Ocean Stars Falling
by Liangnui

Summary

Once again, Kei's infamous (bad) luck spurs a brand new adventure. Only this time, there's no foreknowledge, a giant grumpy turtle monster not where he's supposed to be, and an ocean full of possibilities and danger in the same breath. She just knows she has to find some way to get home to Konoha.

And what is all this business about pirates, anyway?

Notes

Some folks requested a separate posting place for Ocean Stars Falling: Ask, and ye shall receive (as long as I find the idea intriguing.)
Crash Standing

Chapter Summary

Kei: Explore sun and surf.

The day dawned bright and early, as it generally did in places with topography that was flatter than a pancake. And when it came to flatness, it was hard to beat an open ocean view.

On one hand, the view of the sunrise over the waves was magnificent. On the other? I didn’t live on a coast. I didn’t live within a hundred miles of a coast, and my hometown barely had access to rivers or lakes. I lived in a glorified, overgrown military outpost that had decided to call itself a hidden village once the population got higher than a couple hundred thousand. A beach did not factor into my morning view in any way, shape, or form.

“Shit,” was all I said aloud, and my voice was immediately swallowed up by coastal winds howling over the sound of seagulls. Not that I’d tried all that hard to be heard.

I sat up in the sand, dislodging all kinds of beach debris and the occasional live crustacean. My pajamas would have probably been a lost cause after this particular adventure if they hadn’t been preemptively ruined by ninja life. I was really just sealing the fate of a T-shirt and a pair of old mission pants. So I just grimaced at the grit and started slapping loose sand from my clothes as I finally got to my feet. Bare feet. Dammit.

A different person probably would have taken the opportunity to panic. The last thing I remembered was going to sleep in my own bed, in my apartment, in my home village. Whatever the hell had happened to put me on a beach I didn’t recognize and hadn’t conjured up for Isobu’s benefit, I had clearly missed it. I wouldn’t have missed Obito’s Kamui technique firing off again, not after the last time someone had used it in my bedroom, but I couldn’t be sure how I had gotten here. Wherever “here” was.

I’d panic once I finished taking stock.

No weapons aside from my holdout? Check, since I seemed to have ended up on this random tropical beach with only whatever I’d worn to bed. I had stuck a plain kunai into a storage seal painted onto the sole of my foot—which most people would mistake for a tattoo at first glance—but that was it. I’d need to rethink my policy of what made an emergency weapon once I got back to Konoha.

Speaking of. No clue where I was? Also check. The weather and plant life—palms, weird tropical flowers—didn’t really mesh with what I’d seen of the Land of Fire’s coastlines during monsoon season. At least, I was pretty sure it was monsoon season. As for familiar chakra signatures? I couldn’t feel any chakra signatures nearby aside from mine and Isobu’s, which were sort of requirements for me to be considered alive.

Waaaaait a second.

Isobu? I knew he had to be somewhere he could hear me, or else I’d be too dead to ask. Where are you?
I am here, he responded, but I cannot see you. Everything feels...strange.

I closed my eyes and formed the Dragon seal with my fingers. Then I cast my mental net outward, trying to figure out what was throwing Isobu off...and came up with a result that made absolutely no sense.

The little quirk about being a sensor-class shinobi with a giant sea monster inside of me was that I had to filter out internal and external chakra sources relative to myself before I could even start getting an accurate reading. Isobu was ever-present, and his influence on my search parameters would otherwise just throw all my data into chaos. He was also the reason I couldn’t completely suppress my chakra to avoid detection (and hadn’t been able to since I was thirteen). The two problems were pretty well intertwined.

But at that moment, I couldn’t feel Isobu’s chakra just inside me, though I knew I wasn’t actively using it. No, it was there in my mindscape and my chakra coils—but faded. The real bulk of him was out in the physical open ocean.

He sent me a mental image—pretty much a world of solid blue, with light filtering down from above—that pretty much confirmed my suspicions.

I opened my eyes as soon as that projected sensation went white. Out in the distance, a gray-green shape exploded from the water like a breaching whale. I watched, stunