, motioning with his hands the size the vivre card should have been. “I haven’t seen it burn away this fast in a long time.”

“This is worse than I thought,” Marco glanced up at Whitebeard and held up the vivre card for him to see. For the vivre card to burn away so quickly… Ace wasn’t even going to make it to Impel Down at this rate. “You’re right. We can’t wait for another ship to get here. We have to go now, yoi.”

Whitebeard nodded and knelt down in front of Luffy and Sabo, regarding their worried faces gravely. “Listen to me, boys. We’re going to get him back. I gave my word that I would protect him and I’m going to keep it.”

“Do you know why Ace was alone outside Pops’ room?” Marco asked softly.

“He was going to talk to Whitebeard about something.” Sabo said, gritting his teeth in frustration. The one time they left Ace alone was the one time he desperately should have been with them. It was a cruel irony.

“Reject dials.” The shipwright from earlier, carrying a large sack in his arms. He set it on the ground and carefully began to take out the sack’s contents for Whitebeard to see.

One by one, he set the round, grayish white sea shells on the deck, numbering ten total.

“What are those?” Luffy asked in confusion, bending down to pick one up.

“I wouldn’t touch those, if I were you. Pops filled these dials himself.” The shipwright smacked Luffy’s hands away before he could accidentally blow all of them up. “We can reinforce the hull a
little to help with the kickback, but it’s not going to be pretty. Steering is going to be impossible as well. The rudder was damaged worse than we thought.”

“The burst length should be enough to propel the ship for about ten minutes before we’ll start slowly down, but there’s no telling how much distance we’ll be able to cover. This will damage the hull pretty badly, Pops. Possibly even destroy the ship.” One of the other shipwrights added grimly, wiping sweat from his brow.

Whitebeard glanced back at the mast and stood stiffly. “It’s the only option we have. Add all of the jet dials that we have. We can use them to steer. If Akainu is the one coming to get Ace, I doubt he’ll even bother to bring him back for a public execution.”

The ASL pirates collectively blanched, sharing horrified glances.

“We’re going to get him back, yoi.” Marco stated firmly.

“Install the dials as quickly as you can,” Whitebeard ordered, turning once again toward the remaining mast. “We’re setting out after Ace in an hour.”

Chapter End Notes

Soooo another cliffhanger.... It had to be done, I'm sorry. There will be one more chapter after this and then we'll be at the climax!!

Anyways, hope you like it!

I'm officially done writing this story!!!!! This is the first story I've ever finished so I'm pretty stoked about it. I cried a little when I finished it lol. Now I just have a TON of editing and rewriting to do.

Updates will still be once a month, but if I can I'll post the next chapter a little earlier. There's one plot thread that I have to do some pretty drastic rewrites, so it depends on how that goes.

Thank you all so much for all of the comments!! You guys are awesome as always :)
“How about it, Ace? Want to join my crew?” Blackbeard grinned darkly at his prisoner through the cell’s bars, completely unfazed by the murderous glare he was receiving from Ace.

“You’re insane,” Ace grunted, spitting out blood. “Whitebeard is going to kill you.”

“Poor Pops,” Blackbeard shook his head. “He must be taking all of this so hard. My betrayal, Thatch’s death, your kidnapping. Can’t be doing his health any good.”

“Don’t you dare call him ‘Pops’, you have no right!” Ace spat, leaning forward painfully until the chains holding his arms up were biting painfully into his skin. “And there’s no way you killed Thatch.”

“You’re right, I didn’t. One of my crew did,” Blackbeard eyed Ace closely. “Were you attached to him? What a pity. He died trying to save your brothers from me.”

Ace cursed him, lungs heaving painfully.

The Blackbeards had been surprised when Ace woke up a little sooner than expected from the drug they’d given him. His fast metabolism had woken him up, but by the time he had regained enough awareness to realize what was happening around him, the Moby Dick was a distant beacon, alight like a funeral pier.

The fight had been brief, but absolutely brutal. Ace hadn’t stood a chance, alone on a ship with a man whose power was darkness itself.

He was fairly sure that his right arm was broken—in addition to his ribs. Breathing was painful, and if he shifted the wrong way he could feel something move that was definitely not supposed to be moving. They’d given him a beating that left almost every inch of him covered in bruises, not wasting any time in attaching a sea stone cuff to one wrist. They had dragged him down to their brig and left him there half unconscious and bleeding. Ace wasn’t sure how long he’d been passed out, arms wrenched painfully above him. At least a few hours, because Blackbeard had already treated the burns on his chest by the time he came down to gloat in front of Ace.

Mind flashing back to the image of the Moby Dick engulfed in flames, he realized with sickening dread he probably wasn’t going to come out of this one. He’d only caught a glimpse of the ship, but he thought that at least one of the three masts had been destroyed, possibly two.

“I had hoped to get Luffy as well, but I’m sure you’ll do quite nicely for my objectives,” Blackbeard laughed and took a long sip from his already half empty bottle of booze.

“Tell me, Ace. What were you doing in front of Pops’ cabin?”

“Don’t call him that! You have no right.” Ace growled, bowing his head and grimacing as another wave of pain hit him.

“I have every right. I’ve been Whitebeard’s son for decades, after all!” Blackbeard’s eyes narrowed incredulously. “Don’t tell me you were actually going to join?! Did you really think that old fool could keep you safe? Or did you fall for his line? ‘Join my crew. Become my son.’”
“Shut up!!” Ace shouted, coughing painfully.

“You did! Zehahaha!” Blackbeard threw his head back and clutched his side. “Too bad Pops will never know. He’ll come after you, even if you aren’t his son, but he’ll never make it in time. I’ve made sure, believe me. The last thing I want is a confrontation with him if I can avoid it. By the time he arrives, I’ll be long gone!”

Something in Blackbeard’s tone unnerved Ace, sending chills crawling down his spine. “What did you do?” He hissed.

“In addition to inflicting crippling damage to the old man’s precious ship, you mean?” Blackbeard shrugged nonchalantly. “I may have told Kaido and his fleet where to find him.”

Ace felt like the floor had been pulled out from under him. No, no, no, no.

“Kaido should be more than enough to occupy the old man until Akainu is done with you,” Blackbeard grinned cruelly. “Don’t worry though. I understand Akainu wants to leave a message for Whitebeard and your crew. He’ll probably leave your body for them to find.”

Gritting his teeth, Ace resisted the urge to start struggling again. “You’re sick.”

Shrugging again, Blackbeard leaned against the bars and studied him. “You’re my ticket to achieving my goals, but I’m a patient man. I’ve waited for decades to put my plans into motion. If you decided to join me, I wouldn’t hand you over to the marines. You’d just have to turn your back on Luffy and the Whitebeards.”

“Is that all?” Ace snorted. “Listen to me, Blackbeard. I’d sooner die than turn my back on my brother, or Whitebeard, you hear me?”

“Brother,” Blackbeard blinked in surprise and shook his head. “Listen to you. Haven’t even joined the crew yet, but you’re acting just like one of the old man’s brats. You would have fit right in! What a pity.”

With that, Blackbeard walked away, leaving Ace alone to await his doom.

Luffy… Sabo… I’m sorry. It looks like I’m leaving you. Ace swallowed hard and tried to adjust himself to ease a little of the strain on his broken arm. Unless a miracle happened, he doubted the Whitebeards would be able to catch up in time.

*I’m never going to know, now. If it was good or not that I was born,* Ace reflected miserably. And it was in that cramped, dank cell that Ace realized for the first time in his life that he wanted to live.

***

They traveled using the reject dials all night, but were forced to stop to reinforce the hull, make repairs, and reposition the dials. The reject dials were slowly destroying the aft of the ship with every burst. Repositioning the dials ensured that the weakened sections of the Moby’s hull weren’t outright destroyed.

Sabo didn’t need to be a shipwright to know that if they continued at this rate, the Moby Dick would be damaged beyond repair. But the Whitebeards pushed onwards regardless, risking their ship and their very lives to save Ace.

How could he do any less? Though he was going to risk more than his life—much more.

It was easy for Sabo to slip away from all of the chaos in the early rays of dawn. Easy for him to
snag a telephone snail and find a quiet room.

The first call was simple. Thirty minutes later everything was ready.

The set up was easy. Actually going through with his plan was another matter entirely.

He stared at the telephone and pulled out his notebook. Flipping through the pages until he found the right phone number, Sabo blew out a sharp breath and threw his hat onto the table in front of him. Ran a hand through his hair.

The plan hadn’t come via a big epiphany. Rather, it had started out as a tiny, niggling idea. He’d started researching. Old newspapers, books that had somehow survived censorship, letters, word of mouth, government documents. He hadn’t had a real reason for all of the research at first, until he’d started writing letters to Shakky.

She’d told him about Flavance. Ohara. The dark, corrupt underbelly of the World Government—slave trade, human experimentation, assassination, espionage, wars, famines, manmade diseases, things the normal citizens of the world would never even hear of due to the tight control and constant censorship of all of the news that was released.

A thought had entered his mind. What if the world knew? The answer was simple. War.

If throwing down the World Government was as simple as exposing its sins, the Revolutionaries would have done it already. If the World Government had shown anything over the years, it was their ability to suppress information and give out misinformation. Releasing the information wouldn’t be enough.

And suddenly, a kernel of a plan came into his mind.

What he was about to do went against everything in his being, and yet… he was willing to do anything to save his brothers. Anything.

Just a few hours ago, his brothers had called him a hero. A hero would never even contemplate what he was about to do.

But I’m not a hero, Sabo thought viciously, leaning forward and dialing.


“Garp, how many times to I have to tell you that you can’t leave your recruits tied up in the middle of the Calm Belt as training—” Sengoku’s voice was filled with a frustration that could only come from years and years of having to deal with someone else’s insane antics.

“I’m not Garp, admiral.” Sabo said, voice crisp and cold.

“Who is this?” Sengoku demanded, voice tense and strained.

“My name is Sabo,” he said, heart beating rapidly in his chest. “I have a list of demands. You’re going to make sure they’re met.”

“Sabo. Garp’s Sabo,” the telephone snail’s mouth twisted into a snarl. “Why on earth would I do anything you say?”

Sabo leaned forward and pressed the mouth piece closer to his lips. “Because I have evidence of all of the World Government’s deepest, darkest secrets. And if you don’t do as I say, I’ll release it to the
“This isn’t going to work, Sabo. The World Government will never bend to the demands of a criminal. If blackmail was possible, someone would have done it already. You’re wasting your time.” Sengoku stated firmly.

Sabo glanced away for a moment, struggling to gather his nerve. This is for them, he reminded himself. “You’re right. But there’s a reason Dragon has never considered this. He wants there to be a world left when he’s done destroying the World Government.”

Threatening the World Government alone wouldn’t be enough. But they weren’t the only ones with secrets that could start wars.

“I have material on the Marines, the Seven Warlords of the Sea, and all of the Yonko that would destabilize the power structure of the world and turn them against each other. If released it would start a war—a war to end all wars—one been hasn’t been seen since the Void Century. Facing that kind of threat, I think the World Government will be more than willing to listen to my… ‘requests.’”

“You expect me to believe you have actual proof?” Sengoku demanded, voice hushed.

“I do,” Sabo said simply. “Check under your desk.”

There was a shuffling noise on the other end of the connection as Sengoku pulled out the packet that Sabo’s contact in Marineford had placed there a half an hour ago per his directions. He’d sent the packet to his contact months ago, just in case there was an emergency and he had to implement his plan early. Ace being kidnapped definitely counted as an emergency.

The shuffling noise continued as Sengoku opened the packet and read. Read and read and read, the silence speaking more than a thousand words.

He’d accumulated quite a lot of evidence, thanks in large part to Shakky, the Revolutionaries, and a few contacts he’d managed to make in the marines. The evidence was there and the threat it represented was real.

The World Government was trying to keep war from starting at any cost, but they knew it was inevitable. Controlling how, when, where, and why was a must for them. Avoiding another war like what must have happened during the Void century was imperative, and they were willing to go to any lengths to ensure that it didn’t happen— including allowing a seventeen year old pirate to blackmail them, until they could safely eliminate him and the threat he represented.

“What do you want?” Sengoku demanded tersely. Apparently the packet was enough to convince him that not only did Sabo have the evidence, he was willing to actually go through with his threat.

Here came the really tricky part.

“Three things—well, four. I want you to call off the fleet coming to pick up Ace and call off the hunt for him. I want Luffy’s bounty removed. And I want Curly Dadan released from Impel Down.”

Sabo said, voice filled with a confidence he wasn’t feeling.

Sengoku was silent for a moment before responding. “I know who you are and I know where you are. What’s to stop me from issuing a Buster Call right now?”

“I’m on the Moby Dick and the entire crew is furious right now. I wouldn’t risk giving them something to take out their anger on at the moment,” Sabo said airily, staring intently at the telephone snail’s expression for any sign of what Sengoku was thinking. “Second and more importantly, if
something happens to me or my brothers, all of the information I have goes public. All of it, not just the little sample packet I gave you.”

Silence again. If they couldn’t eliminate the threat and they couldn’t risk Sabo’s information getting out, then they would have to meet Sabo’s demands, assuming that his demands didn’t outweigh the threat he was issuing.

“I need time,” Sengoku murmured at last, voice heavy with exhaustion. “To research your claims.”

“You have two hours. The clock is ticking, admiral. If Ace is captured or killed…” Sabo trailed off, letting Sengoku fill in the blanks.

“I understand,” Sengoku paused for a moment. “I will contact you again in two hours.”

Swallowing hard, Sabo smiled grimly. “I’ll be waiting.”

He hung up the phone with a sigh and leaned his head against the cool wood of the table, face and palms sweaty.

Two hours. In two hours, he’d have his answer.

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Holy Land of Marie Jois

“We cannot bend to the demands of a mere pirate.” An elderly man with a long white beard growled, face pale and drawn.

“Be that as it may, we cannot allow the three powers to fall out of balance. If this pirate went through with his threat…”

“How do we even know that any of this is true? The evidence he has—”

“The evidence was meticulously laid out in the packet. Sengoku went over everything with me. The threat is real. If we do not give into his demands, he will release the information. If we try to eliminate him the information will be released by sources unknown. We cannot let that happen. This is a threat to the entire world. If this is leaked to the public, it would not just topple the three powers. The world itself would fall with it. If any of it is released, it would mean war. And this isn’t even all of the evidence that this pirate has. It would mean multiple wars, multiple civil wars. This cannot be allowed to happen. Such a war would destroy the world.”

“What do we do then? Ignore the threat of Roger’s bloodline still existing? Give Dragon’s son the chance to grow into a threat to us? Never before have we bent to the demands of a common criminal.”

“Make no mistake—this is no common criminal that we deal with. The death of the Celestial Dragon at the hands of Akainu, Ohara, Flavance, Punk Hazard, the oppression of the fishman race…the actions of Cipher Pol. This is just the tip of the iceberg, I fear. These are not the demands of a mere pirate. For the sake of the world, we must give in to these demands temporarily, until we can ensure that Sabo’s death does not trigger the release of his evidence. The risk is too great and we know too little of our opponent.”

“We wait then.”

“For now. Discovering what else Sabo knows and how he plans to release the information if he or
his brothers are killed is our top priority. We must maintain close surveillance of the Whitebeards and the ASL pirates. In the meantime, we will prepare. War is coming.”

“Have Sengoku order the fleet back. Executing Portgas will have to wait until we can access and eliminate this threat. I want to know everything about this ‘Sabo.’”

***

The entire ship was shaking when Whitebeard silently entered the room that Sabo was waiting in, drawing his attention from the telephone snail he’d been staring at for the past hour and a half.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re up to in here or do I need to guess?” Whitebeard asked quietly, stiffly sitting down on the floor beside Sabo.

“Do you trust me?” Sabo shifted his chair around so that he was facing Whitebeard.

“I do.” Whitebeard said, simply and without hesitation.

Wordlessly, Sabo flipped through his notebook until he found the page he wanted and handed it to Whitebeard. “Read that.”

Whitebeard pulled out his reading glasses and read. Sabo watched closely as the Yonko read, brow furrowing and expression darkening as he did. The silence was suffocating. It took all the restraint Sabo possessed not to fidget and demand to know what Whitebeard was thinking.

It felt like forever, but at last Whitebeard lowered the book and shoved his glasses up onto his forehead, expression troubled. “Sabo, what did I just read? Some of these events I was aware of…but this… this research being conducted by the World Government… how did you find this?”

“I’ve had a lot of help,” Sabo admitted wearily, rubbing the back of his neck. “The Revolutionaries, spies in the World Government and the marines, even two warlords.”

Whitebeard’s eyebrows rose in surprise, studying Sabo intently. “This information… you have more?”

Nodding, Sabo gulped. “Lots more.”

“For what purpose? Ohara, Flavance…” Whitebeard trailed off, realization dawning on his face. “Sabo--”

“I plan to blackmail the World Government,” Sabo blurted, glancing around quickly to make sure no one had overheard him. “Blackmail them into leaving Ace and Luffy alone.”

“And you feel that you have enough material to use against them that they would consider your threats a greater risk than Ace and Luffy’s existence?” Whitebeard asked, eying Sabo intently.

“Yes.” Sabo said simply, drained to his very core.

“You have actual proof?” Whitebeard demanded quietly, the air around him crackling with energy.

*This is the strongest man in the world*, Sabo thought to himself. It wasn’t that he ever forgot, but Whitebeard was someone he had grown to respect and admire, not just because of everything he was willing to do to protect Ace, but because he was in many ways a father figure to him. He knew who he was dealing with, but having the Yonko’s intense gaze fixed on him only reinforced the feeling of smallness he’d felt numerous times in the presence of Whitebeard and all of the division
commanders.  
I’ve got a long ways to go yet. Sabo acknowledged to himself.

“I do,” Sabo said, and began to explain his plan and his resolve to risk causing Armageddon for the sake of his brothers. “All of the evidence I have has been confirmed by multiple sources. They can’t ignore it. I’ve already arranged for the information to be leaked to the public if this goes wrong. All I’d have to do is make a phone call. And if something happens to me, I have contingencies in place. If even a few of the incidences I’ve researched were released to the public…”

“War,” Whitebeard sighed heavily and for once, Sabo thought he looked old. Old and far too world weary for someone who had been laughing heartily over Luffy’s antics the day before. “Who did you contact?”

Sabo blinked in surprise. He had been prepared for Whitebeard telling him not to do it, that the risk of destroying the world was too great, even for Ace and Luffy, not this. “Sengoku.”

“A good choice. Sengoku is a good man, but he won’t be easy to convince.” Whitebeard murmured, expression thoughtful.

Sagging in relief that Whitebeard wasn’t objecting to his plan, Sabo glanced at the telephone snail. “He’s already convinced. He’ll be calling back any minute.”

“So, what exactly do you have on me?” Whitebeard actually looked amused by the prospect of Sabo having blackmail material on him.

“It was a lot harder to find stuff on you than on some of the others—and what I did manage to dig up I found out before we met you, except for one thing; I know that one of Big Mom’s grandchildren is secretly on the ship. You’ve been hiding her for about six years now. If Big Mom found out—”

“It’d be war,” Whitebeard stared down at his cup somewhat mournfully before taking another long drink. “She’d consider it one of the worst betrayals imaginable that one of her children would choose me over her, no matter how horribly she treats some of her own. What else do you have?” Sabo took back the notebook and flipped to the pages that had information on Whitebeard and handed it back to him. “Read this.”

Whitebeard chuckled as he finished reading. “Apparently the skeletons in my closet are still safe for the most part. This is all you could find on me? I’m slightly disappointed—not in you, of course. But you’d think there would be more stories and rumors about me after all these years!”

“How can you be okay with this?” Sabo blurted incredulously. “I’m risking the entire world for two people. If this goes wrong, it would hurt you and your crew and all of the islands under your protection. How can you laugh about it?!”

The Yonko fell silent for a moment, eyes growing distant. “If it were anyone else but you, I would have stopped this instantly. What you propose is risker than you know, and I fear that your life will be in greater danger than you currently imagine possible. But, as I said, I trust you. This isn’t something that you decided on lightly. And I too want to protect Ace and Luffy.”

Sabo nodded and stared down at the floor.

Whitebeard rubbed a hand across his forehead. “How far are you willing to take this?”

“Far enough to convince them I’d actually release all of the evidence, hopefully.” Sabo answered, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to relieve the tension building in his shoulders.
“This is it...” Sabo rubbed the back of his neck again and motioned for Whitebeard to stay silent. Drawing in a deep breath, he picked up the phone. “You’re cutting it close, admiral.”

“Sabo, you idiotic brat, what are you doing?!” Garp’s voice through the telephone snail rocked Sabo in his seat. “I raised you to be better than this! What are you thinking?! You know what will happen if we call your bluff. You can’t actually be thinking about going through with this!”

“Technically, you didn’t raise me,” Sabo said, wincing the moment the words left his mouth. He shuddered as his mind supplied him with a perfect image of what Garp’s reaction must have looked like. “I’m doing this for Ace and Luffy. This isn’t a bluff. If my demands aren’t met, I will do it. First I’ll release just a taste of the chaos coming your way if you don’t give me my ‘requests.’ Maybe I’ll release the information of the illegal experiments going on at Punk Hazard, or start a war between one of the Yonko. I could also have four of the Seven Warlords resign. That would definitely get your attention—”

“Enough,” Garp snapped. “That’s enough. We get the idea.”

“How are you planning on releasing your evidence? It will never go to print in any of the newspapers.” Sengoku grumbled, a challenge in his voice.

“I don’t need to go to the newspapers. Did you know that it’s shockingly easy to highjack the broadcasting networks?” Sabo rested his elbows on the table and smirked. “The newspapers aren’t as secure as you think either. Once they’re sent to print, no one checks to see if anything additional was added. I could name a half a dozen other ways, but you get the idea.”

“Sabo. There’s no going back from this. You’ll be killed within the month,” Garp choked out. “You’d condemn the world to death?”

“For my brothers?” Sabo risked a glance at Whitebeard. There was no sign of judgement on his face. “Yes.”

“I recalled the fleet, but Akainu and his ships have disobeyed orders and are continuing on their way to the meeting place with Blackbeard,” Sengoku announced without preamble, voice grim. “The rest of your demands are being met as we speak. Garp is going to escort your bandit out of Impel Down to a place of her choosing. I trust that is acceptable?”

Gritting his teeth, Sabo glanced at Whitebeard, mind whirling. “Do you really expect me to believe that Akainu is ‘disobeying orders’?”

“You know Akainu well enough to know that he would if it meant destroying Roger’s bloodline. It’s out of my hands.” Sengoku said, sounding resigned.

“In that case, you won’t mind if I tack on another demand to the list.” Sabo said, leaning forward in his chair.

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Four hours later...

“See them?” Marco asked restlessly, watching Whitebeard peer through the spyglass they’d had specially made for him on his last birthday.

“It seems Teach has thought of everything,” Whitebeard said grimly, lowering the spyglass. “We
“...won’t be able to get around Kaido’s fleet in time to do Ace any good.”

“And we can’t fight our way through for the same reason,” Marco shook his head and scowled. “What are we going to do?”

They’d made good time with the reject dials, but it came at a cost. Every time the dials were activated, the horrible crunching sound of wood could be heard from the aft of the ship. The shipwrights shook their heads and monitored the condition of the ship with despairing expressions and extreme vigilance.

The ride was rough on the crew as well. They’d learned the hard way that every time they activated the reject dials the entire crew had to grab hold something. Several of the crewmembers on the deck would have been blasted over the side of the ship the first time they’d activated them if Luffy hadn’t managed to grab them at the last second.

“Couldn’t we just blast our way past them?” Sabo asked impatiently, eyes drifting to the sliver of paper in his palm. It leaped feebly in the direction that would lead them to Ace. Staring down at the disappearing ember in his hand, Sabo couldn’t help but wonder if they’d even reach him in time.

Marco shook his head. “If Teach tipped them off then they’ll be expecting us to try and slip past them. They’ll have something planned.”

“There has to be something we can do!” Luffy glanced up desperately at Whitebeard, eyes pleading.

“There is,” Whitebeard said slowly, mind whirling. “If we can’t go past them or around them, then we’ll just have to go under them.”

Sabo and Luffy both stared at Whitebeard in wonder, but Marco immediately shook his head. “That won’t work, Pops. They’ll sense our presence as we pass under them and just follow us. And I doubt the bubble coating could withstand the reject dials. We wouldn’t be able to outrun them underwater.”

“Isn’t there a way to hide from observation haki?” Sabo questioned hopefully, shifting from one foot to the other restlessly.

“There is, but not everyone on the crew can use it,” Marco frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t think there’s any way to completely hide our presence.”

“We’ll have to risk it,” Whitebeard said heavily, staring down at Ace’s vivre card. “We don’t have the time to do anything else.”

“There is a way,” Luffy said abruptly, earning surprised glances from Whitebeard and Marco. “To hide from observation haki.”

“Luffy,” Sabo pinched the bridge of his nose. “That won’t work.”

“What is it?” Whitebeard asked, leaning forward so that he could see Luffy’s face better.

Jumping up onto Whitebeard’s knee, Luffy grinned. “If something swallows us they won’t be able to feel our presence.”

“Swallow us?” Marco repeated in disbelief, eyebrows twitching.

“You’re sure?” Whitebeard stared at the boy on his knee thoughtfully, something in the boy’s mannerisms and growing excitement catching his full attention.
Marco shot him an incredulous glance that he didn’t dismiss the idea of having the Moby Dick swallowed whole immediately.

“Rayleigh couldn’t find me when I got swallowed by something,” Luffy answered, excitement growing. “If something swallowed the ship we’d be able to get past Kaido’s fleet without them ever knowing!”

“Luffy…” Marco sighed and trailed off, exchanging glances with Sabo.

“We’d never find something big enough to swallow the whole ship, let along make it go in the direction we wanted or let us out again,” Sabo ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not possible.”

“It is, though!” Luffy jumped down from Whitebeard’s knee and ran over to the railing. Sucking in a deep, deep breath, Luffy threw his head back and yelled at the top of his lungs, “COW-CHAN!!!!!!!”

A chill ran down Whitebeard’s spine. Luffy’s shout echoed in the air and resonated through the decks of the ship, causing some of the crew to collapse, either extremely dizzy or unconscious. Others dropped what they were doing in stunned amazement. They’d traveled with Whitebeard long enough to know Conqueror’s haki when they felt it.

Whitebeard stared at the hat on Luffy’s head and gazed down at the future. The old pirate felt almost wistful, looking at the boy and the future that Shanks had seen long ago.

Everyone on the deck watched the fourteen year old with bated breath, hearts pounding in excitement and a strange sense of anticipation. This kid is someone to watch, they thought. A few of them stared knowingly at the straw hat perched atop his head and felt suddenly that his dream didn’t seem as impossible as it had before.

The silence hanging in the air was interrupted by the sound of something rising out of the sea. A young sea king poked her head out of the water and mooed happily the moment she spotted Luffy.

“Cow-chan! We need your help. Ace was kidnapped!” Luffy exclaimed, jumping up on the rail precariously.

A ways behind her, three giant sea kings arose partially from the sea and watched Luffy intently, heads almost five times the size of the Moby Dick. He waved at them as if they were long lost friends and not three of the most powerful creatures in the world, almost losing his balance in the process.

“I don’t believe it, yoi.” Marco murmured in astonishment, completely floored as Luffy rapidly explained that they needed one of the sea kings’ help to save Ace. They had known that Luffy was able to communicate to them, but still…

Without a word, Sabo dashed over to his brother and waved excitedly at Cow-chan, grinning like a mad man. “I’m never doubting your crazy ideas ever again, Luffy!” He exclaimed excitedly, laughing.

Whitebeard let out a shuddering breath, eyes transfixed on Luffy’s back. “That brat’s going to shake the world when he grows up.” Shake the world like no one had since Roger. He laughed. “It’s going to be something to see.”

“They’ll do it!” Luffy twisted his neck around impossibly to face Whitebeard and grinned broadly.

“I hope I get to be there.” Marco shook his head, still too stunned for words.
“So do I,” Whitebeard chuckled, knowing that the beginning of Luffy’s era would be at the end of his. “So do I.”

***

The Moby Dick was already coated for underwater travel, so it was exactly seventeen minutes after Luffy had first shouted for Cow-chan that Whitebeard’s flag ship was swallowed by a sea king.

Through the sheen of the bubble, the Whitebeards stared in awe at the inside of the sea king’s mouth, teeth almost the size of their ship closing behind them the moment they were fully inside.

“Does he, uh—understand what we want him to do?” Izo asked nervously, squinting up at the back of the creature’s throat.

“Yep!” Luffy said confidently, legs swinging back and forth from his position on the ship’s railing. “He’ll get us past them no problem.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this,” Jozu muttered, shifting nervously. They’d be in a huge amount of trouble if the sea king decided that he was in the mood for a snack. Or swam the wrong way. “This has to be the most insane thing we’ve ever done.”

“This can’t be, but I can’t think of anything else,” Atmos shook his head. “Curial?”

Curial was silent for a moment, considering. “I think this beats it all,” another beat of silence, then, “So does this mean we can’t have sea king steak anymore?”
Rolling his eyes and choosing to ignore the question, Rakuyo asked: “Has anymore heard anything about Thatch’s condition?”

“He’s stable, but still in critical condition,” Haruta answered, eyes red and puffy. “They don’t know if he’ll… if he’ll pull through or not yet.”

The division commanders fell silent, faces downcast. Thatch’s presence, so vivacious and lively was sorely missed, leaving a gaping hole in their tight knit ranks.

And Ace. Ace had wormed his way into their hearts without them really even realizing it, his absence just as painful. If he actually did leave the crew once they got him back, it would be devastating. He was theirs, whether he realized it yet or not.

Sabo sighed heavily and quietly walked over to Whitebeard’s chair. Without a word, he climbed up his chair and sat down on his knee. For a moment, they were both silent as they listened to creaking ship and the strange, foreign noises coming from the sea king.

“We’re going to get him back, Sabo,” Whitebeard murmured, eyes fixed on the scurry of shipwrights working to repair the fallen mast. “I’m not going to let the marines take him.”

“This might be something that not even you can stop,” Sabo murmured, lost in thought. “Now that this happened… I don’t know if he’ll join your crew.”

Whitebeard’s breath hitched slightly and suddenly he knew with terrible clarity why Ace had been by his cabin alone that night. “I know,” He said, clenching his eyes shut and taking a deep breath. Blackbeard might have stolen more than he would ever know by betraying them and taking Ace. The raw, pained fury he felt toward the man who had been his son for decades spiked. “We’re going to get him back.” He repeated.

Eyeing Whitebeard searchingly, Sabo nodded slowly and blew out a shaky breath.
Luffy and Marco joined them after a while and they sat together in silence as they were carried past Kaido’s fleet in the stomach of a giant sea monster. The crew busied themselves carefully hanging lights around the deck so that they could see, working nonstop on repairing the ship. They’d been running without a break since the night before, but they’d pushed themselves until they were on the brink of collapse. Marco finally had to intervene and set shifts so the crew didn’t completely exhaust themselves before the battle, ordering the shipwrights to sleep and eat for a few hours before they got back to work.

Izo, Marco, Jozu and the ASL pirates eventually ended up gathered around Whitebeard’s chair discussing their battle strategy. They spent the rest of the ride in the sea king pointedly not looking at their unnerving surroundings and hammering out strategies and contingencies for the upcoming battle.

The sea king carried them well past Kaido’s fleet before releasing them into a swift current that would take them to Ace’s location. It opened its mouth wide and allowed the Moby Dick to slip out, none the worse for being swallowed by one of the largest sea king that many of the Whitebeards had ever seen.

After thanking it profusely, they set out into the current, having decided to remain underwater until they were closer to Ace. They used the gentler jet dials for additional speed in the current and were propelled rapidly to their destination. Much to their surprise, Cow-chan and the other sea kings followed them, swimming all around them protectively.

It was close to sunset when they surfaced, a few miles away from an uninhabited island. They spotted the dark, fluttering Jolly Roger of the Blackbeard pirates’ just off shore of the island. Watching as the ship lowered its anchor, the Whitebeards sighed in relief. They’d arrived just in time—in the far off distance, dozens of white sails with the insignia of the marines could be seen sailing directly toward them. They’d reach the island at roughly the same time.

“We made it.” Marco breathed, relieved beyond words.

“Akainu’s on one of those ships.” Sabo murmured, the hair on the back of his neck tingling. He would have known it even if Sengoku hadn’t told him. He shuddered, wondering how many ships they’d be facing if he hadn’t blackmailed them into retreating.

“We’ll handle him, Pops,” Jozu growled, crossing his arms and glaring at the warships. “Go save Ace and remind Teach why we’re the most powerful crew in the world.”

Glancing around at the determined faces of his children, Whitebeard grinned dangerously. “Let’s go get Ace back.”

***

The deck of the Blackbeards’ ship was a flurry of activity as Ace was dragged roughly up a flight of stairs to the poop deck.

In the distance, Ace spotted a fleet of marine ships heading toward them and clenched his eyes shut. Akainu was on board; he knew it deep in his bones.

“Captain, we’ve got trouble!” One of the Blackbeards shouted frantically, pointing wildly at the ship’s starboard side.

Ace glanced over with idle curiosity and felt his mouth drop open.

Far off in the horizon, the ocean was rippling and gurgling upwards as something massive arose.
Leaping up out of the water like the whale it was named after was the Moby Dick, the setting sun reflecting brilliantly on the bubble coating. It rocked violently as a huge wave swept out from it and the bubble coating popped.

On either side of the ship, sea kings poked their heads out of the water, but instead of attacking, they merely turned their huge, intelligent eyes to a small figure on the deck before turning away and slipping back under the water.

The ship was moving rapidly toward them despite the fact that two of the masts were badly damaged and its sails were furled. It was the most wonderful thing Ace had ever seen in his life.

He sucked in a breath, head spinning. They’d come for him. They’d actually come for him!

Beside him, Blackbeard cursed and tightened his grip on Ace’s broken arm. “He actually got here. Stubborn old man. Boys! Let’s go show them why the name of the new era will be named Blackbeard! Raise the anchor and prepare for battle!”

The crew roared in agreement, the bloodlust hitting Ace hard and causing him to jerk backwards. He would have fallen down the stairs if Blackbeard hadn’t wrenched his arm forward and dragged him across the deck.

As the Blackbeard pirates unfurled the sails and raised anchor, Ace was frog marched over to the port side of the ship and roughly shoved into a dingy.

Ace caught one last glimpse of the Moby Dick hurtling towards them before the dingy was lowered down, hitting the water roughly. He groaned, clutching his arm and shifting slightly to cradle it.

“Do you think you’re saved, Ace?” Blackbeard spat as he began rowing. “If Whitebeard actually manages to reach us, I’ll kill him. He has no idea about my power! He won’t stand a chance.”

Still desperately trying to catch another glimpse of the Moby Dick, Ace scrutinized Blackbeard out of the corner of his eyes, mouth twitching upwards in an unsteady smirk. “If that’s true, then why are you shaking?”

Blackbeard glanced down at his hands and chuckled. “Because I’m excited, Ace. Today fate decides what the next era will be. The time of Whitebeard is over! It’s the era of dreamers, Ace. It’s the era of Blackbeard!”

Cringing as Blackbeard cackled in crazed ecstasy, Ace leaned forward eagerly when the Moby Dick came into view again. If he really squinted, he thought he could see a tall figure towering above all of the others on the deck.

He’s coming, Ace thought, heart lurching with fevered hope and joy at the same time dread churned deep in his stomach.

Casting a glance at the rapidly approaching warships, Ace realized that all of his fears about endangering the Whitebeards were coming true. The Whitebeards were completely outnumbered and the Moby Dick was severely damaged. Akainu was on his way and Whitebeard had no idea about Blackbeard’s devil fruit power.

They were in danger, his brothers were in danger, and Akainu would kill him on sight. So why… why did he feel so happy that they had come for him?!

It was monstrous of him to be feeling so happy, but he couldn’t help it.
They’ve come. He came. Pops came.

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Ignoring the panicked shouts of the crew as they prepared for battle, Akainu’s eyes sought out his target, zeroing in on a dingy that was slowly rowing toward the island where the trade was scheduled to take place.

Finally. No matter what else happens, I will end that accursed bloodline today! He thought savagely. Nothing would stand in his way, not even Whitebeard.

Today it finally ends.

***

“Pops, wait!” Marco dashed down the walkway of the launch deck and skidded to a halt in front of Whitebeard just as the Yonko climbed aboard his personal ship.

“Marco,” Whitebeard turned toward him, for once free from all of the medical contraptions the medical staff insisted on. He absentmindedly got to work preparing the ship for launch. “I’m entrusting the crew to you. Don’t let a single marine make it past you onto that island.”

“I won’t, yoi,” Marco said confidently, gazing at his captain in concern. There was something about him… something different that he couldn’t put into words right away.

“Don’t take it easy on Teach. Who knows how long he was planning something like this. I doubt we really knew him at all.”

Whitebeard snorted and straightened to his full height, eyes burning with the promise of vengeance.

“I know Teach far better than he thinks.”

The launch bay door opened and a burst of fading orange sunlight hit Marco’s eyes, casting Whitebeard’s face in shadows. It hit him then, what was different.

The power, the commanding aura that surrounded him… it wasn’t diminishing by any means, but he was sick. Dying, even. It was slow and devastating for his children to watch, but no one was immortal and he had already lived far longer than most pirates.

But as Marco stared at his captain, his father, he saw none of the sickness—none of the signs of old age that had been slowly appearing. It was as if he was staring at Whitebeard in his prime, during the wild days of Roger. It was like watching the sun rise above the peaks of a mountain during the last day of summer, knowing that it would not shine quite so brightly or rise as high the next day. It was like watching the last sunset in the world, knowing that once the sun hit its peak in the sky, it would never climb back up.

“Don’t die,” Marco said thickly, swallowing. “Don’t you dare die, old man.”

Whitebeard glanced out at the island looming closer and closer to them and smiled. “Today isn’t my day. I have more than enough energy to teach that traitorous brat of mine—no. No. He’s not my son. No true son of mine would betray us or try murder one of his brothers. Don’t worry, Marco. I’m not going to be the one who dies today.”

With a great shove, the ship slid out into the waters. Unfurling the sails, Whitebeard took one last look at Marco and grinned. “Try to keep the ship in one piece while I’m gone!” he called out.

“Of course, Pops!” Marco watched for a moment as Whitebeard sailed toward the island where Ace
and Teach would undoubtedly be and felt a spark of determination ignite deep inside him.

Akainu’s mine. He thought, and turned and left the launch bay.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the chapter that I'm most nervous about posting because of the blackmail scene. If I hadn't been hitting at it for a while with Sabo's box I probably would have chickened out and just not included it. I had to do a lot of rewriting for the blackmail scene, so hopefully it turned out okay.

Anyways, the next chapter is the climax! I'll try to edit it quickly, but some of the sections will take me a while to edit.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Thank you for the comments and kudos!!
Wind whipping harshly in his face, Marco glanced from the marine fleet looming in front of the Moby Dick back to Luffy and Sabo, who were crouched behind him on the deck. They were in deep conversation, heads bowed as they went over the calculations again and again to ensure everything was perfect.

“Ready?” He asked them, wondering if he should be worried about the pinched, almost pained expression on Luffy’s face.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Sabo replied somewhat doubtfully, tipping his hat backwards to scratch his head. “He’s a little sketchy on the exact angles, but he’s got it now, right?”

“Hmmm…” Luffy’s face scrunched up terribly until Marco worried the boy would end up giving himself an aneurism. “I guess I’ll just figure it out as I go!” He exclaimed, grinning triumphantly.

Sabo threw his hands up in the air in defeat as the Whitebeards all stared at him in growing alarm. Marco merely chuckled. He wasn’t particularly worried. He could fly, unlike everyone else.

A cannon ball fired whizzed past the Moby Dick’s starboard bow, so close it almost grazed the side of the ship. On the deck the Whitebeards scurried into motion, preparing the cannons and arranging themselves on the deck to defend the ship.

Separating themselves into the different groups assigned to board the marine ships, the commanders finished giving last minute instructions to their divisions as the shipwrights prepared to fire the jet dials to turn the ship for the first broadside.

“Hold onto something!” One of the shipwrights shouted, grabbing hold of the railing and motioning for the jet dials to fire at his signal. “In five!”

On the port side of the ship, Marco, Sabo, Izo, Jozu, Atmos, Fossa, Namur, Kindrew, Rakuyo, Wendy, Bam Bam, and Haru all crouched down and braced themselves, expressions flitting between anticipation and unease.

Stepping back from the gathered division commanders and the former ASL pirates, Luffy drew in a deep breath and stretched out his arms, gripping the railing of the ship as tightly as he could. He pulled himself backwards until his back was almost touching the opposite side of the ship, eyes darting swiftly back and forth between the oncoming warships.

“One!”

Luffy flexed his muscles and took another deep breath, pulling and pulling his arms back until he was round as tight as a spring. His arms trembled with the effort it took to not simply hurtle forwards before it was time.

“Two!”

Turning to Jozu, Izo grinned madly. “This is definitely one of the craziest things we’ve ever done.”

“Three!”
Jozu and the other division commanders all laughed. “Wait till Thatch hears about this.”

The commanders and Sabo all sobered at the mention of Thatch, expressions darkening and their eyes flashing with the promise of vengeance. No one hurt one of their own and got away with it.

“Four!”

“For Thatch and Ace,” Marco said, glancing at his brothers gathered beside him. “Not a ship is going to be left by sunset! Let’s remind them why the Whitebeards are the strongest crew in the world, yo!”

The answering roar filled the deck of the Moby Dick, drowning out the shout of “five!” and the sound of the jet dials activating.

The marines watched in terror as the Moby Dick suddenly lurched starboard, bringing the ship around for the opening volley of the fight just as the warships entered range of their cannons.

Over the thunder of the cannons, Luffy shouted and pushed off of the starboard railing, careering toward the waiting pirates. He slammed into them and sent them flying over the railing and high into the air, soaring rapidly directly at the warships.

Transforming into his phoenix form, Marco used the added momentum of the slingshot to dive straight at where Akainu was standing on the deck of the lead warship. He only swerved from his dive bomb long enough to dodge a magma blast, entire being focused on Akainu.

Marco twisted out of his nose dive at the last moment and with haki covered talons, lifted the marine admiral and tossed him into the air-- directly into the path of the falling division commanders as they rained down upon the marine fleet.

Magma erupted from the admiral, threatening to spray the division commanders with red, searing flecks, but Fossa and Jozu easily blocked the magma and attacked as one, sword and fist clashing with one molten arm.

Lava sprinkled down on the marine ships below, the sails of two of the warships catching on fire as the marines were bombarded by cannon fire from the Moby Dick.

Together, Fossa and Jozu slammed Akainu back down onto one of the ships, the deck shattering from the force of the impact. They landed on the mast of the ship and sprang down, the deck buckling and groaning under their feet. With one easy swing of his sword, Fossa cut the mast into pieces, his flaming sword setting it on fire. He and Jozu easily fought their way to Akainu, the marines on deck no match for them. The admiral stumbled onto his feet to meet them, face thunderous as lava dripped onto the deck, damaging it even further.

Swooping down, Marco grabbed a piece of the broken mast and threw it at Akainu. It passed through him harmlessly, but caught on fire, flecks of lava clinging to it. As it slammed into the aft section of the ship, a fire ignited as lava slid from the mast onto the deck and railings.

The Whitebeards might be outnumbered, but they had one huge advantage over Akainu; it was a sea battle. Akainu couldn’t use his full powers while he was on one of the marine ships, while the Whitebeards had no such restrictions. As long as they could keep the admiral away from the Moby Dick, they had the upper hand.

As the division commanders, plus Sabo, Luffy, and the rest of the ASL pirates landed on the decks of four of the warships, Akainu snarled and flung a massive pillar of lava straight at Marco. Flipping sideways, Marco grinned grimly as the lava fell downwards and splattered the ship below him. The
marines cried out and rolled out of the way as the lava hit the mast and chewed away at the wood until it snapped and fell.

Leaving Akainu to stew on the fact that he couldn’t go full out without taking out half of his fleet in the process, Marco gleefully swooped down and landed on one of the ships without any of the Whitebeards on board to wreak havoc. He landed with a crack, the deck shattering under his feet as he transformed his lower half back into his human form.

With a sweep of his powerful wings, Marco knocked the marines rushing toward him backwards, azure fire flecked with yellow lashing out and burning them. Some of them fell overboard, while others were slammed hard onto the deck, dazed and burned. Only a handful managed to actually duck out of the way in time, peppering Marco with an uneven spray of bullets.

Shifting back until his wings were arms again, Marco planted a hand onto the middle of the deck and punched. The ship groaned and cracked, but it didn’t split open like some of the weaker ships he’d come across. Head tilted sideways, Marco clenched both hands into fists, covered them in haki, and slammed them down. This time the ship cracked clean in half.

Smirking in satisfaction, Marco shifted again and soared into the sky, leaving the sinking ship to its fate.

He was banking around to take another shot at Akainu when the world trembled and tilted and the sun was suddenly blocked by a terrible cloud of darkness, spreading up high in the horizon like a surging tidal wave.

Skin crawling, Marco craned his neck around to try and catch sight of Whitebeard. He only managed to catch a glimpse of him; his was bisento raised above his head, one hand seemingly gripping the air as thin blue cracks spreading upwards like fissures in an old wall, the encroaching darkness crashed down upon the island like a tsunami.

Forcing himself to glance away, Marco dove down toward Akainu and focused all his attention on the fight at hand. Pops could handle himself.

Below, Atmos, Izo, and Kindrew were pounding hard on the admiral, driving him back inch by inch on one of the warships’ decks until they had him cornered, the ocean rolling violently behind him.

The admiral glanced at the division commanders surrounding him and behind him at the wide, endless ocean. Turning back one last time to face the commanders, the admiral grinned savagely and leapt off the ship.

Jaw dropping in surprise momentarily, Marco spiraled downwards until he was level with the masts of the fleet as a great cloud of steam rose up from the waters and rose high into the air. It took him only a second to realize what Akainu was attempting and it left him momentarily awestruck.

The ocean was relatively shallow so close to the island-- deep enough for the ships to maneuver without running ashore, but not as deep as the open ocean. If it had been any deeper, it wouldn’t have worked, but Akainu’s control of his devil fruit was astounding, even for a marine admiral. And it was shallow. Shallow enough for the admiral to form a tiny island in the midst of the sea, the lava rapid cooling under Akainu’s expert control.

The warships parted, giving Akainu a perfect view of the Moby Dick. He drew his arms back and blasted a horrible column of lava at the lilting ship, the ocean bubbling and roiling as the lava careened forward.
Marco dove down and met it head on, wings blazing and expanding as he blocked the magma from its intended target. The wood of the warships close by shattered from the power of the collision and the ocean parted beneath him.

He strained a moment longer against the unyielding magma before knocking it aside with a mighty flap of his wings. He dropped to the rapidly expanding island the admiral was forming and they clashed, one haki covered talon biting into a muscular forearm covered in searing lava.

They collided again and again, swirls of crimson and azure flashing blindingly in the air, neither backing down, neither budging an inch as they duked it out on the tiny island. Ships sank all around them, sending violent ripples across surface of the sea as marines desperately swam away from the dying ships and the escalating battle.

The eviscerating heat of the magma licked at Marco’s skin, hot enough to burn him without even touching him. Cobalt flames danced across his entire body, healing his wounds at the same time that they held back Akainu’s lava from swallowing him whole.

His left foot slipped backwards from the force of Akainu’s attack and met nothing but air and the promise of a watery grave. He barely caught himself in time. His sandals were melting from the scorching heat emanating from the volcanic island, steam rising up in thick clouds around its base.

“Marco!” Sabo shouted from somewhere on his left. “Switch!”

With one last heave, Marco shoved Akainu back and sprang into the air, half his body engulfed in flames as his devil fruit rapidly knit his burnt and blackened skin back together. He easily skirted out of the way of Akainu’s retaliatory strikes, one eye seeking Sabo as he evaded with ease.

Sabo surprised both Marco and Akainu by launching himself out of the water and slamming his haki covered pipe into the Admiral’s stomach with enough force to send him flying backwards. He flew through the air slammed into the side of one of the marine warships, just barely catching hold of a rope to keep himself from falling into the sea.

“He’s all yours, Jozu!” Sabo shouted, hopping from one foot to the other as his boots starting burning and melting on the boiling rock.

Jozu’s war cry was almost drowned out by shouts of terror as the division commander wheeled a rapidly sinking warship straight at where Akainu was still dangling. The admiral’s eyes widened in shock as the warship barreled down on him and he rapidly climbed up the rope to evade being crushed.

The two warships collided and Jozu and Akainu clashed. Explosions rocked the two disintegrating ships, the power from their fists connecting shattering them even further. The two opponents danced back and forth across the decks of the dying ships, uncaring of everything around them as the crews desperately fled.

Marco was about to swoop down and help when the world suddenly turned upside down and there was a brilliant, almost blinding flash of energy from the island. It parted the sea of darkness clinging to the island in half, swirls of cobalt flashing dazzlingly in the dimming sky and driving the shadows away.

All of the ships were rocked brutally as the ocean floor was hit with a sea quake, the waters churning violently. The ocean heaved upwards, sending the remaining warships crashing into each other.

Marco glanced at the island and his eyes widened; the island had been split cleanly in two. The
darkness that had been curling around it was gone. He could just make out Ace’s still form on the beach, half bent over his knees and face trained fixedly on the fight taking place between Whitebeard and Teach.

An explosion tore his attention away from his father’s battle. His head whirled around to the Moby Dick, eyes narrowing in fury. The Blackbeard pirates had used the chaos to get close to board the ship. A fierce battle was raging, but Marco didn’t dare go and help them, not when Akainu was still very much alive and in the fight.

Diving down to the marine admiral, Marco trilled loudly, alerting Jozu to duck, before ramming into Akainu with all his might.

They fought in the air, clashing over and over as the ocean drew backwards and a huge tidal wave slowly grew in strength and height. The last marine warships sunk, but still they collided, oblivious to the world around them. They were azure and crimson blurs in the sky, lighting up the dusky sky with every blow.

Fire and magma rained down on the surviving marines as they desperately tried to escape the impending tidal wave, waters hissing as great billows of vapor arose. Even a few of the division commanders were caught beneath the violent spray, desperately swimming back to the Moby Dick.

Akainu’s power was terrible, and even though Marco had the advantage, it was taking a terrible toll on the phoenix’s body. If their battle had taken place on land instead of in the air and flammable ships, the admiral might have won. But Akainu’s overconfidence in challenging the Whitebeards without sufficient preparation and backup was only partly his undoing; the phoenix was fighting for his family and was willing to go to any lengths to protect them. And he had more to lose. Much more.

The tidal wave crested. With a terrible roar, it crashed down on the battle field, sweeping away pirate and marine alike. It hurtled toward the Moby Dick and the Blackbeards’ ship, blocking out the sinking sun as it reached its zenith.

Marco glanced at the wave rushing toward them, body entangled with Akainu as they hurtled in a downward spiral. His wings was the only thing keeping them from slamming into the ocean. He was tiring and his injuries weren’t healing as quickly as before. They were on the brink— one wrong move, one mistake away from winning or losing. If Marco lost, Akainu could potentially save himself from falling into the water by creating another small volcanic island, stopping the tidal wave, and then attack the Moby Dick freely.

Dizzy from their rapid decent, Marco almost missed the fleet of ships appearing far off in the horizon. He felt physically ill the moment his brain finally processed who the Jolly Roger flying overhead of the fleet belonged to.

Kaido. Kaido had followed them and was mere minutes away from entering the battle. With half of the division commanders in the water and Whitebeard preoccupied with Teach, there was the very real possibility that they would lose a fight with Kaido, especially if Akainu wasn’t defeated, now. The thought was enough to seal Marco’s decision.

He would do anything to keep his family safe. Anything.

He tightened his grip on Akainu, haki covered claws biting into lava and flesh. He glanced triumphantly at Akainu’s face, taking extreme satisfaction in the way the admiral’s eyes widened in alarm. “My brothers will come for me,” He hissed, wings arching backwards in preparation. “But I doubt anyone will be eager to come for you.”
Sweet terror dawned in the admiral’s eyes as Marco flapped his wings and propelled them straight into the tidal wave as it began its long sweep of the battle. It was like hitting a brick wall as they slammed into the wave, all his strength and adrenaline instantly swept away.

Awareness was washed away not long after, but Marco smiled. His family would come for him, even if they had to drain the entire ocean to find him.

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_Fifteen minutes earlier…_

Sabo dove into the water as the marine ship he and Luffy had been on burst into flames, one arm wrapped firmly around Luffy’s waist.

They hit the water hard, knocking the wind out of him as Luffy went limp in his arms. He swam up to the surface and gasped. The water was boiling hot, reminiscent of the last time they’d clashed against Akainu, when the Romance Dawn had sunk. He grimaced and started swimming as quickly as he could toward the Moby Dick.

“Hey, Sabo,” Luffy’s head lolled against his brother’s shoulder, eyes fixed on the battle raging overhead. “Do you think Ace is okay?”

Unconsciously glancing at the island, Sabo swallowed hard and tried to quicken his pace, lungs and arms burning. “Whitebeard’s with him.” He muttered, resisting the urge to swim directly over to the island, grab Ace and run.

He had to trust Whitebeard. They’d only get in Whitebeard’s way and if Ace was hurt, the last thing he needed was a long swim in the scorching ocean.

It took him five minutes to reach the Moby Dick. They were quickly pulled aboard by members of the ninth division, along with Izo and Jozu, who had both fallen into the water after the battle ship they’d been attacking had sunk.

Izo sagged the moment he and Jozu were dragged up on the deck, exhausted from having to swim with Jozu’s deadweight. They all laid on the deck panting for a moment as Speedy Jiru, Vista, Blenheim, and Rakuyo battled the Blackbeards with their divisions.

“Izo… I think you might want to consider a diet when this is all over,” Izo wheezed, staggering to his feet and distractedly pulling his hair into a messy ponytail. He quickly changed out the gun powder in his guns and reloaded them. “Take a break from all of the food eating contests.”

“This,” Jozu propped himself up using the ship’s railing and gestured at his body. “Is pure muscle.”

Izo and Sabo both choked out a laugh, ignoring the glare they got from Jozu.

Climbing unsteadily to his feet, Sabo unstrapped his pipe and whirled it around in his hands. “These are the guys who shot Thatch?”

“They are.” Jozu confirmed, flexing his arms as his skin transformed into diamond. Rolling onto his feet, Luffy’s expression darkened and he cracked his knuckles. “What are we doing standing around here, then?!”

“My thoughts exactly.” Izo smirked, cocked his pistols and sprang into the action.

The Blackbeards weren’t that large, but they were strong for such a new pirate crew and it was clear
that Teach had prepared them to fight the Whitebeards. They were painfully familiar with the fighting styles of the division commanders, giving them a slight advantage since the Blackbeards were basically unknown, even though they had been allied.

Sabo and Luffy were wildcards, thrown into the battle like bulls in a china shop. They kicked and punched their way through the Blackbeards, furious not just for their kidnapped brother, but for Thatch.

It didn’t take long for some of the Whitebeards to step back slightly from the battle and just watch the carnage. The two brothers were a whirlwind, sweeping through the ranks of the Blackbeards in perfect concert with the division commanders. It was a sight to behold.

A bullet whizzed through the air and hit Izo as he dodged out of the way of a sword strike. He staggered to the ground, one hand clutching at his shoulder. His eyes zeroed in on the sharpshooter perched on the Blackbeards’ crow’s nest. “Jozu.” He breathed, surprised at the sheer rage that overtook him.

“He’s the one who shot Thatch.” Jozu growled, confirming Izo’s suspicions. It would take a sharpshooter of extraordinary skill to hit one of the division commanders.

“I see,” Straightening, Izo carefully loaded his gun and took aim. “Distract him.”

“We got it.” Sabo twisted in the air and took out two of the Blackbeards with a spin kick.

He and Luffy fought their way to the enemy ship and leaped across to it, landing lightly on the deck. Luffy launched his gattling gun attack, assaulting both the crew and the ship.

The distraction worked, because a second after they boarded the ship, three bullets hit Luffy and bounced off harmlessly. Realizing that bullets were useless against Luffy, the sharpshooter shifted his attention to Sabo. He leaned forward to take his shot, rifle trained on Sabo’s chest.

“Got you.” Izo grinned grimly from his position halfway up the ladder to the crow’s nest and fired, face pale and hands slick with blood.

The bullet hit the sharpshooter square in the forehead and the man tumbled down, rifle falling uselessly from his hands.

“Tidal wave! Tidal wave! Everyone, brace for impact!”

Sabo slammed his pipe down hard enough to knock his opponent unconscious and was about to whirl around to face the tidal wave when something in the distance caught his eye and his blood ran cold. A fleet of ships was coming their way, a Jolly Roger waving proudly from the masts and featured prominently on the sails. Kaido’s Jolly Roger. Kaido’s fleet.

Sabo wasn’t the only one to notice and suddenly the rapidly approaching tidal wave was the least of their worries. They were winning the battle against the Blackbeards and the marines, but they’d been outnumbered to begin with and they’d taken heavy casualties. A confrontation with Kaido now would be devastating for the Whitebeards.

Cries rang out over the chaotic din; sounding the warning that Kaido was coming, crying for the division commanders to organize themselves, for the cannons to be reloaded, for the crewmembers frantically trying to reach the Moby Dick before the tidal wave hit to hurry.

“Luffy, come on! We have to finish here and get the back to the Moby Dick!” Sabo shouted, swinging his pipe around and blocking the double sided scythe wielded by an extremely sick looking
man. He looked about to keel over any minute, but he was fast. Sabo narrowly sprang backwards in time to avoid having his stomach sliced open. As it was, his shirt was slashed and he had a long, shallow cut across his stomach.

Three gunshots rang out from the Moby Dick. The scythe wielder dodged, but the split in his attention cost him. Sabo lunged forward and slammed his pipe down as hard as he could on the man’s head and he dropped like a stone.

Springing forward, Sabo grabbed hold of the back of Luffy’s shirt and tugged him away from the fight he’d gotten himself embroiled and dragged him across the deck.

“Sabo, let me go!” Luffy growled, swinging his arms and legs in the air uselessly as Sabo prepared to jump back to the Moby Dick.

“Look at the tidal wave!” Sabo shouted in response, glancing up himself and wincing. It would hit both ships any second now.

A flash of blue light caught his eyes and he froze, one hand on the railing of the ship and the other still clenched around Luffy’s shirt. His jaw fell open as he watched a brilliant streak of blue of and red plunge directly into the oncoming wave.

Marco.

“Namur, Marco just--!” Sabo’s eyes widened as the wave hit the Blackbeard’s ship. It was all he could do to tackle Luffy and grab hold of something.

The wave hit the Blackbeard’s ship and the Moby Dick with the force of a thousand cannon balls. The ship buckled and disintegrated under Sabo’s body as he and Luffy were slammed by the water, the poor quality of the wood and construction of the ship unable to withstand the force of the wave crashing down on it.

He wasn’t able to maintain his grip on the ship for long under the sheer force of the tidal wave. It was all he could do to cling to Luffy, who was limp and helpless in his arms.

They were washed overboard and slammed into the mast of the Moby Dick just as someone on board activated the bubble coating. They fell heavily to the deck, along with a good portion of the water that had carried them over from the other ship.

“Ahhhh I thought I was going to die!” Luffy exclaimed from his position on top of Sabo’s stomach, still drooping slightly from the ankle deep water pooling on the ship’s deck.

“Get… off,” Sabo grunted, rolling Luffy off and springing to his feet. He staggered as the ship rocked and tilted dangerously sideways. “Namur… where’s Namur?!”

“Some of the crew were thrown overboard and he went after them,” Izo explained, still clinging to the ship as they were swept away by the wave.

There was a terrible cracking noise and everyone stiffened as shouts rang down from the lower decks that they were taking in water.

Izo ran to the side of the ship and grimaced. “We didn’t activate the bubble quickly enough. There’s water inside it!”

“Izo, forget all of that! Marco’s in the water!” Sabo shouted, running to a nearby crate that had first aid supplies and equipment to help fish wayward crewmembers out of the ocean. He grabbed a small
coral that must have been from Fishman Island, bit down on it and took a deep breath, testing it. Satisfied that it worked, he grabbed a second one, tossed his pipe to Luffy and jumped onto the railing. “I’m going after him. Tell Namur and the other fishmen that we don’t have much time!”

Izo shouted something, but Sabo dove out of the bubble and was swept away by the raging current before he had a chance to hear what the commander had been about to say.

He was flounced away from the Moby Dick at once. For a moment, Sabo despaired of finding the first division commander; it was all he could do to keep himself from being dragged helplessly along with the rushing waters. If he had been a normal person, it would have been impossible.

Closing his stinging eyes for a moment, Sabo concentrated and stretched out with his observation haki. He grimaced at the dimming presence and adjusted his course, struggling to swim in the right direction.

Hold on. Sabo thought desperately, swimming as fast as he could in the raging currents.

He shut his burning eyes, relying solely on his observation haki to guide him.

He counted the seconds impatiently, growing more and more frantic as seconds turned into minutes. How long had it been since Marco had been swallowed by the tidal wave? Two minutes? Three? Sabo was painfully aware of how long a human could survive without air, considering that his two idiotic brothers were both anchors.

Sabo grit his teeth and swam faster, miraculously gaining on the sinking division commander.

There! Sabo pushed himself for one last burst of speed and opened his eyes. Reaching out, he grabbed hold of Marco’s shoulders and urgently tugged him upwards. The deadweight in his arms threatened to pull him back down, but he clawed his way up inch by inch.

Marco wasn’t breathing when they burst up into the turbulent surface.

Pounding on Marco’s chest, Sabo glanced around and tried to get his bearings. The ocean was still rolling violently and his heart sank when he finally caught sight of the Moby Dick. It might as well have been miles and miles away, with the ocean still wild and thrashing violently.

All of his tension drained away the moment that Marco gasped and started coughing, spewing out copious amounts of sea water.

The division commander opened his eyes as he continued choking and sputtering. “Sabo?” He asked in surprise, when his breathing finally got under control.

“Honestly, what were you thinking?” Sabo shook his head disapprovingly and began swimming back to the Moby Dick.

Marco was silent for a while, eyes automatically drifting toward the island where Whitebeard and Ace were. He grinned a little wobbly. “Knew someone would come for me, yoi.”

Ahead of them, the Moby Dick was wheeling about to head towards them, shouts from the crew just barely audible.

“Kaido’s coming.” Sabo murmured, exhaustion hitting him hard as he tried to increase his speed.

“I saw, yoi,” Marco grit his teeth and squinted, trying to see how far away Kaido’s fleet was now. “Do you see them?”
“I think—” Sabo almost forgot to keep treading water the moment he spotted Kaido’s fleet in the distance, a huge smile spreading across his face. “They’re being drawn off—it’s Shanks!”

Eyes widening, Marco stared in disbelief as he caught sight of the Red Force weaving in between Kaido’s fleet, bright flashes of red spiking into the air like lightning as the two Yonko clashed. “He actually came.” He murmured in surprise and relief, leaning his head back against Sabo’s shoulder.

Sabo started tugging them forward again, eyes still fixed on the Red Force as it led Kaido’s fleet away from them. “Of course he did. Luffy still has his hat, after all.”

On the island, gunfire resounded in the air. A moment later, the remaining inky blackness lingering around the island dispersed into nothingness.

The battle between Whitebeard and Blackbeard was over. And for the first time during the entire battle, Marco couldn’t see Whitebeard.

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Teach was waiting for him with Ace when Edward arrived on the island, the battle raging beyond the shore a fiery backdrop. His traitorous son blanched, all of the color draining away from his face as Edward stalked toward him. Fear shined in his eyes for a split second, but it was quickly replaced by a greedy, overconfident gleam as one hand tightened on Ace’s shoulders, smirking cockily.

Ace was small and pale and injured, eyes wide as if he couldn’t believe that Edward had actually come for him. He was bruised, bloody and one of his arms was broken. They’d literally taken the shirt from his back, revealing frightening large bruises blossoming over his chest.

Fury and deep, deep sorrow bubbled up at the sight of the teen and the gun Teach was pressing against his head. The world had been cruel enough to Ace already, without throwing yet another betrayal at him and destroying the fragile trust he had been building with the Whitebeards. It pained his old heart more than he would ever have thought possible to think that Ace could be lost to him because of this.

And Teach. The treacherous man he’d called his son. The man who had been with him for decades, lying and scheming for who knew how long. It was as if Edward was seeing him for the first time.

“Pops!” Teach grinned, a sharp, predatory grin as he continued to hold the gun to Ace’s head. “I should have known that you’d find a way around Kaido’s fleet, but still I’m surprised! How did you do it?”

“Don’t call him ‘Pops!’” Ace growled, visibly shaking with fury much to Edward’s surprise. Something uncoiled inside him at the words and filled him with hope that perhaps Ace wasn’t lost to him yet. Seeing the gun pressed to Ace’s head incensed him; it was hard to remember the last time he had felt this furious. Furious wasn’t even a strong enough word to begin to describe what he was feeling.

“Unhand him, Teach. You don’t want to make this any worse for yourself than it already is.” Edward growled, grip tightening on his bisento until his knuckles were white and the handle almost cracked.

“I will. It’s not like Ace can do anything at the moment anyways, right Ace?!” Teach slammed his hand roughly on Ace’s back and knocked him face first into the sand. “Look at him. He trusted you to keep him safe and look where it got him, though by the looks of this scar, it seems he isn’t a stranger to betrayal.”
Teach shoved Ace down further until Edward could see the angry red scar at the center of Ace’s back, a physical mark that showed his trust had been betrayed far too many times. If the wound had been a few inches higher, the boy would have certainly died. It was a miracle he had survived as it was.

“Tell me, Ace. How does it feel to know that there’s nowhere safe for you? That no matter where you go in the world, all you’ll bring to the people around is pain and death. It would have been better if you had never been born at all,” Teach hissed into Ace’s ear, a hand tugging cruelly at Ace’s hair. “And now, you get to watch me kill the strongest man in the world. Is there something you want to tell him first?”

Ace’s eyes were dazed and numbed with pain as they sought Edward’s, expression raw and devastated in a way that made the old pirate’s heart clench. The boy said nothing and looked away. Edward felt his heart sink.

“Oh? Didn’t you go to his room to tell him something important that night?” Blackbeard smirked and released Ace with a final shove. “Face it, Pops. He’ll never join your crew now. He’s been betrayed too many times to trust anyone. And in a crew your size? He’ll never be able to feel safe again.”

“Enough words,” Edward growled, whirling his bisento in the air and releasing a thunderous burst of Conqueror’s haki that hit Teach and Ace like a strong gust of wind. “Let’s end this, Teach.”

“Yes,” Teach clambered to his feet, hands trembling. “I was hoping to at least have Kaido soften you up a little first, but it doesn’t matter. I’ve been preparing for this! It’s time to see what fate decides—if this will be the end of your era or the beginning of mine!”

Edward twirled his bisento into the air and slammed it into the sandy beach. “Come on, then!”

Grinning maniacally, Teach charged, keeping Ace directly behind him as he ran so that Edward couldn’t strike at him without risking Ace.

Grinding his teeth, Whitebeard lifted his bisento off the ground in one hand, dug his fingers into the air and pulled.

The ground underneath his feet trembled as Teach closed the remaining distance between them, the murderous gleam in his eyes twisting his once familiar features.

“You always were too cocky.” Edward thought grimly, not even flinching as Teach drew his hands back and something black and almost cloud like formed around his arms.

A huge twenty foot wave of water slammed into Teach, swept him off his feet, and carried him deeper onto the island— and more importantly away from Ace. After a few seconds the wave dissipated, slamming Teach roughly onto his back.

Edward wasted no time. In the course of six strides, he had positioned himself in front of Ace, his broad back blocking Ace’s view of the traitorous pirate completely. “This won’t take long, Ace.” He growled, coat whipping around roughly in the wind.

Rolling onto his feet with a rueful laugh, Teach shook himself in a futile attempt to dry off and absentlly adjusted the bandana he was wearing. He laughed lowly, but it lacked some of the confidence from before. “Even after all these years, your control over your devil fruit still amazes me, to create a sea quake that controlled...”

“You have an interesting one yourself,” Edward growled, unease churning in his gut. He hadn’t known that Teach had eaten a devil fruit and alarmingly he didn’t recognize it. Something about it
gave him a bad feeling. “Is that the one you were looking for all those years?”

“I’m surprised you noticed I was looking for one at all, although I suppose I shouldn’t be,” Teach grinned again, some of his shaken confidence returning “Let me show you, Pops--the power that will take me all the way to the top!”

Teach lurched forward and in the blink of an eye was right in front of Edward, one hand raising a pistol and the other spewing the same black, inky substance as earlier. Edward brought his fist down, forming a white orb around his knuckles with enough power to blast Teach into oblivion.

The two powers collided and what should have been a killing blow dissolved away into nothingness. A single gunshot rang out over the din of the raging sea battle, reverberating deep in Edward’s bones. The bullet hit his left shoulder, but he didn’t even flinch as it tore into his flesh.

Eyes widening in shock, Edward activated his devil fruit power and slammed his fist down again—only for the same thing to happen.

“Zehaha!” Teach laughed and the milky darkness expanded and swelled, clinging to Edward’s skin and compressing and pulling on him painfully. “Your devil fruit won’t work! Zoan, paramecia, logia, they are all useless before the power of darkness!”

Roughly swinging his fist backwards, Edward attacked again with the orb, but this time launched it early and sent it hurtling straight at Teach’s face. The orb that had obliterated wood and stone in the past was harmlessly dissolved by the expanding darkness surrounding his former, traitorous son.

The ex-Whitebeard pirate emptied his pistol into the man that he had called father for over twenty years and with a great heave, used the gravity controlling aspect of his devil fruit to jerk Edward forward and fling him into the air.

Twisting his body around, Edward just barely managed to land on his feet. With a powerful swing of his bisento, he launched a powerful earthquake attack. The sandy beach split open in the wake of it, creating a six foot crack in the ground. Rather than dodging the massive attack, Teach flung up a great cloud of darkness around him until he wasn’t even visible.

The darkness absorbed the attack and grew, spreading upwards until it was starting to block out the sky. It covered the island like a dark storm cloud, ominous and deadly and blinding. Around them, the world tilted and trembled dizzyingly, the sound of cannon fire overwhelmed by the rumbling, grinding, and shifting of earth.

But Edward didn’t need his eyes to fight. Leaping forward, Edward and Teach collided in a terrifying show of force and energy, the power strong enough to destroy the world against all-consuming darkness. The island trembled and shook as the relentless pull of gravity uprooted trees and sent terrible swirls of sand, dirt and debris into the air.

He caught a glimpse of Ace through the gloom, who was keeping his head down and clinging uselessly to the scratchy sand beneath him as the sea of darkness began to drag him forward toward the onslaught. He grabbed onto a rock and clung to it tightly, struggling to keep himself from being pulled directly into the fight.

Edward stood tall and as unmovable as a mountain, feet spread apart and bisento raised high as he swung it in a great sweep and split the veil of darkness in half. Far above the battle, even the clouds were parted for miles and miles in either direction from the sheer power of the strike and the accompanying rumble of Conqueror’s haki.
Stunned, Teach didn’t have time to gather his wits beyond the primal instinct to dodge and run as another blow hurtled toward him, this time accompanied by the deadly destructive energy of the Yonko’s devil fruit. He barely managed to dodge in time, the sheer power crackling in the air making his knees grow weak and unsteady. Twisting his neck around Teach watched as the attack shot out into the water and burst into the horizon.

The ground shook and massive waves beat against the island’s beaches, aftershocks hitting it with enough force that Teach could barely stand. When the trembling finally subsided slightly, his jaw dropped open in terror.

The force and power of the attack had torn the island in two.

Teach tried everything he could think of, but the longer the battle stretched out, the more apparent it became that the power of darkness was no match for the most powerful man in the world. Not even deflecting the worst of the tidal wave from the island was enough of a distraction to give Teach the upper hand.

Panting heavily, Edward saw the moment that Teach’s overconfidence and arrogance finally failed him and he realized that he wasn’t going to win. It was the moment Teach turned toward Ace, who was watching the battle with wide, wide eyes, pale and helpless on the beach.

Teach stretched out a hand and his darkness dragged Ace over to him. He pulled out a sword and swung it up high into the air as Ace entered his reach. Ace’s eyes widened and he struggled frantically, but it was useless; he was powerless with the sea stone cuffs still firmly attached to his wrists.

The blade swung downwards. Blood splattered in the air and onto the sandy ground as the sword carved a terrible gash on scarred skin. The blade was then plunged in cruelly, blood staining the beach crimson. The battle ceased as Teach grinned triumphantly, madness in his eyes.

Ace stared up helplessly, eyes widening in horror.

The sword was plunged deeply into Edward’s belly, blood spilling from the gash on his chest and the wound to his stomach. The Yonko stared down at the wounds as Teach laughed shakily and roughly pulled out the blade.

Edward grunted and raised his head, wrath filled eyes reflecting Teach’s face as the traitor’s expression morphed from triumph to terror. He raised his bisento.

“P-Pops, don’t do this,” Teach pleaded, eyes wide with fear as his mind scrambled uselessly to think of something, anything that could get him out alive. He pulled his other pistol and fired and fired until all of the bullets were spent. Edward stood unmoved, expression thunderous. “I-I’m your son, aren’t I? Just yesterday you called me your son and told me that you were proud of me!! Don’t tell me you can kill one of your children so easily!”

“Easily? Kill one of my children?” Edward twitched and in one swift movement, the bisento was impaled in Teach’s body. “You were never one of mine, Teach. That has become very clear now. No true son would ever kidnap or harm my children. Your power might have one day proved a great threat to the world, but you overestimated yourself. Overconfidence was always going to be your undoing.”

Choking and coughing up blood, Teach reached out and touched the bisento with a shaking hand. “It would seem… that fate has decided against me after all.”
Edward snorted derisively, but his eyes were sorrowful despite himself. “You should never have threatened one of my children. All your patient work undone by a single moment of greed and arrogance."

“But he’s not your child, is he?” Teach’s lips twitched upwards in a cruel smile. “And now he never will be.”

“You won’t live to find out, one way or the other.” Edward growled.

“Old man,” Teach coughed harshly. “Pull it out.”

Wordlessly, Edward complied. The sound of the bisento being pulled out was sickening, as was the wound itself. It was a testament to his sheer willpower that he hadn’t died instantly.

Falling to his knees, Teach glanced over at his where his ship should have been. Nothing was left, not even debris. “Your era may not end today, old man, but it will end. Where will your precious children be then? What of Ace? All you’ve done is delay the inevitable. You’re a dying old man and Ace was born to die. Which of you will go first? Who will it be, I wonder? Kaido, Akainu. Big Mom, perhaps? Who will be the one to claim your head?”

“All men die,” Edward said, weary beyond his years. “But today is not my day.”

“But, you know what, old man? Dreams… dreams never die.” Teach’s breathing was just faint wheezes as his lips turned upwards in a final, twisted grin. And with those words hanging heavily in the air, Teach fell forward and died.

A single tear streamed down Whitebeard’s face. A bond suddenly cut off after decades was still painful, no matter how superficial it had been or how terrible the betrayal. Just yesterday the man in front of him had been his son, but Teach would never again be counted among Edward’s children.

It was silent. Out on the ocean, the only ship remaining bore his Jolly Roger. The traitorous Teach was dead.

It was over.

***

Ace was trembling by the time Edward shook himself from his stupor and turned slowly away from the body. If Ace saw the single tear track down Edward’s face, he said nothing.

Shuffling slowly and painfully over to Ace, Edward studied the teen’s face, searching for some sign to clue into what was going on in the teen’s head. He knelt, the emotions shining in Ace’s eyes raw and aching. The boy was shell shocked.

“Are you alright?” Edward rumbled, stretching out a hand to touch him. He drew back reluctantly when Ace flinched away.

“You killed him,” Ace murmured, shifting slightly and wincing as the movement jarred his broken bones, bruises, and cuts littering his body. His eyes remained fixed on where Teach’s motionless form was lying face first in the sand. “This—this is all my fault—”

Edward shushed him gently, eyes carefully cataloging Ace’s injuries. “None of this is your fault. Betrayal does not bloom overnight. It would have happened eventually and it would have been worse, for he would have had more time to plan our demise.”
“Are you okay? You’re bleeding!” Ace’s good arm twitched and jiggled the cuffs, his wrists raw from struggling.

“Nothing but scratches,” Edward replied with a snort, glancing down at his torso. It wasn’t a complete lie. Except for the stomach wound, Teach hadn’t managed to hurt him too severely. He studied Ace for a moment, longing and the distressed expression on the teen’s face clenching his heart. “I’m going to touch you now.” He said calmly, gently reaching out a large hand to carefully pull Ace into his arms.

“Wha--” Heat crept up on Ace’s pale, freckled cheeks, but he made no move to escape the careful embrace.

“Indulge an old man.” Edward murmured, shutting his eyes and relishing the knowledge that Ace was utterly safe in his arms, careful to keep him away from his bloodied chest.

After a moment and a great deal of hesitation on Ace’s part, the teen all but melted in Edward’s arms, his head resting securely by the Yonko’s elbow. They sat together for a long time, the silence in the wake of the battle almost deafening.

Ace grew restless, but Edward knew instinctively that it wasn’t because he was tiring of the embrace. He waited patiently for Ace to speak, absently stroking the teen’s hair.

“Teach said you’re dying,” Ace said at last, swallowing hard. “That you wanted to… that you wanted to go out in battle. And that my being on your crew would—would ensure that you did.”

Burning hot fury coiled in Edward’s belly, but he didn’t allow any of it to inflect in his voice as he answered. “Everyone dies, Ace. It’s a part of life. I’m old and I’ve already lived longer than most pirates—in a few more years, my new title will be the oldest pirate in the world. I’d be lying if I said that dying in battle, on my feet, while I can still die with honor isn’t what I want. But, no matter how I die, it won’t be your fault—it won’t, Ace. It will be by my choice. My decision to fight or to defend what is dear to me. I would gladly give my life for any of my children. If I died to protect Marco or Thatch, would you blame them?”

“No, of course not,” Ace leaned back so that he could see Edward’s face. “But I’m--”

“It wouldn’t be their fault, because it would be my decision to give my life up to protect them. A man will waste his life on many things, but he will only die for one he loves,” Edward knew his eyes were growing moist, but he was too old and had shed too many tears in his life to care. “Do you understand?”

Tears streamed down Ace’s cheeks as he stared up at Edward with wide eyed surprise, mouth agape, as if the answer to a great mystery had been suddenly laid out before him. He bowed his head, shoulders shaking silently.

“Teach was a liar and a murderer, but he was right about one thing,” Edward sighed heavily, feeling the weight of all his years on his shoulders. “I can’t expect you to trust us enough to join after this. The trust that you placed in us was broken, and I do not take that lightly. You’ve suffered more betrayal than most will experience in their entire lives. Everyone will understand if you simply wish to be dropped off in Paradise after this.”

Ace startled under his hand, lifting his head to stare up at Edward in confusion. Edward continued speaking, obvious to the determined look flashing in Ace’s grey, tear filled eyes. “Just because you leave the ship doesn’t mean that the relationships you’ve formed will end,” Edward swallowed, heart restricting painfully. “We can even ally with you, or perhaps--”—
“Pops.” Ace interrupted, wiping at his eyes furiously and drawing in a deep breath. His chin trembled as he eyed Edward uncertainly.

Edward stared down at Ace in astonishment, mouth agape. Tears slipped down his face freely as hope rocked him where he sat.

“Pops,” Ace said again, stronger and much more certain. “I’m nothing but trouble. I have bad blood and I have trust issues and almost everyone in the world wants me dead-- I’m not sure if it was good that I was even born, but… I want to join your crew. I want to become your son—if you’ll still have me, that is.”

“Son,” Edward beamed down at him and laughed joyously. I thought I’d lost you, he thought in wonder. You never cease to surprise me with your incredible resilience and courage. “I’d be proud to proclaim to the entire world that you are my son.”

Ace’s smile was bright and warm and pure like the sun. They both laughed and cried, hugging and clinging to each other like they hadn’t seen each other in years. Like they were father and son reunited after decades apart.

It was a long time before Ace finally drew back and Edward picked him up and carried and carried him home.

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The deck was crowded as they climbed on board, one of his sons jumping down to bring the boat back into the launch bay.

He set Ace down and allowed him to be engulfed by his brothers, watching fondly as the three boys laughed and clung desperately to each other. The relief on their faces was so earnest it was almost painful to see; all three of the boys were sagging against each other, physically and emotionally drained.

“Boys!” Edward called out, voice booming easily over the loud cheering. He glanced at Ace for confirmation and the teen nodded against Sabo’s shoulder, his brother’s arms wrapped lovingly around his neck. Edward paused just long enough for the rest of the ASL pirates to shove their way through the crowd, almost tackling the three boys in their excitement to latch onto Ace, before continuing. “I have returned and have brought my son safely home with me.”

The roar of approval would have shaken the heavens. Even some of the most hardened of his children teared up a little, the joy and relief in their faces almost palpable.

Edward’s eyes connected with Marco’s on the other side of the ship. The first division commander was huddled in several thick blankets with two nurses hovering next to him, but his wounds were already healed and his eyes were glowing with pride.

“Everyone, let the nurses take care of Pops’ and Ace’s wounds,” Marco shouted, voice barely audible above the racket. “The sooner they’re taken care of, the sooner we can start celebrating Ace becoming our brother!”

The cheering reached new levels of enthusiasm and noise as they parted so the nurses could reach them. As Edward glanced down at Ace and his brothers, he honestly couldn’t remember ever seeing the three boys look so happy.

My son, Edward thought, with the pride and joy that only a father could have as he stared down at his newest child.
Ace laughed and tackled his brothers in another awkward one armed hug the moment the sea stone cuff fell off. He was safe and his wounds, both of body and soul, would heal. He was absolutely basking in the shower of affection from his brothers and his new family as the nurses tried to herd him through the crowd to the infirmary.

The battle hadn’t changed that the world was still after his head, but for the moment he was safe. Safe, loved, and wanted. That was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

And there we go! The climax. Hope all of you enjoyed it :)
This chapter was a lot easier to write than I’d thought, but editing it was challenging because of the way it jumps around. Hopefully all of the fighting made sense!
Only a few more chapters to go until the end...
Thank you for the wonderful response to the last chapter! I was nervous for nothing. See you in a few weeks!
Chapter Twenty Five

There was laughter ringing in his ears as Thatch slowly emerged from unconsciousness, the enticing smell of food tugging him toward wakefulness as his stomach rumbled. He opened his eyes and blinked owlishly.

The first thing he saw was the ceiling, which was wholly unremarkable. The second thing he saw as he turned his head to the side was Whitebeard. The Yonko was propped up in a gigantic hospital bed, with Ace sprawled out on his right leg, half covered in a pile of blankets.

“I think you should get it on your face.” Luffy said, perched on the edge of Whitebeard’s bed. His back was resting against Whitebeard’s leg, close to where Ace was lounging comfortably.

“I’m not getting it on my face, Luffy.” Ace grunted, shifting further under the covers. He looked more content and relaxed than Thatch could ever remember seeing him.

“Think about it though! If you got it on your forehead, you wouldn’t have to worry about the shirt problem.” Luffy argued, munching on a large bowl of meat.

“Well—that is true.” Ace admitted grudgingly, reaching out a hand to absently stroke Luffy’s unruly mop of hair.

“Son,” Whitebeard chuckled, a low, tired rumble. He seemed just as content as Ace, which was somewhat strange considering how much Whitebeard hated being stuck in the infirmary. “Please don’t get your tattoo on your face.”

Ace snickered and grinned up at him and it was then that Thatch decided that he must be dreaming. He’d never seen Ace’s brightest grin directed at anyone but his brothers.

“Hey, look! Thatch is awake again.” Dream Ace said with another brilliant smile that rivaled even Luffy’s.

Thatch decided that he really wasn’t quite ready to wake up yet, but his eyes closed of their own accord. “I like this dream.” He mumbled.

The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was the sound of Whitebeard’s laughter.

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“Hey, he’s waking up again!”

“Give him some space, Luffy. You’ll scare him, yoi.”

Thatch opened his eyes and let out a muffled curse and jerked backwards. An inch away from his face was Luffy, chopsticks stuck in his nose and mouth, looking for all intents and purposes like a deformed walrus.

“Thatch, take it easy! Luffy, back off, yoi!” Marco snapped, grabbing the back of the boy’s t-shirt and dragging him away.
Panting heavily, Thatch pressed a hand to his chest and grimaced. He flopped back down with a pained grunt, heart racing and wounds protest protesting the sudden movement loudly. He closed his eyes briefly and tried to sort through his hazy memories to figure out what had happened.

“Thatch is awake! Yay!” Luffy exclaimed, words garbled by the chopsticks still protruding from his nose and mouth.

“How are you feeling?” Marco asked him quietly, adjusting his blankets and pillows so that he was more comfortable. “Take those out, Luffy. It’s disturbing, yoi.”

Pouting, Luffy complied with a huff and tossed them aside. Without another word he crawled up onto Whitebeard’s bed and propped himself up against the Yonko’s side.

The memory came back abruptly and had him scrambling upright again, expression frantic. “The boys’ cabin! There was someone messing with it--”

“Calm down! They’re right over there, see?” Marco gestured over to Whitebeard’s bed and shoved him back down onto his own. “They’re perfectly fine, yoi.”

Thatch stared in shock. Sprawled out on the bed with Whitebeard was Ace and Sabo. They were pressed against one another by the crook of Whitebeard’s elbow, snoring away without a care in the world. He honestly couldn’t remember seeing Ace so at peace, except for in his dream—

“Did Ace join?!” Thatch practically shouted, voice cracking slightly. He accepted the cup of water Marco pressed into his hand and downed it in two big gulps, staring up at his brother desperately for confirmation.

Marco smiled and ruffled his hair, which was limp and unruly. “He did. You missed quite a bit, yoi. You’ve been unconscious for four days.”

Blinking in surprise, Thatch stared at Marco’s face for a moment before his eyes drifted back to the sleeping pirates and Luffy, who was watching the conversation in mild disinterest. “What happened?”

He listened to the explanation with wide eyes. His gaze kept darting to Ace, and he noticed for the first time the numerous bruises, his heavily bandaged torso and the cast and sling on his right arm. But despite the terrible betrayal that had almost cost him and Ace their lives, the teen was snoozing away next to his newly adopted father without a care in the world. Thatch couldn’t help but feel slightly in awe that somehow, despite everything the teen had gone through just days before, a miracle had happened.

They owed a large part of that to Shanks. If he hadn’t come to stop Kaido and proceeded to drive him away from the ailing Moby Dick… it didn’t bear thinking about. They owed him a great debt and Thatch knew it couldn’t easily be repaid. They hadn’t even had the chance to thank him; he had left shortly after defeating Kaido without saying even a word to them, though he’d lurked around the area until Jinbei and Squard arrived with reinforcements. Stopping Kaido was risky enough. He couldn’t be seen as allying himself with Whitebeard any more than he already had.

“Ace really joined?” Thatch asked quietly, still struggling to process everything.

“He did,” Marco glanced over at the three brothers and smiled fondly. “I’ve never seen him so happy. I haven’t seen Pops so happy in a long time.”

Ace had found a special niche in his heart-- in all their hearts, really, but Whitebeard’s especially.
“I still can’t believe… after all this time, that Teach could just…” Thatch shook his head.

It wasn’t like he and Teach had been very close, but they’d fought together, bleed together, laughed and cried and shared adventures together for over twenty years. They’d been brothers.

Whitebeard had given them a place in a world where they were outcasts, the unwanted, the unloved, and the forgotten. Calling him ‘Pops’ wasn’t just a nickname, or a joke to them. If there was ever a man who deserved to be called ‘father’ it was him. Betraying Pops after everything he had done for them… it was unthinkable.

He glanced over to the huge bed that Whitebeard and the ASL trio were currently sleeping in. Luffy had dozed off almost as soon as Marco had started to explain everything, a big contented smile on his face as he snored in almost perfect harmony with his brothers.

“A lot of the crew is still in shock. We captured a few of the Blackbeard pirates and apparently Teach wanted to turn Ace over to the marines to become a Warlord. He wanted access to Impel Down to break out some of the worst criminals in there-- the ones that even we would consider too evil to run rampant. And that was just the beginning, apparently. He was far more cunning and ambitious than we ever realized, yoi.” Marco sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

Thatch wondered how much sleep he’d gotten in the past four days. Not much, if the dark circles under his eyes was any indication.

“How’s Pops taking it?” Thatch asked softly, grimacing slightly as he shifted into a more comfortable position.

Marco was silent for a moment, contemplating. “Teach almost killed you, severely damaged the Moby Dick, and kidnapped, injured, and threatened Ace. The moment he did those things, he was no longer our brother, no longer Pops’ son. But…”

“It must have been painful for him.” Thatch murmured, shaking his head.

“No one is mourning Teach, but this whole situation is… complicated. We barely had a chance to process what had happened before we were going into battle,” Marco shook his head. “Teach was dead before everyone even had a chance to hear that he’d betrayed us, yoi.”

“Enough talk of him,” Whitebeard said, surprising both of the division commanders. They hadn’t noticed him wake up. “Teach made his choice. He was never truly one of us, for he was duplicitous from the start. His threat is over and all that he tried to destroy has been restored. Now we must simply lick our wounds and let time do its magic.”

Thatch and Marco both nodded.

“How are you, Pops?” Thatch asked, struggling not to worry about how pale he looked.

“Stomach wounds are never easy to recover from, but I’ll be fine. Although I’ve been completely banned from alcohol for at least three for months,” Whitebeard said, glancing down at the three sleeping teens curled up at his side. “Possibly longer if the doctors have their way.” He finished with a deep sigh and a grimace.

“You’ve been needing to cut back anyways,” Marco said with a slight smile. His lips twitched into a smirk. “You don’t want to set a bad example for your newest son, after all.”

“That’s a low blow, Marco,” Whitebeard rumbled lowly, but his eyes were twinkling with mirth. “Drinking is bad for his narcolepsy anyways, so he doesn’t partake except on special occasions. I
doubt he’d change just to follow my example.”

“I don’t know, Pops,” Thatch eyed Ace thoughtfully, eyes sparkling mischievously. “I think Ace is just the type to follow your example and end up adopting unwanted misfits left and right.”

Marco laughed, nodding in agreement. “I can see that! One day, when he’s older.”

When he’s older. Such a simple statement, yet it was still very possible that Ace would be deprived of his someday, in a world that despised him for something that was beyond his control. The three veteran pirates glanced at Ace and knew that they’d do everything in their power to give Ace a chance at a future.

“Really Luffy is the one who adopts misfits,” Whitebeard said thoughtfully. “I’m very much looking forward to seeing what kind of crew he gathers, gurarara!”

“Can’t be any stranger than yours,” Marco’s lips twitched in amusement, sharing a knowing look with Whitebeard. “I’d be very impressed if he actually managed to find a bunch weirdos stranger than some of our brothers.”

Thatch shuddered. “Don’t say it like that. What if he actually does?”

They exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

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Ace was held in the infirmary for almost a week because of his ribs and concussion, but remarkably didn’t put up much of a fuss so he could stay near Whitebeard and Thatch. The infirmary had a constant stream of visitors for all three of them, keeping them entertained for the most part. Marco and the rest of the former ASL pirates were almost permanent fixtures, spending every free moment available with them.

Repairs were under way, but the damage from the explosions, the reject dials, and the battle itself had taken a heavy toll on the ship. There was also still some minor leakage from the sections of the hull that had been damaged worst and the crew was struggling to keep it under control.

It had been a huge relief to all of them when the keel of the ship was pronounced unharmed. The Moby Dick was not beyond saving, although it needed at least a month or two of repairs before it would be ready for battle again.

The Maelstrom pirates and the Sun pirates had arrived after the battle had already ended, but they stay to escort them to one of the islands under their protection, where they had a shipyard big enough to accommodate the Moby Dick. With the ship in such bad shape they hadn’t wanted to take any chances.

Whitebeard was up early going over the most recent reports about the damages to their fleet and the islands under their protection with Marco, when Fossa, Curial, Izo and Vista came storming in with the newspaper.

“Pops, Marco, you won’t believe this! Akainu survived!” Curial shouted, with a stack of newspapers in his arms, eyes flashing with fury.

“What?!” Thatch screeched, carefully sitting up abruptly with a grunt. “Someone actually pulled him out?”

“He is an admiral,” Sabo said with a frown. “It shouldn’t be that surprising that someone fished him
“I can’t say I’m really that surprised,” Ace grunted from his position on the edge of Thatch’s bed. “He just won’t die.”

“There’s more. He was kicked out of the marines!” Fossa exclaimed, eyes wide with disbelief.

“What?!” Ace’s mouth dropped, stunned.

Marco snatched one of the newspapers out of Curial’s hand without a word. He quickly read the article, forehead wrinkling in confusion, before passing the newspaper to Whitebeard, who’s expression was carefully schooled. “This doesn’t make any sense, yoi.”

“The official statement is that Akainu was forced to resign after disobeying orders and losing his entire fleet, but he’s done worse than that before without even getting a slap on the wrist. Something else is going on.” Izo said shrewdly, exchanging worried glances with Marco.

Ace glanced at Sabo, who was strangely silent and frowned at him.

“I’m sure there’s some chatter either from the Underworld or the marines. I’ve already asked some of our informants to investigate. We’ll be monitoring Akainu’s movements closely in the meantime.” Izo brushed a stray strand of hair out of his face and sighed.

“He will come after us. That much is certain, yoi.” Marco stared down at the paper and scowled at one of the articles. “It looks like they’re having a field day with Teach’s death. They’re saying that we betrayed him.”

“We’ve already contacted our allies and let them know what happened.” Fossa said, stroking his mustache thoughtfully.

“I doubt Akainu will be eager to face us again soon. He’s no fool; he won’t be able to come at us head on now that he no longer has the weight of the marines behind him,” Whitebeard murmured, shaking his head. “He’s a wildcard now.”

“Who knows what he’ll do next, yoi.” Marco agreed, mind whirling.

“I can’t believe he’s still alive after Marco almost died stopping him.” Thatch shook his head and slammed a fist down on his mattress. “That’s it! I’m forming an ‘I hate Akainu’ club! Who’s with me?!”

“I am!” Fossa, Vista, Curial, Ace and Luffy all exclaimed with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Marco just sighed and shook his head.

“I say we gather the rest of the division commanders and go pay the former admiral a little visit.” Izo smiled thinly, and Sabo and Ace both shuddered at the chilling expression on the commander’s face. They never, ever wanted to be on the receiving end of that look.

“Curb the bloodlust,” Whitebeard ordered, accidentally ripping part of the newspaper when he tried to turn the page. “You’re scaring the children.”

“Luffy looks perfectly fine.” Curial commented wryly, watching as the boy growled at Akainu’s face in the newspaper with amusement. He curiously folded the newspaper to hide the picture and Luffy stopped growling instantly, expression turning neutral.
Amusement growing exponentially, Curial unfolded it and laughed loudly when Luffy resumed growling, looking like he was moments away from attacking the newspaper and Curial’s hand in the process.

“Stop it,” Ace snatched the newspaper from Curial’s hands and threw the newspaper into a nearby trashcan. “Luffy, calm down.”

“We’ll have another shot at Akainu sooner rather than later,” Marco exchanged tired glances with Whitebeard. “So let’s focus on repairing the ship and preparing as best we can in the meantime, yoi.”

“I seriously doubt we’ll have to go to Akainu,” Ace agreed, drumming his fingers on his cast distractedly. “As long as I’m around he’ll keep coming after all of you.”

“All of us, Ace,” Thatch gingerly leaned forward and ruffled the teen’s hair. “You’re our brother now, so it’s ‘all of us.’ Your problems are our problems now, and vice versa.”

Ace smiled and some of the tension from his shoulders drained away. He grinned impishly and Marco dimly wondered what they’d just unleashed upon the crew. “Really Thatch? So does that mean that the next time you put dye in Marco’s food and turn his teeth pink it’s my problem too when he finds out?”

Thatch’s eyes widened in horror and he darted a desperate glance at Marco. “Traitor! I’m still confined to bed, I can’t run! You’re supposed to be on my side anyways!”

“You what? When was this—Thatch!” Marco sputtered incoherently when he realized that Thatch must have somehow bribed one of the cooks to put the dye in his breakfast, because everyone present had burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with a hand and glared murderously at Whitebeard, Sabo and Ace. “One of you could have said something sooner!”

“You mean you didn’t make your teeth pink on purpose?” Luffy asked innocently, earning several snickers.

Marco stormed out of the infirmary, but not before promising swift vengeance on Thatch the moment he was released from the infirmary.

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“And then, Ace sneezed and he set the sails on fire!” Luffy exclaimed with a laugh, earning a round of laughter from his audience.

Ace blinked awake and sat up abruptly, overgrown hair sticking up messily in all directions. “Wha—I didn’t mean to set the bathroom on fire.” He muttered, blinking drowsily and wiping his eyes.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in exasperation, softened by the obvious fondness and amusement in their eyes.

“Please, please, explain that sentence!” Thatch demanded eagerly, leaning forward to ruffle Ace’s hair.

“Stop it!” Ace leaned back in his chair a little too far and would have toppled over if Jinbei hadn’t managed to grab hold of the chair’s back, almost getting slapped in the face by Ace’s good arm for his effort. “Jinbei! I heard you were here, but I kept missing you.”

Jinbei chuckled and patted Ace on the shoulder. “Yes, my timing has been quite awful. Every time I came to visit you were asleep. How are you injuries?”
“Better,” Ace answered with a rueful grin, motioning at the sling that his right arm was in. “My arm’s out of commission for a while, but it’s finally starting to get easier to breath.”

“I doubt sleeping like that was helping your ribs any,” Jinbei eyed him with concern, noting the darkening bruises, numerous bandages, and pale complexion. “Should you even be out of your bed yet?”

“Jules has only complained about me being out of bed five times today, so I guess it’s okay.” Ace shrugged.

Jinbei dragged a chair over by the foot of Whitebeard’s bed and sat down. “So, what was that about setting things on fire?” he asked, watching in amusement as Ace’s cheeks turned red.

“We were telling funny stories,” Thatch explained gleefully. “Like the time Luffy tried to eat Marco.”

“Luffy… tried to eat Marco?” He repeated in disbelief, eyebrows twitching.

“He was in his bird form! How was I supposed to know that it was Marco?” Luffy huffed, brow pinched together unhappily.

“It doesn’t matter what excuse you use, Luffy. It won’t change the fact that you wanted to eat him,” Ace said, shaking his head.

“I thought he was a turkey,” Luffy responded defensively, turning away from Thatch and pouting. “He looked so delicious, too.”

Thatch lost it, laughing until he was crying and gasping. “T-turky,” He gasped, holding his side. “I’m so glad you’re staying Luffy! This is going to be amazing!”

“It’s not that funny, yoi,” Marco scolded, folding his arms over his chest. He was still miffed with Thatch about his teeth. He’d spent twenty minutes brushing and they were still a very light pink, so he’d been spending most of the day quietly stewing in irritation, hunched over his paperwork. He smirked. “I can think of a few of your more embarrassing moments that are much funnier.”

“Ooh, do tell.” Ace grinned widely and scooted his chair a little closer to him.

“If I may interrupt,” Jinbei interrupted, not wanting to be distracted from his purpose in coming. “I’ve come to take my leave for the time being. I didn’t get the opportunity to say goodbye to you boys last time, so I wanted to make sure I got the chance now.”

“Already?” Luffy asked with a pout as he bounced off the edge of Thatch’s bed and sprang over to him.

“I’m afraid so. Squard will escort you the rest of the way. I’ve pushed my luck enough already,” Jinbei said with a heavy sigh. “I can’t risk my position as a warlord any further at the moment. But I will come back in a few months to visit again… you will be here, won’t you?” he asked, glancing at Ace and Luffy expectantly.

“Yes!” Ace answered with a bright grin.

“I’m planning on joining the Revolutionaries soon, but Luffy will be here,” Sabo added. “I’m sure I’ll see you around though.”

Jinbei nodded, obviously pleased that Ace was joining the Whitebeards. “Are you going to join,
Luffy?

“Nope! I have to be the captain,” Luffy grinned widely and puffed out his chest. “After all, I’m the man who’ll be the next pirate king!”

Everyone laughed, but it wasn’t mocking or condescending.

“Come visit again soon!” Thatch said, waving goodbye.

“I will,” Jinbei walked over to Whitebeard’s side and clasped his hand. “Try not to overdo it.”


“See you later, Jinbei,” Sabo grinned. “Maybe next time you come back we can have a spar.”

“And we can have a rematch!” Ace exclaimed excitedly.

Jinbei chuckled ruefully and shook his head. “A sparing match, perhaps. I won’t have time for another five day battle anytime soon.”

“I’ll look forward to it!” Ace smiled broadly and slapped Jinbei’s shoulder.

“Hey, Jinbei,” Luffy stepped closer to him, a gleam in his eyes and an strange edge to his smile. “I’m going to ask you to join my crew someday, when I’m a captain worthy of having you on my crew.”

Jinbei’s eyes widened in surprise, but after a moment he smiled. “I will look forward to that day then, Luffy.” He answered, surprising Ace, Sabo, Marco and Thatch that he didn’t dismiss the promised offer out of hand.

Whitebeard didn’t look surprised at all.

“I will see all of you soon.” Jinbei promised, walking out of the infirmary with a smile firmly planted on his face.

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The rest of the day passed peacefully. The somber air that had struck the ship upon hearing that Akainu had survived wasn’t enough to overwhelm the joy everyone felt that Thatch was alive and Ace had joined the crew. It was almost impossible for them to stay in a sour mood for long.

Word of Thatch’s prank spread quickly through the crew and did a great deal to raise everyone’s spirits, as if that small action made everything right in the world. If Thatch was well enough to pull a prank on Marco from his hospital bed then a full recovery was certainly in his future.

Sabo hovered close to Whitebeard’s side for most of the day, waiting for the opportunity to talk to him in private. Thatch, being the social butterfly that he was, did better when he was around others—meaning that there was always at least two or three people sitting with him while he was awake.

His chance finally came when Ace was finally officially released from the infirmary a few hours before dinner. He hung back as Ace, Luffy, Bam Bam, Wendy, and Haru all headed off to dinner.

“Make sure you spy on the kitchen and bring me back a full report on the food!” Thatch exclaimed, settling back in the bed to sleep.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ace said with a wave, shoulders shaking with laughter. “I promise if I see so much as a one unwashed pair of hands or one hair in my food I’ll let you know.”
“Unwashed hands… a hair?!” Thatch wheezed, looking like he was ready to roll out of bed and crawl to the kitchen if he had to. “Don’t even joke, Ace. Why would you even say that?” He looked genuinely hurt that Ace would suggest such a thing.

“Would you relax? You run a tighter ship in that kitchen than Marco—don’t tell him I said that,” Ace rolled his eyes. “I seriously doubt I’ll find even a fork out of place. Coming, Sabo?”

“Actually, there’s something I wanted to talk to Whitebeard about,” Sabo answered, glancing up at the Yonko for confirmation. “I’ll join you later.”

Luffy and Ace glanced at him curiously, but their stomachs both growled. Food overruled curiosity almost every time.

“Don’t take too long or Luffy will eat your share,” Ace teased, turning and walking out of the infirmary. “I’ll sneak back with some dessert for you, Thatch! Pops, do you want anything?”

“I’m good, thank you, son.” Whitebeard said with a grin, and if it was a little sappy, no one commented.

“Well, I’m going to take a little nap,” Thatch announced, sensing that Sabo needed to talk to his captain alone. “If I start snoring too loud just hit me with a pillow or something. Gently, please.”

Sabo waited until he was sure that Thatch was out for the count before silently climbing onto Whitebeard’s bed. “I wanted to talk to you now that everything has settled down a little.”

The old captain nodded solemnly, but stayed silent and waited.

“I didn’t honestly think they’d throw Akainu out,” Sabo said, running a hand through his hair. “At least, not right away.”

He’d assumed that they’d try assassinating him first or at least try to threaten him into backing down one more time. But with Ace and Luffy safely in Whitebeard’s protective care, they had nothing to threaten him with, at least for the time being.

“I was surprised as well,” Whitebeard murmured, expression turning thoughtful. “But I doubt they’ve truly severed ties with him.”

That was exactly what Sabo hadn’t wanted to hear, but he knew it was true. Having Akainu kicked out of the marines wasn’t part of his original plan, even with all of the incriminating evidence he possessed. It had been a spur of the moment idea in response to Sengoku being ‘unable’ to recall Akainu’s ships.

“I might have made things worse.” Sabo admitted reluctantly, fiddling with a loose thread on his shirt.

Whitebeard was quiet for a while, carefully measuring his words before speaking. “The idea of Akainu as a free agent is unsettling, I’ll admit. But as a single individual, the avenues in which he can face us become extremely limited, even if the marines secretly support him. I doubt his time in disgrace will last very long though. It depends on how serious they take your threat and the measures they take to eliminate you and anyone who might be working with you.”

“Which means that they’ll be sending Cipher Pol after you.” Sabo murmured with a grimace.

“At the moment I doubt we’re at the top of their priorities, thanks to you,” Wry amusement warned for concern in Whitebeard’s eyes. “They’ll be after you with everything they have.”
Sabo shrugged somewhat carelessly. “I won’t be here for long, assuming the Revolutionaries still want me—and I’ll be in disguise. Plus, it’s not like I haven’t dealt with them before.”

“Don’t underestimate them. If they had truly focused all their attention on the three of you before, you wouldn’t be here,” Whitebeard said bluntly. “Dealing with Ace was high up in their priorities, but at the moment you’re at least number two or number three on their list.”

“I won’t,” Sabo promised earnestly. “Are you going to let the commanders go after Akainu?”

Whitebeard sighed heavily. “No. We’re going to be monitoring him closely. For the moment that should suffice.”

Not entirely convinced, Sabo nodded. “Thank you. For not stopping me.”

“You probably saved the lives of my children, Sabo,” Whitebeard gently patted Sabo’s head. “There is nothing you wouldn’t do to protect your family and I could never, ever fault you for that.”

Whitebeard fell silent and Sabo could tell that he was carefully considering what he wanted to say next. “How far are you willing to go? What will you do if they decide to ignore your threat?” Whitebeard asked at last, leaning forward and eyeing Sabo intently.

It was a question he’d been asking himself long before he’d even started seriously considering his plan. What was he willing to risk to protect his brothers? His principles, deeply ingrained in his early childhood and reinforced by everything he had seen and learned since setting out to sea? The world and the very people that he wanted to liberate from the oppression, slavery, and cruelty of the World Government?

There was a line that he could not cross without losing himself and everything he cared about completely, but he didn’t know where exactly the line fell. How far was too far? And would it even be enough to save Ace and Luffy in the end?

“I hope I don’t have to find out.” He murmured, gritting his teeth.

“So do I,” Whitebeard agreed, easily guessing what was going through Sabo’s mind. “So do I.

***

Ace took a detour after dinner to go visit the ship’s resident tattoo artist, Ellie. He’d been sketching his mark the entire time he’d been stuck in the infirmary, so he had a fair idea of what he wanted.

“The scar won’t be an issue, right?” Ace asked anxiously, squirming slightly as the tattoo artist touched it thoughtfully.

“Of course not. This should actually cover it quite nicely,” Ellie answered, stepping away from him and motioning for Ace to put his shirt back on. “It’ll take more than one session since it’s so big.”

“That’s fine. When can we get started?” Ace pulled his shirt back on and grinned eagerly.

“Give me a day or two to firm up the design and go over it with you,” She glanced at the sketch again. “I’ll get something back to you by tomorrow afternoon.”

Smiling wider, Ace stood. “Thanks, big sis!”

Chuckling in surprise, Ellie grinned and ruffled Ace’s hair. “Anytime, little bro.”

***
The next day Whitebeard finally revolted against the medical staff and returned to the quarter deck and the fresh, clean ocean air.

The only reason he hadn’t left sooner was because Thatch had needed the company and Ace had only stayed so long without trying to escape because of Edward. It was incredibly endearing how much Ace enjoyed his company.

But the change of scenery wasn’t just because he was tired of being cooped up in the infirmary for so long; he needed to clear his head and make some difficult decisions.

He’d mulled it over and over and over, but it didn’t settle well with him to send any of his children after Akainu, at least not immediately. As great a risk as Akainu was, Kaido and Big Mom presented an even more urgent danger. Kaido had already attacked them and would do so again as soon as he was sufficiently recovered from his battle with Shanks. Big Mom on the other hand, would undoubtedly take advantage of the losses both Edward and Kaido had experienced, though which of the two emperors she’d go after was anyone’s guess.

Sabo was the other reason he was sitting on the deck of his ailing ship, lost in thought on a fine spring day in the New World. Sabo’s plan would keep Ace and Luffy safe—for a few years. Long enough for them to grow even stronger and be ready for whatever the world threw at them.

The same couldn’t be said about Sabo.

The risk he had taken was beyond anything Whitebeard could have imagined if he hadn’t witnessed it himself. Sabo wasn’t the type that wanted to watch the world burn, but the plan would never have work if he wasn’t willing to actually go through with a good portion of his threat.

The world would burn, if all the information he had gathered was released. War was inevitable, but this wasn’t war they were talking about. It was Armageddon.

Still… Whitebeard knew that the battle to save Ace would have gone very differently if Sabo hadn’t managed to force the marines to turn most of their fleet back. The losses would have been far greater and they would have lost the Moby Dick. They might not have been in time to save Ace.

But even with Sabo’s intervention, the World Government wouldn’t stop coming after Ace and Luffy, even if it meant going through the Whitebeards to get to them. They just wouldn’t be able to attack them directly. It was a mess. But what worried him most was Sabo. The moment he stepped foot off the ship and left the Whitebeards’ he would be killed if the World Government had their way.

Rubbing a hand over his face wearily, Whitebeard shut his eyes and allowed the familiar sound of the sea and the general din of his children hard at work to wash over him.

“Hey, Pops!” Ace’s cheery voice drew Edward out of his dark thoughts and he opened his eyes to see his newest son beaming up at him. “I’ve got something to show you!”

Edward barely had time that to realize that Ace wasn’t wearing a shirt before he spun around and showed him his back.

His eyes were instantly drawn to the large, freshly completed tattoo on Ace’s back. The scar that had once marred his skin was gone, covered by Edward’s mark for the entire world to see.

He was speechless for a moment, staring at Ace’s back in wonder. If anyone had ever doubted that Ace truly trusted Edward and his children, they never would again. His tattoo was a sign of implicit trust and to have placed it on his back… It had a wealth of meaning. ‘I trust them to have my back.’
‘I trust them enough to allow myself to be vulnerable in front of them.’ ‘I trust that they won’t betray me.’ It was truly humbling.

“What do you think?” Ace turned around and jumped onto Edward’s knee, watching him expectantly. “I think I could have had it a little bigger—”

“I think the size is just fine, son,” Edward chuckled, recovering slightly. “No one will be able to miss it when you’re not wearing a shirt.”

Ace nodded. “It’s a good thing I usually don’t get cold thanks to my devil fruit. I won’t have to wear a shirt very often!”

Shaking his head in amusement, Whitebeard watched as Ace sprang off his knee and ran off to tackle Marco to show off his tattoo. His eldest son smiled fondly at Ace’s pure, childlike excitement, eyes crinkling in amusement as he ruffled the teen’s hair.

Perhaps some things were worth risking the entire world, like family and a rare, carefree smile from a young man who had just found his home.

“Curial,” Whitebeard called out, motioning him over. “Contact Rayleigh and tell him that he should come visit his wayward apprentices.”

“Sure thing, Pops.” Curial said with a grin, before jogging off to fulfill his mission.

Wishing desperately for a drink, Whitebeard watched Ace interact with his children and knew deep in his heart that he would go to any lengths to keep his children safe.

Including Sabo.

***

Rayleigh was getting too old for this sort of thing—getting shipwrecked was something that should happen to young men, not experienced sailors who were in their seventies.

He climbed aboard the Moby Dick without much difficulty thanks to one of the young scalawags on night duty throwing down a rope ladder. Apparently Whitebeard had been kind enough to let the crew know he was expected.

He was escorted to Whitebeard’s room and ushered in without further ado, leaving a trail of water in his wake to mark his passage. The night air was slightly chilly, but he merely felt invigorated after his long swim.

Whitebeard looked well, all things considered. He was hooked up to a large variety of medical equipment, but that was nothing new for him. Despite pale skin and the bandages covering his chest, it was clear he was on the mend.

“I see rumors of you being on your death bed are greatly exaggerated,” Rayleigh grinned wryly and gratefully accepted a towel from the same boy who had thrown down the ladder. “You’ve been busy this year. I’ve heard more about you in the last three months than I have in the last two years.”

“What can I say,” Whitbeard chuckled, but there was a note of solemnity that could not be banished from his continence even by the rumble of his laughter. “My newest son is quite the trouble maker.”

Rayleigh’s smile broadened and he threw his head back and laughed, all of the worry he’d felt when Whitebeard had contacted him draining away. “Ace joined? That’s the best news I’ve heard in years.”
“Got his mark finished today,” Whitebeard shook his head, eyes twinkling with amusement and slight resignation. “If he had a choice I think he’d never wear a shirt again.”

“He got it on his back?” Rayleigh couldn’t help feeling surprised. The last time he’d seen Ace, the boy had reluctantly revealed what had happened on Glass Island after Rayleigh had asked why they didn’t have a doctor on in their crew, considering how injury prone the three brothers were. For Ace to choose to place Whitebeard’s mark there… “That kid really trusts you.”

“That’s why I asked you to come here,” Whitebeard sighed and finally gave in and poured himself a drink as well. The nursing staff would have his head, but he’d deal with them in the morning. “Sabo has taken action to keep the World Government off Ace and Luffy’s back for a few years.”

“Ah,” Rayleigh helped himself to more sake and flung his dripping cloak onto the floor before sitting down on the edge of Whitebeard’s bed. A heavy weight fell on his shoulders. “He said he was working on something, but he didn’t give me any specifics.”

“I’m not surprised. His plan was… risky, to put it mildly,” Whitebeard took a drink and winced as it burned going down, both painful and unsettling as it hit his stomach. “He collected evidence to blackmail the World Government into leaving Ace and Luffy alone. He threatened war—the war.”

Rayleigh shut his eyes. Shakky had come to him several months ago and expressed concerns about what Sabo was planning. It seemed her suspicions had been right on the money, not that he was surprised. But to think that Sabo actually went through with it… He sighed and ran a hand over his face. “What happened?”

“They accepted his terms,” Whitebeard responded, setting his cup aside. “For now.”

“Hmmph. I’m not surprised he pulled it off… smart kid,” Rayleigh set his cup down on the small table beside Whitebeard’s bed and grabbed the whole bottle. “I had hoped… well. It hardly matters now. Is he going to join you too?” He asked somewhat hopefully.

“I offered, but he intends to join the Revolutionaries,” Whitebeard said, resting a hand on his stomach and wincing. “We expect to hear from them with a rendezvous point any day now.”

Rayleigh blew out a breath. While he had no doubt that the Revolutionaries would do what they could to protect Sabo, what they did was dangerous. Sabo wouldn’t be under the same level of protection as he would if he stayed with Whitebeard. “I can’t say I’m surprised about that either. Sabo’s always seen the world differently from his brothers. He’ll fit in perfectly with the Revolutionaries.”

Whitebeard rubbed a hand over his bandanna and fixed his piercing gaze on Rayleigh. “I agree, which is why I want to do what I can to ensure that he stays alive.”

“Oh?” Rayleigh arched an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t think that there’s much you could do at the moment.”

“Maybe not,” Whitebeard conceded. “But, I was thinking of giving a call to Sengoku to tell him to congratulate me on my new sons.”

“Oh, I see,” Rayleigh grinned, seeing where Whitebeard was going. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d lie about something like that.”

“I’m a pirate,” The Yonko responded somewhat defensively. “And I do consider Sabo a son, even if he isn’t going to join the crew. It will buy him time if nothing else. Especially since he’ll be spotted on the Moby Dick next to his brothers.”
Grinning wider, Rayleigh laughed and shook his head. “That will only work if you don’t have a Cipher Pol agent--”

“We don’t,” Whitebeard stated firmly, looking down right offended. “We’re checking to be sure, but if Cipher Pol had someone in the crew they would have acted already. We were too vulnerable for them to pass up taking some action against us.”

“Why did you ask me here?” Rayleigh asked, knowing that Whitebeard hadn’t truly asked him all the way to the New World just for a light chat. “It seems you have everything sorted.”

He was excited at the prospect of seeing Ace, Luffy and Sabo of course, but he knew Whitebeard hadn’t just asked him to come just so he could visit them.

“I thought it’d be good for the boys if you did a little training with them before Sabo leaves,” Whitebeard said, sniffing his cup of sake regretfully setting it aside. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to see you as well.”

Rayleigh leaned back in his seat and grinned. If Whitebeard couldn’t protect Sabo himself, he’d make sure that the boy was as prepared as possible to face the consequences of his actions. “Ah. I’m sure I still have a few tricks up my sleeves that I can teach them.”

“The division commanders will be training them as well, but you’ll have as much time with them as you want.” Whitebeard said, smiling back.

“We’ll start tomorrow. Now that business has been taken care of…” Rayleigh shoved his glasses up and poured himself another drink. “How hard was it to convince Ace to join?”

“I haven’t had such a challenge since Marco,” Whitebeard admitted with a fond grin. “He didn’t think I was even including him when I invited him and the rest of the ASL pirates to join.”

They talked through most of the night, catching Rayleigh up on everything that had happened since the Whitebeards’ had first encountered the ASL pirates to the battle with Teach and Akainu. Once Rayleigh was up to speed on everything they began swapping stories of the three brothers. Some lighthearted, others from the darker period of their lives after Dawn Island had been attacked.

“I’m beginning to think that Ace has imprinted on Marco,” Whitebeard chuckled, imagining the first division commander’s reaction if he used the euphemism in front of him. He rarely indulged in torturing Marco with bird jokes, but when he did, the reaction never failed to entertain. “He’s been following Marco around for the last two days.”

Rayleigh laughed and shook his head. “I’ve missed those boys.”

He’d missed them more than he’d ever expected, just as he’d grown to love them more than he’d ever believed possible. Even knowing that Ace was Roger’s son hadn’t prepared him.

“They’ll be happy to see you,” Whitebeard said, leaning back in his bed and rubbing his eyes tiredly. “Marco’s waiting outside to take you to your room. I’m sure he’ll be able to help you change into something dry.”

Rayleigh sprang off the bed and absently patted the damp spot he’d left. “I’m surprised we made it this entire time without you mentioning that I was dripping water all over your bed sheets.”

“I’ve known you long enough to guess what happened,” Whitebeard shook his head. “Shipwrecked again.”
“Indeed,” Rayleigh sighed. “My luck hasn’t changed since I was a kid running wild with Roger in the early years.”

“Is it true that you sunk the first ship you and Roger ever had?” Whitebeard asked, tossing one of the top blankets to the floor that Rayleigh had soaked through.

Barking out a laugh, Rayleigh shook his head. “He would blame it on me. He destroyed the mast and cracking the ship almost in half during a fight, did he tell you that? My accidentally ramming the ship into rocks was just the final straw.”

“Gurarara!” Whitebeard grinned fondly. “Tell me the full story over breakfast. Ace doesn’t object to hearing about Roger if someone else asks about him.”

“Really?” Rayleigh’s eyes widened with interest. “That’s new. Good for him! I’ve always thought that Ace would have loved Roger—Luffy’s painfully similar to him, after all.”

“Yes,” Whitebeard said slowly, eyes growing distant. “I’ve noticed. Quite a time to be alive, eh, Rayleigh?”

The idea of Ace, Luffy and Sabo actually getting the chance to live long enough to become the movers and shakers of the next era made his blood boil in excitement just thinking about it. Watching them grow was a joy. He would do everything in his power to ensure that the next generation got their chance, and he knew that Whitebeard felt the same. “Yes, it is. Makes an old man want to stick around for five or ten more years to see where things go, doesn’t it?”

Whitebeard’s gaze grew distant once more, as if looking upon something that was just out of reach. “Yes. It does.”

Ace, Sabo and Luffy were all half asleep when they entered the mess hall that day, which was why it took them a full ten seconds to process that Rayleigh was sitting with Whitebeard and a handful of the other division commanders eating breakfast.

The moment they did, they almost tripped over each other in their excitement to reach him.

“Rayleigh!” Luffy predictably reached the old man first, flying over Marco’s head and tackling Rayleigh to the ground.

“Miss me?” Rayleigh grinned, glasses knocked eschew as he reciprocated Luffy’s hug just as tightly.

“Of course! Wait till you see my new attacks!” Luffy untangled himself from Rayleigh and allowed the old man to use his shoulder to shove himself to his feet with a grunt.

“Maybe you can finally talk him out of yelling the names of all his attacks,” Ace said as he and Sabo reached Rayleigh’s side, ducking his head in embarrassment when Rayleigh hugged him and ruffled his hair affectionately. “Not that I have much hope.”

“It’s cool!” Luffy protested, crossing his arms and frowning up at Ace. “You should do it too.”

“Anyways,” Sabo drawled, jamming an elbow into Ace’s side. It was a losing battle and they all knew it. “It’s really good to see you, Rayleigh.”

“Good to see you too, Sabo.” Rayleigh hugged him and playfully knocked his hat eschew.
“What are you doing here?” Luffy asked, stretching out a hand to try and sneak food off Marco’s plate, only to have his hand smacked away.

“To see my wayward apprentices of course,” Rayleigh said vaguely, casting a significant glance in Sabo’s direction. “What’s this I hear about you joining the Whitebeards, Ace?” Grinning, Ace twisted around to show off Whitebeard’s mark, glowing with pride. “I’m going to be in the second division!”

“Good for you! Room for promotion in that division, from what I understand,” Rayleigh smiled and squeezed Ace’s shoulder. “I’m surprised that position hasn’t been filled yet.”

“Whoever becomes the second division commander will eventually become Marco’s first mate,” Whitebeard explained, startling all of the division commanders and Ace at the announcement. “We’re waiting for someone special to come along.”

Marco glanced at Ace thoughtfully. “We won’t have to worry about that for a while, will we, yoi?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“No, there’s no hurry,” Whitebeard allowed his gaze to shift to Ace, who was utterly clueless at the significant glances being cast in his direction by everyone but Luffy. “Why don’t you take Luffy up on deck with Rayleigh, Ace? I need to have a quick conversation with Sabo.”

“Sure,” Ace flung an arm around Rayleigh’s shoulder and smiled. “I finally got my flame commandment attack perfected! If you can stick around long enough for us to get to the island we’re traveling to I can show you.”

“I’ll be here for a few weeks at least,” Rayleigh slung his free arm around Luffy and together they walked out of the mess hall. “My ship sunk on the way here.”

“Again?” Luffy threw his head back and laughed. “You’re a terrible sailor, old man.”

“Luffy!” Ace scolded, glare completely ineffective because he was snickering into his palm. “He’s not terrible; he’s one of the most experienced pirates alive. Say it right this time.” Tilting his head sideways, Luffy considered it for a moment, brow furrowing. “You’re the worst.” Luffy said with a bright grin.

“You of all people don’t get to say that! You’ll wreck your ship five minutes after you set out!” Ace snapped, lunging forward. Luffy managed to slip past him and dart toward the nearest door, Ace hot on his heels.

Sabo watched them go and settled at one of the abandoned plates at the table and dug in. “So, you’re going to have Ace become the second division commander?”

“It’s very likely, assuming Marco approves,” Whitebeard responded lightly, finishing his meal and belching loudly. “Excuse me.”

“Why not one of you guys? I mean, if the second division commander is the one who’s going to become Marco’s first mate eventually…” Sabo trailed off and winced.

“The divisions aren’t decided by who is the strongest. Each division has its own specific role and Jozu and the others aren’t interested in becoming first mate,” Marco responded quietly, exchanging glances with Jozu and Fossa. “They would if they had to, but all of them are happy with their current positions.”

“Ace, huh?” Sabo chewed the cold, half eaten omelet thoughtfully. It wasn’t easy to imagine Marco
as captain, simply because it was difficult, not to mention painful to think of Whitebeard dying. But it
was surprising easy to picture Ace and Marco working together.

“He’s young. He’ll grow into the role and it will be a good experience for him if he ever decides to
form his own crew again.” Whitebeard glanced up at the ceiling, staring at something only he could
see.

“You’ve put quite a bit of thought into this, yoi.” Marco shot his captain a look that Sabo couldn’t
quite decipher, eyes troubled.

“Perhaps I’m growing sentimental in my old age,” Whitebeard shrugged. “It pleases this old man to
think of the future of his children.”

“You’ve always been sentimental.” Marco rolled his eyes and stood up to chase after Ace and Luffy
to make sure they didn’t destroy the ship or set it on fire.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was actually two chapters, which is why it took so long to edit it lol. I think
this is the first time I skipped a month, so sorry about that. Originally, Sabo would have
enacted his blackmail plan in this chapter, but I realized it didn't add anything to the
story if I had him blackmail the World Government after the battle.
The next chapter is the last one! We're almost there.
Thank you for all of the AMAZING reviews for the last chapter! You guys are
awesome and I loved hearing from all of you.
Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter Twenty Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A week Rayleigh arrived, Sabo received a call from the Revolutionaries. By the end of the five-minute telephone conversation, Sabo had a date, time, and location where he and Bam Bam were supposed to meet the Revolutionaries in ten days’ time.

Melancholy hit the three brothers hard upon realizing that Sabo would be leaving soon. Even the excitement of being trained by Rayleigh and the division commanders couldn’t fully lift the somber mood that had hit them.

It was strange. After all the years of being inseparable, their time together was coming to an end in ten short days.

Most of that time was spent training. Rayleigh and the division commanders pushed them to the brink of collapse every day, both physically and mentally. Each of the division commanders had their own area that they specialized in, such as disguise, strategy, emergency first aid, code breaking, stealth training, weapons, and more. Ace and Sabo enjoyed the ‘extracurricular’ lessons for the most part, but it was questionable how much Luffy was retaining, not to mention his general ineptitude at anything other than fighting.

Ace learned more about Roger in those ten days than he had his entire life. Rayleigh and Whitebeard would commiserate together almost everything night after dinner about the old days, when Roger had been young and roaming the seas, desiring only freedom and adventure.

At first, Ace only listened because he was curious to know how Whitebeard felt about his old enemy. It hadn’t taken long to realize that Whitebeard didn’t regard Roger as an enemy at all—more like a beloved rival, or an old friend.

Later though… later Ace listened because he couldn’t help it. All his life, he’d had a very clear image of the cruel, monstrous man that had shaken the world to its core. But that was not the man that Rayleigh and Whitebeard had known.

Rayleigh had told Ace once that Luffy reminded him of Roger. Ace would never have believed him if it weren’t for some of the stories the two old pirates swapped. Roger had rougher edges than Luffy and had been perhaps a little more blood thirsty, but they shared the same core-- the same fierce desire for freedom and the same unbreakable resolve to protect their friends and crew.

It gave Ace a lot to think about. He listened and watched Rayleigh’s face as he talked about his old captain and for the first time in his life realized that Roger probably had experienced the same slander and lies from the World Government and the newspapers as he had.

It made him wonder about a lot of things. He listened every night and tucked away their stories in his heart, struggling to view Roger fair-mindedly. He was only partially successful, but something took root in his mind, something other than hate and resentment. And with that tiny, fragile realization, he suddenly wondered if his blood rally was cursed.

If Roger was just a man, not a monster… if he had been a pirate with a love for adventure, who set out not for conquest, but for freedom…

It gave Ace a lot to think about.
Time passed too quickly as they hurtled closer and closer to the date when Sabo would be leaving. Every other second they had that wasn’t with Rayleigh, Whitebeard or the division commanders was spent with just the three of them, or with Wendy, Haru and Bam Bam.

They arrived on the island where they were going to repair the Moby Dick three days before the rendezvous. As soon as the ship entered the dry dock the division commanders became much busier as repairs began in earnest, leaving them training solely with Rayleigh.

Far too soon, it was the day Sabo was scheduled to meet with the Revolutionaries.

“We’re not training today?” Ace asked in surprise, wiping absently at his nose and stifling a yawn. Beside him, Luffy was falling asleep standing up, leaning heavily against Ace’s shoulder and snoring loudly. They’d just finished eating breakfast and were about to walk out of the mess hall when Rayleigh told them they were taking the day off.

“You’ve earned a break. Besides, Sabo’s leaving today. You should spend the time you have left together,” Rayleigh chuckled as Sabo blinked drowsily and flopped onto Ace’s free shoulder, half asleep. “Tomorrow there will be a meteor shower over the island that only occurs once every fifty years. You should watch it.”

“You watched it before?” Ace asked, rubbing his eyes tiredly and sagging under the weight of his brothers.

“Yes, with Roger,” Rayleigh glanced away for a moment, smile turning wistful. “You should enjoy it if you can.”

“Okay.” Ace said, promptly falling face forward onto the floor, fast asleep. With the only thing propping them upright gone, Luffy and Sabo collapsed half on top of Ace. None of them even twitched.

“They’re blocking the doorway!” One of the Whitebeards complained loudly.

“I think we might have pushed them a little too hard…” Jozu remarked dryly, walking over and poking Sabo in the side. The teen didn’t so as much as twitch.

“They needed it,” Rayleigh answered, watching them thoughtfully. It was still astonishing to see them so trusting that they’d let themselves fall asleep in a room with so many people around. He hoped Sabo would be able to find such trustworthy companions. “They won’t be able to watch each other’s backs for much longer.”

Laying a hand on Rayleigh’s shoulder, Izo smiled. “That’s what their crewmates will be for.”

Smile broadening, Rayleigh nodded, remembering the crewmates who had watched his back once upon a time and the ones that he’d watched in return. “Help me take them back to their quarters?”

Izo nodded with a long suffering sigh and wordlessly picked up Ace, as Jozu hefted Sabo up into his arms. “They’ll sleep the whole day away at this rate.”

Picking up Luffy, who instantly nuzzled his head into the crook of his neck, Rayleigh laughed. “They’ll sleep until they’re hungry.” He said, momentarily unable to take his eyes off Luffy, who was smiling even in his sleep.

It was a miracle. They were alive. They were safe. They had people that cared for them and loved them—a family that would fight and die for them. It was more than he had ever dared to hope for.
“Let’s get them to bed.” Rayleigh said, turning and moving aside so Izo could lead the way.

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Blinking awake, Ace rubbed his eyes and yawned, every muscle in his body aching as he stretched out his cramping right leg. Training with Rayleigh and the commanders was rough. He’d almost forgotten how hard the old man pushed them, and the division commanders had taken far too much pleasure in working them till they dropped.

Sitting up slightly, Ace shoved Luffy’s head off his chest and grimaced at the wet patch on his t-shirt. He glanced to the side and jerked when he spotted Sabo sitting in one of the worn leather arm chairs they’d been given for their room, staring at them. “Sabo, what have we said about being a creeper while we’re sleeping?”

“Do it?” Sabo grinned as he offered a typical Luffy response to such a question. “I’m just… I’m leaving today.”

Flopping back down on the mattress, Ace flung an arm over his eyes. “I know.” He said, voice coming out more sullen than he had intended.

“It’s just… it’s weird, right?” Sabo asked, trying to fix his bed hair with a little huff.

Twelve years. He’d known Sabo for twelve years and had seen him almost every single day of that time span. They’d spent the last seven years fighting for their lives, protecting, defending, and depending on each other with unwavering loyalty and trust. They’d fought, bled, laughed, and cried together. Sabo and Luffy had seen Ace at his very worst. They’d seen him reach rock bottom in ways he never would’ve imagined reaching and stuck with him, as unwavering as the unbreakable bond of brotherhood that tied them together.

And suddenly, they were going their separate ways. Ace knew it was inevitable, but that didn’t do anything to soothe the dull ache inside at the thought of Sabo suddenly not being there. The knowledge that Luffy would be setting out in a few years only made the feeling worse.

“Yeah,” Ace sighed and ran a hand through his unruly hair. “It’s weird.”

Suddenly realizing that this was possibly the last chance he’d have Sabo to himself for who knew how long, Ace sat up and stared at him intently. “Sabo… I just want to say I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Sabo blinked in bewilderment. “If this is about setting my coat on fire yesterday—”

“No, no, no, not that—though I am sorry about it,” Ace scratched his head, nose wrinkling as he struggled to grasp the right words. “When we were about to set sail after Rayleigh left… I wanted to leave you behind.”

Face suddenly going suspiciously blank, Sabo glanced away, shoulders hunching forward unconsciously.

“I was scared of losing you and I was being selfish. All I could think about was that if something happened to you it would be my fault and it was my fault that Dawn Island was destroyed and Mak—everyone died. I couldn’t take anymore guilt. I couldn’t lose you, Sabo,” Ace shrugged helplessly, voice thickening with emotion. “I couldn’t let you die because of someone like… someone like me.”

“Ace… I know it’s hard for you to understand, but I value you and Luffy over everything else, even my own life,” Sabo smiled wearily. “I’d gladly die for either one of you. You’re my brothers and I love you two idiots.”
Cheeks burning, Ace rubbed the back of his neck and looked everywhere but at Sabo. “I—I know. Me too.” He said somewhat awkwardly and incredibly embarrassed.

“It was my choice to go with you. And that’s why—that’s why I was so upset when you just announced that you were leaving without me. You didn’t even give me a choice,” Sabo sighed. “That… wasn’t one of our best moments.”

The fight, both verbal and physical, had been the worst they’d ever had. Even though they’d made up and Ace had apologized, it had taken them weeks to get back to normal. It hadn’t been until they’d stolen the Romance Dawn that they had finally managed to put it past them.

But even though they hadn’t talked about it, Ace knew that it still bothered Sabo. He’d seen it in the way he’d responded to Garp, when the old man had expressed regret that Sabo had been dragged into the whole mess with Ace and Luffy.

“I’m sorry,” Ace said earnestly, leaning forward to catch Sabo’s wandering gaze. “I never should have tried to leave you behind. I-I let my fear get the better of me. I was so afraid. But I realize now that we wouldn’t have made it without you.”

“True,” Sabo’s lips quirked upwards. “You didn’t need to apologize again, Ace. I forgave you a long time ago.”

“I know,” Ace shrugged again. “You’re leaving and it’s just… even though the Whitebeards are my family now too, I just want you to know that no one could ever replace you. You—you were my first friend in the whole world. If it weren’t for you… I can honestly say I wouldn’t be here… And it doesn’t have anything to do about the whole mess with the marines.”

Ace had been in a dark place when he’d met Sabo. He honestly didn’t know if he would have gotten through it if Sabo hadn’t chased him down and insisted that they become friends, almost as stubbornly as Luffy had. Sabo’s friendship had been like rain in a desert; it had revived a part of him that had been slowly withering away from neglect and absence.

Head tilted sideways, Sabo nodded. “You were mine too, you know—my very first friend.”

They both fell silent for a moment.

“I’ve been thinking…” Ace glanced down at the blanket Luffy was hogging and tugged it over his legs. “I think we should go with Luffy to Dawn Island before his birthday and be with him when he sets out.”

“We could do that…” Sabo said, mentally calculating when they would have to set out and how long it would take to reach East Blue.

“No one else will be there to cheer him on as he sets out, so we should go,” Ace said, absently picking at a loose thread on the blanket. “Besides, I want to see it for myself. Gramps said that it wasn’t completely destroyed, so maybe… at least Dogra and Magra survived.”

“We can go see, but don’t get your hopes up too much, Ace,” Sabo cautioned. “I like the idea though. And even if I can’t travel with the two of you I can at least meet you there.”

“Meet us where?” Luffy mumbled, yawning and sitting up.

“We’re going to go with you to Dawn Island and be there when you set out.” Ace said, poking Luffy’s cheek and mussing his hair.
“Really?!” Luffy glanced between his brothers, a huge smile stretching across his face. “That would be awesome!”

“It’s decided then!” Ace grinned and slapped Luffy’s shoulder. “You and I will set out for Dawn Island and Sabo will either meet us either on the way or once we get there.”

“Yes!!” Luffy threw his arms up in the air, almost hitting Ace on the head.

“Watch it!” Ace swatted at Luffy and accidentally knocked him off the bed. His stomach rumbled. “I need food.” He grunted, holding his stomach with one hand and fending off the pillow Luffy threw at him with the other.

“Me too! Let’s go!” Luffy sprang to his feet, grabbed his hat from the bed post, and dashed to the door.

Following at a more sedate pace, Ace and Sabo exchanged amused glances and shook their heads. Some things never changed.

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Rayleigh sat with them while they ate in the mess hall. They’d missed the regular lunch by several hours, but Thatch had left food for them, knowing that they’d wake up starving.

“I’m going to miss Thatch’s cooking,” Rayleigh leaned back in his chair and loosened his belt with a contented smile. He stared at Luffy for a moment, something obviously weighing on his mind.

“When you set out on your own you’ll start from East Blue?”

Luffy nodded, brightening unconsciously. “Ace and Sabo will be coming with me to Dawn Island to send me off!”

“Really?” Rayleigh glanced at them in surprise. He’d thought they’d never want to go back, Ace especially, but he could understand the desire to see what had become of their former home. And who had survived. “I’m glad that you won’t be on your own. Someone should there to bear witness.”

Ace and Sabo both nodded solemnly.

“You plan to find your first crew members in East Blue then.” Rayleigh said carefully, earning curious looks from Ace and Sabo.

“Of course!” Luffy grinned.

“Then I want you to keep this in mind—East Blue is the weakest of all the oceans. Even once you enter the Grand Line, most of the people you’re likely to meet will still have a considerable gap in strength from those who are in the New World,” Rayleigh leaned forward and fixed a stare of great intensity on Luffy. “You probably already outclass all of the opponents you might face in East Blue, but your crew will struggle. If you rush through East Blue and the first half of the Grand Line too quickly your crew will suffer. You might even lose someone, either by an enemy’s hand or by an unwillingness to endanger themselves and their crewmates by staying. To advance quickly through the Grand Line with a rookie crew could prove to be deadly.”

Luffy for once was perfectly still in his chair, expression grim. “You’re saying that I shouldn’t plan to head into the New World until they’re ready.”

“No one is ever truly ready for the New World,” Rayleigh said honestly. “We weren’t. When we
entered the New World the first time, we had heavy losses—far too many.”

Rayleigh fell silent for a moment, eyes growing distant. He stirred after a moment and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “We were so confident we were ready, but the New World defies all logic. Even the sea is stronger and more treacherous. Your experience and strength in both Paradise and the New World will give you a great advantage, but if you’re not careful it could be a double edged sword. As a captain, you have to consider your crew’s strengths and weaknesses and carefully chose what dangers you lead them into. You might be able to handle it, but if they can’t…”

“I think I understand.” Luffy said gravely, absently planting a hand on his hat.

“Good,” Rayleigh smiled and reached over to pat him on the shoulder. “You’ll be a good captain, Luffy.”

“Was Roger a good captain?” Ace asked, wondering what it had been like to enter the New World all those years ago when it had been even more unknown and unexplored.

“He had his flaws,” Rayleigh said quietly. “He had a terrible temper and he never backed down from a fight, no matter how much we might have wanted him to. But he was a great captain. He cared about his crew and inspired loyalty in the most unexpected places. We’d have followed him to hell and back, because we all knew he’d go even further for us. He had honor. Roger never would have been able to earn Whitebeard’s respect if he hadn’t. Even Garp respected him, in a grudging sort of way. He was many things Ace, but he was never the monster the world thought he was. No pirate is a saint, but Roger was a good man. We loved him dearly.”

Ace huffed and stared down at the table, conflicting emotions flashing across his face. He honestly didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“Why don’t the two of you come and help me finish packing? Then we can go play cards or something until sunset.” Sabo suggested after the silence dragged on for a minute and Ace continued to stare distractedly at the worn table.

Rayleigh nodded and stood to his feet. “I’ll see you tonight then.”

Swallowing hard, Sabo nodded and shoved himself to his feet. “Tonight.” He murmured, as they walked back in a somewhat depressed silence to their room.

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“So, are we going to watch the meteor shower? We still have a few hours before I need to leave to meet with the Revolutionaries.” Sabo said, not glancing up from his cards.

It was almost dusk. They were sitting in a semi-circle by the Moby Dick’s figure head playing cards, squinting to see in the growing darkness. They’d been at it for an hour and Sabo was winning, partly because half of Luffy’s cards were turned the wrong way and partly because Ace had accidentally had set a winning hand on fire when he’d sneezed earlier.

Peering up at the cloudless sky, Ace nodded. “If Rayleigh suggested it then it has to pretty cool, right?”

“We should go to that hill on the island!” Luffy exclaimed, standing up and stepping on the cards in his excitement and pointing.

“Hey!” Sabo slapped Luffy’s leg and shoved him away, but it was too late. The pile of cards was in hopeless shambles. “Gah… I give up. We should get going soon if we’re going to watch it.”
“We should get a blanket—oooh, and a picnic basket!” Luffy laughed in delight at the prospect and peeled a card off the sole of one of his sandals.

“We just ate—oh, never mind,” Sabo rolled his eyes, collected all of the cards and shoved them into one of his pockets. “I’ll go take care of that.”

“Hey,” Ace glanced at his brothers thoughtfully. “Can I take Pops with us?”

Sabo frowned. “Wasn’t he grounded by the nurses for drinking?” The alcohol had irritated his stomach wound just as the nurses had predicted and they had given him strict orders to stay in bed until further notice.

“We could sneak him out!” Ace scowled at the disbelieving expression on Sabo’s face. “We could!”

“Well, I don’t mind. It’d be interesting to see you try at any rate,” Sabo glanced at Luffy. “Do you mind?”

Placing both hands on the back of his head, Luffy rocked back on his heels and laughed. “Nope!”

“I’ll go get him then!” Ace grinned and dashed off for Whitebeard’s room.

He barely bothered to knock before barreling into Whitebeard’s cabin, a bright grin plastered on his face. “Pops!” he exclaimed, a feeling of giddiness flashing through him at the word and the way Whitebeard smiled down at him fondly.

“Son,” Whitebeard put down the book he’d been reading and motioned for Ace to come closer. “What are you up to?” he asked in amusement as Ace poked his head out the door to check if the coast was clear.

“We’re going to the island to watch the meteor shower and I wanted to see if you’d like to come with us.” Ace explained animatedly.

“I would love to, but I’m not supposed to leave the bed.” Whitebeard said with a grimace.

“We could push your bed!” Ace chuckled at the skeptical expression on Whitebeard’s face. The bed had wheels, but it had taken ten nurses just to move it over a few inches the day they’d finally enforced bed rest on the old pirate. “We’re strong.”

“Well… if you think you’re up to it—”

“Let’s go!” Ace waited just long enough to check what medical equipment they needed to bring and load it into the bed before carefully tugging it through the door and out onto the deck. “The coast is clear.”

Whitebeard struggled to suppress a smile as Ace ‘stealthily’ wheeled his bed out onto the deck and toward the gangplank. “I’m impressed that you’re able to move me by yourself, Ace.”

Flashing Whitebeard a pleased grin, Ace peered up at the crow’s nest as he slowed to a stop in front of the wide gangplank. “Luffy!” He hissed, glancing around in confusion when he didn’t see either of his brothers on the deck.

“We brought food!” Luffy exclaimed as he burst out onto the deck with a huge sack of food that was almost bigger than he was. Sabo was right on his heels with a large blanket, the backpack he had with everything he was going to bring with him when he left with the Revolutionaries, and his pipe.
“Shhh! We’re sneaking out of here, remember?” Ace snapped, voice pitched a little too loudly to be considered quiet.

Someone in the crow’s nest snickered, almost in synch with the deep chuckle that escaped from Whitebeard. Ace shot Whitebeard a baleful glance and the Yonko stifled his laughter for the most part, offering his newest son a sheepish smile.

“Come on! Let’s get him down before the nurses come to check on him.” Sabo said, plopping the blanket he was carrying on the side of Whitebeard’s bed and moving to help push it down the gangplank, with Ace pulling from the front.

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The gangplank was thankfully wide and extremely sturdy, allowing them to move the bed safely onto the dock and roll him as quickly as possible out of the town and into the forest.

Pulling the bed through the uneven forest floor was much more challenging, but they managed to get him up the hill with relative ease, all things considered. They were still out of breath and exhausted by the end of it, though.

“You’re heavy, old man.” Luffy collapsed on the top of the hill, panting heavily.

“Get up,” Sabo kicked Luffy’s side with one foot as he unfolded the blanket. When he didn’t budge at all, Sabo simply laid the blanket down on top of him, covering him completely. “Luffy—”

Before Sabo could say anything else, Ace flopped down on the Luffy shaped lump. “Hmmm… I think there’s a rock here or something, Sabo. This isn’t comfortable at all.” He wiggled around until he was lying fully on top of Luffy.

“Ahcff! Gerrtooffffgh!” Words garbled and almost incomprehensible, Luffy kicked and struggled to dislodge Ace without success.

“This is actually kind of comfortable—oof!” Ace rolled off Luffy instantly when Luffy’s knee connected with his spine.

“Ahh!” Luffy crawled out from under the blanket as fast as he could, gulping in a huge breath of air. “Ha! Serves you right, Ace!”

Without a word, Ace lunged forward and tackled Luffy to the ground, sending them rolling down the hill as they kicked and punched each other. They slammed into a tree with enough force to almost topple it and continued fighting, twin smiles widening across their faces as they slammed into each other.

Chuckling at their antics, Sabo unloaded everything they’d piled on Whitebeard’s bed and finished spreading out the blanket. He wiped sweat from his brow and drank in the scene in front of him.

The view from the hill was one of the most stunning sights he had ever seen. Beyond the forest, the dimly lit village, and the bright lights radiating from the Moby Dick was the ocean; its velvet depths reflected the sky so perfectly it was almost hard to tell where the sea ended and the sky began.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Whitebeard murmured, staring out at the sea as some would stare at an old lover.

“Yes,” Sabo agreed, settling down comfortably on the blanket. “Have you seen the meteor shower before?”
“Yes. This will be my second time,” There was something distant in Whitebeard’s voice that made Sabo glance up at him curiously. “Have you said all of your goodbyes?”

“Not to everyone, but if I tried I’d be here for the next ten years,” Sabo chuckled to himself. “I just want to say… thank you. For taking in Ace and Luffy, for going along with my plan… everything you’ve done to protect us. Meeting you is probably the best thing that could have happened to us.”

“Everything that I have done has been my privilege. I don’t take the trust that you boys have placed in me and my crew lightly,” Whitebeard paused and turned his gaze back out to the ocean. “You boys truly amaze me. Your resilience, the mercy you have shown, the fact that you still have the ability to trust after all of the betrayals you’ve experienced… I could not be more proud of you.”

Swallowing thickly, Sabo glanced away from him. “That means a lot coming from you,” More than you know, Sabo thought somewhat wistfully. “If things were a little different, I probably would have joined the crew too, but I can’t just sit back and do nothing. I’ve seen too much. All of the evidence I found… things have to change. But still, even if it was just for a little while, I’ve loved being a part of your crew.” Your family, he thought but didn’t bother to say aloud. He knew that Whitebeard would understand, somehow.

“Sabo,” Whitebeard motioned for Sabo to come closer to him. He waited until Sabo was settled on the bed by his elbow before continuing, gazing down at him earnestly. “You might not be joining my crew, but that doesn’t mean that you’re not my son. Understand?”

Biting his lip, Sabo stared at Whitebeard in surprise a moment, eyes stinging. He smiled, albeit a little wobbly. “Got it, Pops.”

They sat together watching as Ace and Luffy rapidly lost steam, finally collapsing in exhaustion as the first meteor streaked across the sky and disappeared into the horizon.

Running back over to them, Ace and Luffy joined Sabo on Whitebeard’s bed and covered themselves a blanket they’d brought with them just as two more meteors lit up the sky and disappeared into the ocean.

They’d seen a meteor shower before on Dawn Island, but this was the Grand Line. This was the New World. It didn’t even begin to compare. There were no words.

It started out as two or three streaks illuminating the dark sky as they raced past, but then it was ten, fifteen, thirty-- until the entire sky was alight with the meteors, bathing the sky and the world below in brilliant white light. The meteors’ trails remained in the sky long after they disappeared, almost blocking out the stars as the shower reached its zenith. It was mesmerizing, more dazzling than fireworks or anything they’d ever seen.

The haunting sound of a bird trilling in the distance caught their attention and they spotted Marco flying toward them in his Phoenix form, cobalt and gold a stark contrast to the brilliant white flashes. He swooped down gracefully and mussed Ace’s hair with the tip of one wing before landing on the edge of the bed and settling down.

“Here to join us, son?” Whitebeard asked in amusement. “Or did the nurses send you?”

Marco craned his neck around to shoot Whitebeard a baleful glare in answer. He turned his attention back to the sky, feathers ruffling a bit when Ace carefully placed a hand on his back.

“How is he not setting fire to the bed?” Ace wondered aloud, fingers gently stroking the flaming feathers in fascination.
“Hush.” Whitebeard murmured, reaching out a finger to ruffle Ace’s hair.

Glancing around him, Sabo shared a look with Ace and knew that he was thinking the same thing, the look of contentment on his face foreign, but absolutely wonderful.

It really doesn’t get any better than this.

***

Wendy, Bam Bam, Haru, and Rayleigh were waiting for them at the bottom of the hill when the meteor shower finally ended two hours later. Judging by the duffle bag slung from Bam Bam’s shoulders and Wendy’s red, puffy eyes, they’d already said their goodbyes.

“Do you have to go already?” Luffy wrapped his arms around Sabo, just managing to keep the whininess in his voice to a minimum.

“I’m afraid so,” Sabo returned the hug tightly and swallowed hard. “I’ll come back to visit whenever I can. And I’ll definitely be there when you set out.”

“It’s a promise!” Luffy squeezed him one more time before reluctantly letting go.

“Try not to do anything too stupid without us, okay?” Ace tried to grin, but failed miserably. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Ace,” Sabo hugged him tightly, the reality that he was leaving finally truly hitting him. “I’m going to miss you both so much.” He choked out, eyes growing misty.

Flinging his arms around both of his brothers, Luffy hugged him again. “Now who’s the crybaby?”

“I-I’m not crying, stupid.” Ace grit out, wiping his face absently.

Sabo laughed and somehow managed to gather the willpower to pull away from his brothers. “See you soon,” He promised, and turned to Marco and Whitebeard. “Thank you for everything.”

“Be careful out there, Sabo,” Marco said, tugging him into a quick hug. “We’re going to miss having you around.”

“Stay safe, son.” Whitebeard said, placing a huge hand on his shoulders and squeezing gently.

Turning to Rayleigh, Sabo smiled gratefully at him. No words were necessary between them, but he still said: “Thank you so much, Rayleigh. For everything.”

Rayleigh placed a hand on Sabo’s head and smiled down at him. “I’m proud of you. Take care of yourself and come visit me when you can.”

Ace and Luffy hugged Bam Bam and then hugged Sabo again. They were quickly joined by Wendy and Haru, wrapping their arms around each other tightly and leaning their heads forward so that they were pressed against each other. The only ones not crying were Marco and Whitebeard.

“Well… we better go before this gets even harder.” Sabo pulled away from his brothers, his family, and motioned for Bam Bam to follow him. Together they walked back up the hill, pausing just long enough at the top to wave goodbye before disappearing down the other side.

They could still hear the shouts of farewell as they walked away from the Moby Dick and the family they had found and forward to an unknown future.
The Revolutionaries were already there when they reached the other side of the island, four shadowy, hooded figures waiting for them on the beach. Behind them was a large ship with a dragon figure head. Sabo could faintly make out more people watching them from its deck, all eyes fixed on him and Bam Bam.

Approaching them silently, Sabo struggled to suppress a grin as they drew closer and he realized that he knew at least two of the cloaked figures waiting for them. He refrained from saying anything and instead shifted his attention back to the man standing in the middle, shivering at the suppressed power he felt emanating from him.

The man pulled his hood back to reveal none other than Dragon himself, intense gaze fixated on Sabo. “I’ve heard a great deal about you, Sabo. Your plan to blackmail the World Government seems to be working, at least for now. They’re going to remove Luffy’s bounty tomorrow.”

Resisting the urge to squirm, Sabo nodded and sighed in relief. The removal of the bounty would be a huge help to Luffy once he set sail. “He’s here if you wanted to meet him…?”

Dragon let out a small snort, lips curling upwards in amusement. “Would he care if he met me or not?”

That would be a no. Luffy had known about Dragon for years and not once had he ever expressed much interest in meeting him. The answer must have shown on his face because Dragon snorted again and glanced at the person on his right. “I’ll meet him someday, but we’re pressed for time just now.”

“Honestly Sabo, what on earth did you threaten them with? What we talked about wouldn’t have been enough to actually make them listen to you.” Koala tugged her own hood back a little so her face showed, but didn’t bother taking it off.

Shrugging carefully, Sabo offered her a small grin. “You really don’t want to know.”

“Probably not.” Koala huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“We can discuss that later in a safer location,” Dragon said, eyeing Sabo a moment more before turning around and heading back to his ship with a sweep of his cloak. “Your arrival is timely. I’ve been needing a new chief of staff.”

“Wait, what?” Sabo stared at Dragon’s retreating back in disbelief and hurried after him.

“That’s only after you’ve gone through the proper training and gone through a probationary period,” Koala warned, automatically falling into stride with Sabo. “We’re glad to have you with us too, Bam Bam. We’ll want to debrief you as soon as possible about everything you know about the inner workings of Cipher Pol.”

Bam Bam nodded and fell into step with her.

“You and Hack will be his partners for now,” Dragon announced as he boarded the ship. “Show him the ropes after we’re done with the debrief.”

“What?” Koala slapped her face, visions of all the headaches Sabo would undoubtedly cause her flashing through her mind. “I don’t want to be partnered with someone as selfish as him!”

“I told you we’d make a good team!” Sabo grinned, incredibly pleased that he’d get to work with Koala and Hack. “Please take care of me. I’ll try not to cause you too much trouble.”
“You’ve already caused me trouble!” Koala snapped, glaring at Hack as a quiet chuckle escaped him.

“I think we’re going to fit right in, Bam Bam.” Sabo shared a grin with her and followed Dragon into the ship for his first debrief.

Excitement coursed through his veins as the wind picked up and the sails of the ship were unfurled. He had a feeling that he’d have a lot of things to tell Ace and Luffy when he saw them again and even more things that he’d have to keep secret.

It was a good beginning, he thought as he cast one final look out at the island before following Dragon below deck.

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Three Years Later…

“Hey, Luffy! Hurry up; we were supposed to set sail twenty minutes ago.” Ace shouted, stomping into their room impatiently.

“But Sabo isn’t here yet.” Luffy protested, legs kicking back and forth restlessly from where he was sitting on his bed.

“We can’t wait any longer. I want to get us into the Calm Belt by nightfall,” Ace shoved his hat back and brushed his hair back in frustration, but his expression softened when he caught sight of Luffy’s slumped shoulders. “He’ll meet us there. He promised, remember?”

“Yeah,” Standing, Luffy straightened and grabbed his hat from his bedpost. He slapped it on his head and followed Ace out of their room for the past three years. He paused just for a moment to double check that he had everything and smiling faintly. He’d always have good memories of this room. “Coming.”

The room had changed considerably since it had been given to them, but it still had three beds with blue, red and orange quilts, despite the fact that Sabo hadn’t stayed in the room for almost a year, when they had seen him last. It was strangely empty, even with all of the knickknacks that they’d collected over the years.

It was Ace’s room now. Even if Luffy and Sabo came back to the Moby Dick, it would never be truly theirs again.

“Let’s go.” Ace looped an arm around Luffy’s shoulder and shut the door behind them, before leading Luffy away.

Everyone was waiting for them by the small ship that they’d had built for this very journey. It was similar to Ace’s ship Striker, but it was a little bigger and had a kitchen and sleeping quarters for extended trips and could comfortably accommodate three. Tied up securely to it was the small boat that Luffy would be using when he set sail.

It took them a while to make their way across the deck to the ship, the New Dawn. Everyone wanted to say goodbye and wish Luffy good luck, or give him tips on what to do first once he set sail. By the time they finally reached where Whitebeard and the other division commanders were waiting, Ace was at the end of his rope. He was practically vibrating with impatience.

“I would have had us leave yesterday if I had known it would take this long just to say goodbye.” Ace grumbled to himself, wincing when Jozu smacked his head.
“We’ll have you gone before lunchtime, brat.” The third division commander rumbled, watching in amusement as Luffy tackle-hugged Thatch when the cook presented him with six extra ‘pirate lunch boxes.’

“The boat is going to sink from the extra weight from the food at this rate.” Fossa chuckled shaking his head ruefully.

“With the way those two eat their supplies will be halfway depleted by tomorrow.” Izo retorted, grinning at the glare he got from Ace.

“It won’t be a problem,” Ace grinned suddenly, enjoying the immediate nervousness that flashed in Izo and Fossa’s eyes. They knew him too well. “We have a ride.”

“A ride…?” Haruta questioned.

Ace whistled and a sea king emerged from the ocean, showering them with water. She was young and small for a sea king, but still very large. Her large brown eyes landed on Luffy and Ace and she mooed happily.

“Cow-chan!!” Luffy laughed and sprang over to the railing. “You’ve gotten so big!”

“That’s your ride?” Thatch asked in amazement, staring at Cow-chan in disbelief. “How is that even going to work?”

“We’re old friends now,” Ace grinned and slapped Thatch’s shoulder. “Try not to have too much fun without me.”

“I’ll have a slew of pranks planned and ready for when you get back.” Thatch promised, dragging Ace into a hug.

“Pops, I’ll be back soon!” Ace said with a cheery grin, staring up at his adopted father.

“Be safe, son,” Whitebeard grinned back and turned toward Luffy. He was silent for a moment, before solemnly intoning, “We’ll meet again when you reach the top, Luffy.”

“Yeah. The next time we meet, I’ll be a great pirate!” Luffy grinned, echoing the familiar words of long ago. The words echoed with promise, as they had that day with Shanks. Another reason to grow as strong as he possibly could, another reunion to look forward to.

“You two take care and try not to cause too much trouble, yoi,” Marco smirked and reached out to ruffle Ace’s hair. “We want you back in one piece.”

“I’ll be back soon!” Ace slapped Marco on the shoulder and jumped onto the New Dawn. “Come on, Luffy, we’re leaving!”

Springing down onto the ship, Luffy turned back to look at them, expression surprising serious. He tugged his hat down slightly, smiled, and threw his arms out. “I’m going to be the King of the Pirates!”

“Get out of here already!” Vista shouted, chuckling to himself.

“Set sail! Next stop, Dawn Island!” Luffy grinned and hopped to the front of the ship as Cow-chan opened her gigantic mouth and swallowed them whole.

Ace really wished he could have seen the faces of the Whitebeards. If the shouting they could faintly
“So, Cow-chan is going to let us out at the edge of the Calm Belt. From there, we’ll head to East Blue on our own. It shouldn’t be that difficult for us to cross it with our haki,” Ace paused, mentally calculating how long it would take them to cross the Calm Belt and then travel to Dawn Island once they entered East Blue. Thankfully the lack of wind was no problem; the New Dawn was basically a larger, more comfortable version of the Striker and could be propelled by his flames. He held up his fist and lit it on fire for light. “We’ll get there a week ahead of time, more or less.”

“Mhmm… do you feel something?” Luffy asked frowning and glancing around. A moment later his face brightened.

“In here?” Ace asked, and then shut his eyes as well to concentrate. His whole face lit up the second he realized what he was sensing. “Sa--”

Something crashed into the side of the ship, sending them stumbling sideways. Ace whirled around and smiled. “Sabo! How did you--”

“I have my ways,” Sabo tipped his top hat back and grinned broadly. “I promised I’d be here, didn’t I?”

Head tilted sideways, Ace scrutinized him for a moment before a slow smirk spread across his face. “She ate you, didn’t she?”

Grimacing, Sabo nodded. “I was on my way to meet you when she came out of nowhere and swallowed me. I don’t know if she didn’t hear me or if she was just ignoring me, but she wouldn’t let me out.”

Ace shook his head, shoulders shaking with laughter.

Luffy waited just long enough for Sabo to tie the two ships together before flinging himself at him. “I missed you! How’s Bam Bam?”

Grunting from the weight of his not so little brother, Sabo silently marveled at how much Luffy had grown in a year. “I missed you too. Bam Bam is doing fine as far as I know. She’s been on assignment for six months so I haven’t seen her recently.”

“I want to hear everything!” Luffy untangled himself from Sabo and settled cross-legged with his back to the Dawn’s mast.

“Well, considering almost everything I do is supposed to be a secret, it won’t take very long to catch up on my end. I’m more interested in hearing about Ace’s fight with Boa Hancock.” Sabo glanced at Ace expectantly and sat down on the railing.

“She’s crazy! She kept saying that she loves Luffy and that he’s her husband!” Ace scowled at the memory and shook his head.

“So it was a fight to protect Luffy’s honor?” Sabo snickered at the pained expression on Ace’s face.

“She kept calling me brother in law and insisting that Luffy was her beloved,” Ace sighed and leaned back against the door that led to the tiny living area. “It was a mess. The Whitebeards just laughed the entire time.”
Sabo chuckled, wishing he had been there.

“Come on Sabo, tell us a story!” Luffy demanded eagerly as he scooted a little closer to him.

“Alright, fine. Let me think…” Sabo placed his head on his hand and mentally ran down the stories he could tell Luffy without revealing sensitive information. “I saw a ghost in the Florian Triangle.”

“A ghost?! Sooo cool! What happened?” Luffy was almost quivering with excitement, eyes sparkling in anticipation for a good story.

“Well, we were passing through it and all of a sudden we heard the sound of a violin playing in the distance. It kept playing Binks’ Sake over and over. And then… I saw it,” Sabo paused for dramatic effect, barely containing a smile when Ace shifted closer to him with poorly veiled interest. He glanced back at Luffy and could almost see stars shining in his eyes. “A derelict ship drifting off our starboard side. It must have been abandoned for at least fifty or sixty years. And on it… just for a moment as the fog cleared, I swear I saw a skeleton playing the violin. No one else saw it, not even Koala and she was standing next to me but facing the wrong way. I thought I heard as we passed it by, ‘Can I see your panties?’ uttered softly over the creaking of the ship and the haunting refrain of the violin.”

Silence for a moment, then: “That’s it! That’s who my musician will be!”

“No, no, no, no! Sabo, tell him it wasn’t real!” Ace despaired when Sabo only shrugged helplessly. “Don’t recruit a creepy pervert ghost onto your crew, Luffy!”

“It’s decided!” Luffy nodded decisively to himself. “Another story!”

“No!” Ace shook his head vehemently. “Tell Sabo about how you almost got us executed for kidnapping a princess.”

“She asked me to take her.” Luffy responded somewhat defensively, before launching into a rather convoluted tale about their last visit to Fishman Island.

Sitting on the small boat, swapping stories and unsuccessfully trying to get Luffy to forget about the ghost, it was as if they’d seen each other yesterday instead of spending a year apart.

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They sailed past the molten remains of High Town first; the once pristine city was reduced to nothing but ash and rubble. There was no smoke in the air, but they could still smell the sulfur and taste the ash on their tongues. They passed by without stopping.

The dock that Shanks had once frequented for an entire year was in disrepair when they finally arrived, but still sound enough for them to use. They tied up their boats and simply stood on the dock for a long moment, staring out at the husk of Fuusha village.

Most of the buildings had burnt down, the blackened skeleton of the frames and foundations the only thing left standing. There were a few houses still somewhat intact far away from where Party’s Bar should have been, but they had obviously not been lived in or repaired in almost a decade.

There were no graves and they found no bodies. The marines had either burned the bodies till nothing was left, or the survivors had taken the dead somewhere else to bury.

It was a warm, sunny day, but chills ran down Ace’s spine and it was as if the world had been drained of color. He could remember the screams, the smell of smoke and burning flesh, the pleading
eyes of a young woman ordering him to leave her and run--

“Ace,” Luffy placed a hand on his shoulder, jerking him back to the present. “Let’s go.”

Swallowing hard and nodding, Ace walked through the village with his brothers at his side and couldn’t help but think that at least it hadn’t been for nothing. They were alive. They’d survived despite all of the odds and they were thriving.

“Watch us, Makino. Watch us.” Ace murmured, forcing himself not to look at the spot where she had fallen for the last time.

They strode out of the remains of the village toward the beckoning arms of the forest, following the trail of volcanic earth that scared the ground like the uneven footsteps of a terrible monster. The edge of the forest had grown back with a vengeance, the foliage thick and untamed.

The familiar paths they had once known like the back of their hand were gone, swallowed up by the foliage, but they picked their way through the forest with ease. A few animals tried to approach them, but a quick glance from Ace sent them scurrying away.

They stopped at the tree house first and froze, grinning for the first time since they had arrived.

It was as if they had never left—actually, it looked better than the last time they’d seen it. All of the damage from the storm had been repaired. Tattered and worn, but still flying proudly atop of the tree house was the original ASL pirate flag.

“I can’t believe it.” Ace breathed, dashing forward and climbing up. He didn’t have to glance behind him to know that his brothers were hot on his heels.

He had to bend over to fit inside, but that did nothing to dampen the delighted smile spreading across his face. It was as if they hadn’t left, except for the thick layer of dust covering everything. He turned, heart pounding in excitement and couldn’t help the gasp that escaped his lips when he saw them; three red cups in a worn, thinly knitted sack.

“Are those…?” Sabo stared in astonishment from where he was dangling from the edge of the tree house. It was too cramped with Ace and Luffy inside for him to fit.

“Our cups,” Ace smiled and turned to show them. “Hand me your napkin, Sabo.”

“It’s a cravat, not a napkin.” Sabo retorted with a glare, tugging it off and tossing it to Ace.

Wrapping the cups up carefully in the cravat, Ace stuffed them in his pockets and glanced around the tree house again. “If you say so.”

“I can’t believe we used to all fit in here;” Luffy murmured, twisting his neck around to stare at the ceiling. “We were so small.”

“Dogra and Magra must have survived. They’re the only ones that knew where our treehouse was besides Dadan.” Sabo said thoughtfully.

“We should go find them. We can come back here later.” Ace said at last, motioning for Luffy to climb down ahead of him.

They climbed down wordlessly and stopped to stare at the treehouse in amazement, before slowly making their way to where Dadan’s hideout used to be. Seeing the treehouse still intact did wonders to improve their mood, but it quickly grew solemn and downcast as they drew closer.
None of them had any idea what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t the little village that they found.
Around Dadan’s hideout trees that had once kept the bandit hideout secluded had been torn down for
tiny houses, not unlike the ones that had once filled Fuusha village. At least half a dozen had been
built and they could see even from afar people walking back and forth.

“Maybe the survivors from Fuusha and the Grey Terminal came here to live?” Sabo wondered aloud
as they stopped just short of the first house on the edge of the makeshift village.

“They’re going to hate us.” Ace murmured to himself, plopping his hat back on his head and tilting it
down over his face.

“Even if they do, what happened wasn’t your fault.” Sabo stated firmly, reaching out to squeeze Ace
on the shoulder.

Luffy pressed in closer to Ace protectively. “They won’t be mad at us.” He said with a confidence
that even Sabo wasn’t feeling.

“Come on,” Ace strode forward before he had the chance to change his mind. “If Dadan’s hide out is
still there, then that must mean at least a few of the bandits survived, right?”

They entered the little village wordlessly, drawing the attention of everyone standing outside as they
walked down the main path to Dadan’s former hideout. All of the activity ceased and people came
out of the houses to watch them.

Spine straightening reflexively and shoulders tensing until his back and neck ached, Ace kept his
head held high as he began to recognize some of the people gaping at them. He recognized a few
from Fuusha, half a dozen from the Grey Terminal, and one or two from High Town.

“It’s the owner from the ramen place we dined and dashed at!” Ace hissed suddenly, watching as the
man crossed his arms and glared at them.

“Oooh, do you think he’ll cook for us?” Luffy asked eagerly, the volume of his voice making his
brothers wince. “It doesn’t hurt to ask.” He added more quietly, rubbing the back of his head where
Sabo had smacked him.

“We can repay him or whatever later. Right now I just want to find—” Ace abruptly stopped as they
came into full view of the old hideout, causing his brothers to slam into his back.

Opening his mouth to ask Ace why he had stopped, Sabo glanced at the hideout and froze.

“Brats,” Dadan stepped out of the shadow of the old familiar doorway, skin pale and body
frighteningly skinny, but alive and free and staring at them with tears shining in her eyes. “Stop
standing there gawking and get over here.”

Ace dashed forward before he even realized that his feet were moving, but he faltered as he got
closer to her and saw the toll the years in prison had taken on her body. Uncertainty, along with all of
the old insecurities and guilt hit him like a sea train. “Do you hate me?” he blurted, his voice
hitching.

Without a word, Dadan dropped her cigarette and crushed it with her foot. She stepped forward
slowly, as if one wrong move would spook him and cause him to run away, before reaching out and
dragging Ace into a bone crushing hug. “You idiot. As if I could ever hate you.”

Tears dripped onto his neck as he wrapped his arms around her and held her just as tightly. Her body
felt strangely small in his arms, but her grip was strong, and she still smelled like he remembered as a
child—cigarette smoke, booze, and gunpowder.

“Don’t just stand there gawking, you idiots! Get over here!” Dadan snapped, managing to shoot Sabo and Luffy a glare despite the fact that she was crying.

They complied instantly and came along either side of Ace, wrapping their arms around her and pressing their heads against hers. They all sank to their knees, not relinquishing their grip on each other for an instant.

“You idiots. You idiots,” Dadan murmured, uncaring of the tears streaming down her face as she pressed a sloppy kiss on Ace’s forehead. “If the three of you had died I would have killed you. I can’t believe some of the stupid stunts you’ve pulled! Don’t think I don’t know!”

Ace laughed, a weight that had lingered on his shoulders ever since that horrible night lifted from him. “You have plenty of time to scold us now.”

Pressing kisses to Luffy’s forehead and Sabo’s cheek, Dadan pulled back from them suddenly and pointed behind them.

Glancing back, Ace saw her. He felt like the floor had been ripped out from under him. He forgot how to breathe. His brain stuttered to a halt as he struggled to process what he was seeing. A sob escaped his lips, his body reacting to what his brain was struggling to come to grip with. He started crying in earnest, shoulders shaking from the force of his sobs. His vision blurred until it was hard to see and his eyes were burning, but it was her. It was her.

Makino. Makino was standing there. She dropped the apples she had been carrying in the fold of her skirt, tears dripping down her cheeks as she clamped a hand over her mouth.

Her face, neck, arms, and legs were all badly scarred, but she was alive. Despite the scars, she hadn’t changed much. Her clothes were in the same style as before and she still wore a bandanna, but her hair was much longer, falling almost past her waist.

Despite the horrific burns scars covering most of her body, in that moment none of them had ever seen anything more beautiful than her living and breathing and standing in front of them.

Wiping tears from her face, Makino smiled at them and it was just like they remembered, sweet, gentle, and warm like the sun. “I told you I’d be here waiting for you.” She said, voice trembling.

Without another word she knelt down beside them and wrapped her arms around them, pulling them close. They clung to her and Dadan and to each other, switching between laughing and crying.

Makino laughed joyfully as Luffy and Ace showered her with kisses on her cheeks and forehead. She couldn’t bring herself to look away from them, intent on memorizing every nook, cranny of their faces.

It was a long time before they stopped crying.

“How—how—” Ace wasn’t sure what he wanted to ask first, how Dadan had gotten out of prison or how Makino had survived. He sniffed and wiped uselessly at his face.

“One of Dragon’s people saved me. Ivanokov,” Makino pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose. “I would have sent word to you or Shanks or even Garp, but we were afraid that the marines would intercept any message we sent and come back to kill everyone who had survived. We’ve been living here in hiding ever since then.”
“Things were like this when I got back here,” Dadan wiped her face on her sleeve and leaned against the doorframe, physically drained. “I’ve been trying to get rid of them, but they just won’t leave.”

“How did you get out of Impel Down?” Luffy asked, rubbing his face on Sabo’s sleeve and earning a punch on the top of his head for it. He was still attached to Makino’s side and showed no interest in letting go anytime soon.

“They released me three years ago,” Dadan replied, pulling out a cigarette. Ace lit it for her without a word and she took a long drag before continuing. “No explanation of why-- just warnings to never mention Impel Down to anyone and to never contact you. At first, I thought it was some type of trap for the three of you, but then Luffy’s bounty was removed and Akainu was kicked out of the marines… the three of you were careful coming here, right?” she asked with concern.

“No one could have followed us,” Sabo said slowly, expression strangely tight as if he wanted to say something, but couldn’t. “I doubt the marines know we’re here.”

“Whatever the reason might have been, we’re grateful to have Dadan back,” Makino said, ignoring the grunt Dadan made. “And I’m so, so happy the three of you are here. Just in time for Luffy’s birthday, right?”

“Yes! It’s less than a week away.” Luffy sniffled and tugged his hat back atop his head.

“Wonderful! We’ll have plenty of time together before you set sail, then,” Makino clapped her hands together in excitement and gracefully rose to her feet. “Come on, I’m sure you must be hungry.”

“What about the Mayor? Did he survive too?” Luffy asked, following Makino inside Dadan’s place. Makino glanced away from him. “He… didn’t make it.”

The three boys glanced away and Dadan smacked Ace on the head. “It wasn’t your fault and no one blames you or hates you. Stop being an idiot and blaming yourself—there was nothing you could have done and it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t, you hear me?”

Sighing heavily, Ace nodded.

“Now, tell me all about that tattoo on your back. We don’t get the news anymore.” Dadan leaned against a wall and sat down as Makino began cooking in the kitchen that had been added on at some point. She eyed the red beaded necklace around Ace’s neck and shook her head. “The Whitebeards, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ace grinned and sat across from her. “Let me tell you about Pops.”

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Five days. Five days of telling Makino, Dadan, Dogra, and Magra everything that had happened, exploring the forests and the remains of the Grey Terminal. Five days of giving and receiving the most hugs any of them had ever received their entire lives. Even Dadan was shockingly clingy and affectionate, not that any of them minded.

They hunted for the village, competing to see who could bring back the biggest haul and they visited all their old haunts. On the second to last day, they spent the entire day crammed into the tree house snacking and swapping stories from their time apart, just the three of them.

All too soon, they stocked Luffy’s ship with as much food as it could hold without sinking it and spent the better part of the afternoon going over sailing and navigation. Luffy looked like his head
would explode with everything Ace and Sabo had tried to cram into it, brows pinched together and expression unhappy. By the end of the evening, he’d already forgotten half of what they had taught him and they were all tired and frustrated.

“It’ll work out!” Luffy had declared, expression reverting back to his usual carefree cheerfulness the moment they sat down to dinner.

On the morning of Luffy’s birthday, they woke as the first rays of the sun started spilling over the horizon and entered the forest for the last time. They walked along an old, familiar path deep into the forest, snacking on fruit and nuts they found along the way until they reached a small clearing with a lone tree stump.

The air was still and calm as Ace sat down an old bottle of sake and three red cups on that stump, the same stump that they had gathered around ten years ago to swear an oath.

Ace poured sake into the cups and stared down at them, lost in thought for a moment. “We’re really going our separate ways this time.”

“Yeah,” Luffy nodded, touching the brim of his hat with one hand. “You could always join my crew.”

“I could say the same thing,” Ace shot back, stifling a chuckle. “But I know what you’d say.”

They fell silent, ten years’ worth of memories flashing before their eyes. So many precious memories, mixed together with pain and heartache. Ten years felt like forever and no time at all.

“Say something, Ace,” Sabo said suddenly, turning toward him. “You were the one to last time.”

“Have you heard? When you exchange cups of sake, you become brothers!”

Ace picked up his cup and stared down for a long moment, sorting through the swirl of emotions he was feeling. He cleared his throat. “There’s no telling when we’ll meet again or how. Luffy and I might even end up fighting since we’re on different crews. But none of that matters. You’re my brothers… and I know nothing can break the bond between us. Not the world, not death, not anything.”

If everything they had been through after leaving Dawn Island couldn’t tear them apart, nothing could. It was one of the few things Ace was concretely certain of, like the sun rising every morning and the love and affection of his crew and captain. “There are no words... I can’t--Our brotherhood is my precious treasure. I--I love you both so much. So, here’s to our brotherhood and ten more years —” He drew in a quick breath and laughed a little. Ten more years was a lot longer than a day. But for the first time in his short life, he was looking forward to the future. He had more than a day to live for, now. “We’ll toast again when we’ve all reached our goals! But for now, to brothers!”

“Brothers!” Sabo and Luffy exclaimed, toasting their small cups against Ace’s and drinking.

They laughed as Luffy coughed and sputtered as he had all those years ago, the words that had been spoken that day reverbering in their minds as if it had been just yesterday.

“With this, starting from today, we’re brothers!”

The next time they toasted, they would be a pirate king and a government toppler. Ace had no clear picture of what he would be, but it didn’t matter. He had plenty of time to figure it out.

***
They had a much larger crowd than they’d expected with them as they traveled to the dilapidated docks of Fuusha village. The survivors of Fuusha had all come, returning to their former home for the first time since Akainu had destroyed it all those years ago. Accompanying them were some of the former residents of the Grey Terminal and High Town who still remembered them, all to watch Luffy’s official departure.

Makino mournfully walked through the ashen remains of Party’s Bar, running a hand along what was left of the bar that Shanks had once sat at habitually. She managed to collect a few half burnt knickknacks, but there wasn’t much left to salvage.

She wasn’t the only former member of Fuusha to be teary eyed long before Luffy was ready to say his goodbyes.

“Be careful, Luffy.” Makino murmured, hugging him tightly.

“You want me to go over the map with you again, Luffy?” Sabo asked, watching as Luffy sprang into the small ship they’d brought just for him.

“I’ll figure it out.” Luffy said with a laugh that was not at all reassuring.

“Just try to find a navigator as soon as possible, okay?” Sabo sighed. He’d tried his best to help prepare Luffy to set sail on his own, but it had been a losing battle.

“Of course! Right after I get my cook.” Luffy nodded to himself and began unfurling the sail.

Ace groaned and pressed a hand to his forehead. “As long as you get a navigator before you leave for the Grand Line.”

“I will! Don’t worry about me,” Luffy untied the boat from the dock and turned one last time to face his brothers, Makino and Dadan. “Ace, Sabo! Watch me! I’ll catch up with you soon!”

“We’ll be waiting for you at the top!” Ace said, crossing his arms and smiling broadly.

“See you later, Luffy!” Sabo shouted. Then, because Luffy was going to die lost at sea if left to his own devices, “Find a navigator!”

“Be careful you idiot!” Dadan shouted, eyes growing misty as she watched him sail away.

He didn’t make it very far before it emerged, the lord of the coast. Gasps and worried shouts rippled through the crowd, Makino shouting desperately for Luffy to watch out.

Ace and Sabo merely watched calmly as Luffy stared up at the sea king, one hand pressed to his straw hat. He stared up at the creature and caught it’s eye, freezing the creature in place.

A hush fell on the docks. A contained burst of Conqueror’s haki burst forth, rippling through the air. The creature stared at him in terror for a moment before disappearing back into the ocean, sending water raining down on Luffy.

The crowd fell deathly still, those that had lived in Fuusha undoubtedly remembering another man with a straw hat performing the same feat all those years ago.

“Just like Shanks…!” Makino whispered in astonishment, one hand clapped to her mouth in surprise.

“I’m going to be,” Luffy took a deep breath and threw his arms up into the air. “KING OF THE PIRATES!!!”
They cheered for him and shouted goodbyes until he was long out of earshot. Slowly but surely, the gathered crowd dissipated and began the long hike back to their new home in Dadan’s country, leaving only Ace, Sabo, Makino, Dada, and a Magra and Dogra watching the ocean even after Luffy was long gone.

“He’s going to get lost, isn’t he?” Makino murmured quietly, voice a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

“Yep.” Sabo said, knowing that all his navigation lessons were basically for naught.

“Definitely going to get lost,” Ace chuckled at the thought and tried to imagine what kind of ridiculous crew Luffy would end up with. “He’ll be fine though.”

“Do you two really have to leave right now?” Makino asked, staring at the two other ships that were still tied up to the dock waiting for them.

“Yeah,” Ace said regretfully, gaze drifted from her back to the ocean. “There’s one more thing I want to do before I go back to the Grand Line.”

***

The center of the town was deserted as he slowly walked to the execution platform, a bottle of rum in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other.

He stopped a few feet away from the platform and stared up for a moment, before sitting down in front of it.

Pulling out two shot glasses, he uncorked the bottle and poured. Setting the glasses and the small bundle of pink hibiscus flowers down in front of him, Ace tilted his head back and stared up at the platform where the Pirate King had been executed.

“I bet you never thought I’d come here,” He murmured, shifting his gaze back down to the cups. “I heard this was your favorite rum from Rayleigh. I didn’t ask him or anything! He just mentioned it one day.”

He glared at the platform as if daring it to contradict his statement for a second, before sighing and running a hand through his hair, dislodging his hat in the process. “I honestly don’t really know why I had to come here, but… since neither of you have a grave—that I know of, at any rate, I figured… I figured I’d come and pay my respects.”

The idea of paying his respects to him of all people still grated at him, but he pushed through the feeling and focused on what he had come to say. No one had ever said that making your peace with someone was easy.

“The flowers are supposed to be your favorite, Mom,” Ace shifted slightly so he was settled cross-legged in front of the execution platform. “I came to say… I understand now. Why you gave your life for me. Before, I couldn’t even fathom why you’d die for a worthless monster like me-- someone who should never have been born in the first place. But then, I met Sabo and Luffy. And suddenly it didn’t seem quite so bad, that I was alive. But I still didn’t understand why you’d die for me. I thought you must have died hating me. I didn’t get it until the day that Pops came for me… suddenly everything clicked and I understood.”

She’d chosen him over her own life, bearing him through an impossible pregnancy to ensure that he had the chance to live. It hadn’t been until he saw Whitebeard on the beach that day and recognized the light shining in the old pirate’s eyes that he finally, finally understood. “You wouldn’t have given
your life to keep me safe and make sure I was born if you didn’t… didn’t love me.”

Brushing his fingers across one of the petals, Ace wished he could have met his mother, more than he ever had in his entire life.

“It’s strange, how you can miss someone you’ve never met…” Ace trailed off momentarily, trying to picture her from what Rayleigh and Shanks had told him, but all he could see was a vague outline. He supposed he’d never know what she looked like and it hurt more than he’d thought possible.

“And as for you—” Ace glanced over at the rum bottle and scowled. “You’ve caused me a lot of problems, you know.”

He got no answer, but he could just picture Roger laughing and shrugging ruefully, but unrepentantly. He hated how he could picture him so easily, but not his mother. “I hated you for so, so long. In a way, I still do, but—stupid Rayleigh! He compared you to Luffy and suddenly—suddenly I could see you. I could your stupid smile and understand your rage when someone threatened your crew and your desire for freedom. I could see you.”

He’d fought the gradual shift like a rabid animal, wild and desperate in his efforts to hold on to the old picture of Roger that had been ingrained in his head as a child. But all his struggles were ultimately useless. Suddenly, he was seeing Roger through a Luffy shaped filter and his entire worldview changed. Suddenly, where he’d only seen a terrible monster, whose taint ran through his blood, he’d seen Luffy; a rougher, angrier Luffy with sharp, sharp edges and a love for adventure and freedom above all else. The monster that haunted his every step had a grin and a personality that like his little brother.

It was like everything he knew of Roger was suddenly put into perspective. Luffy was different from Roger in so many ways, but at their very core, the same heartbeat.

“I kept trying to hate you for so long, but…” Ace grit his teeth for a moment, before releasing a breath and laughing. “I could never hate anyone like Luffy. Not really.”

Ace still had largely mixed feelings about Roger. There was still hurt and resentment and anger—so much anger he honestly didn’t know what to do with it or even where it came from. But maybe it didn’t matter, in the end. All he could do was move forward and live as he’d promised himself and his brothers.

“I’m going to live my life without regrets,” Ace said, staring up once again at the execution platform, expression grave. “So, I came to say goodbye. And… I forgive you. I’m not sure you deserve it, but… I think I can understand now why you did what you did.”

He wasn’t going to let his parentage hold him down anymore. It didn’t matter who his father was, or what the world said about him. He had Pops, his crew, and his brothers. He was going to live his life to the fullest and nothing, not even the blood that ran through his veins, would hold him back.

“Don’t think this suddenly means I like you or that I’m not angry with you,” Ace warned sternly. “It just means that… I’m not going to be holding anything against you, anymore. You lived your life as best you could, the way you wanted to, and now I’m going to do the same thing. I’m ready to stop living for just today. I’m really… I’m--”

Ace pictured his brothers. The family and the father he had waiting for him back on the Moby Dick. Tears streamed down his face, but all he could feel was joy. He had his answer. He had his answer for the only question he’d ever asked. “I’m so happy I was born!”
The wind picked up and rustled his hair as he slowly rose to his feet. He grinned suddenly. “Mom… Dad…” Ace bowed low in front of the execution platform, the pink hibiscus flowers, and the bottle of rum and smiled. “Thank you for loving me.”

He straightened as the wind suddenly increased and something shoved him from behind. Whirling around, Ace saw nothing, but he could have sworn he had felt someone touch him. He glanced back at the execution platform and grinned, bright and carefree. He flung his fists into the air and laughed. “Mom! Dad! Watch me! I’m going now.”

Ace turned and walked away, not turning around once as he made his way back to where Sabo was waiting for him at the far edge of Loguetown’s center.

He felt free. Truly free, for the first time in his life.

“All done?” Sabo asked as he approached, straightening and stepping away from the wall he’d been leaning on.

“Yeah. Any trouble?” Ace asked, surprised that he didn’t see any unconscious marines nearby. There was no one in the square or on the streets either.

“Nope! Apparently having the Revolutionary chief of staff and the second division commander of the Whitebeards was more trouble than even that Smoker guy was willing to handle. He actually took our warning and evacuated the town. We should get out of here now before reinforcements arrive though.” Sabo said cheerily, hooking his arm around Ace’s and leaning into him hard enough to make him stumble.

“Do you have to go back right away?” Ace questioned as they made their way back to their boats.

“No, I still have a few weeks before I have to head back,” Sabo answered, grunting as Ace shoved him sideways. “Why?”

Glancing at the ocean stretching out as far as the eye could see, Ace grinned. “I was thinking it’d be fun if we could meet him in the Grand Line. He probably won’t wait very long to head there.”

“Assuming he finds a navigator,” Sabo muttered ruefully, shaking his head. “Alright. It’ll be fun. I’m curious to see what kind of crew he finds.”

Laughing, Ace shook his head. “They’ll be great, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Sabo agreed, giving Ace one last shove that sent him sprawling to the ground. “Race you back to the ship! The loser has to catch dinner!”

“Wait! Sabo, you cheater!” Ace sprang to his feet and ran after him as fast as he could. “Get back here!”

They raced all the way to the dock and sailed away, leaving behind the burden and insecurities since Ace had first learned who his father was.

He was free. And for once, the future was bright and his for the taking.

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Ace couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever felt this restless. The moment he had entered the New World, he had barely been able to force himself to sit still as he followed the vivre card back to the Moby Dick.
The paper in his palm leaped excitedly forward and he knew that he was close, anticipation building in his gut to the point where he could hardly contain himself. He wondered what had happened while he was gone. Wondered if they had missed him or what crazy pranks Thatch had done to Marco.

Ace was so lost in thought he almost didn’t see her right away—the most beautiful ship in the world. The Moby Dick was already heading towards him when he finally spotted her, his heart leaping excitedly in his chest. He sped up without thinking about it.

The crew was shouting and cheering wildly as he came alongside the ship and tossed up a rope for someone to grab. He barely waited until they had his boat secured before jumping up, almost knocking Haruta over in his haste to get on board.

“Ace! Welcome home!” They shouted, instantly crowding him.

“Ace! Finally! Take this, Jozu!” Thatch leaped for joy and threw a water balloon filled with paint at Jozu and ran away as fast as he could.

“Thatch! Get back here!” Jozu shouted, chasing after him.

It took him a while to make his way to Pops’ chair with everyone crowding him, but he was rewarded for the effort it took by a hand ruffling his hair and a big smile from Marco. “Welcome home, yoi.”

“Ace! Welcome home son.” Whitebeard said, beaming down at him.

Swallowing thickly, Ace glanced around at his family and smiled. “I’m home.”

End.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! I can't believe it's over.

I hope all of you enjoyed this as much as I enjoyed writing this. This is the longest story I've ever written and the first thing I ever finished!

Thank you for all of the amazing feedback! I've loved hearing from all of you. Reading what you had to say has really encouraged me.

I do have ideas for a sequel, but it's still in the development stage. I also plan on writing a couple of one shots and shorter stories eventually, but right now I'm going to be trying to focus on an idea I have for an original novel.

Eventually I want to work on editing and rewriting this. The rewriting process has always terrified and confused me, so I thought it'd be good practice to work on this, lol.

Thank you again! Until next time.
This is the first story I've ever posted! Reviews and critiques are appreciated, but please be kind.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!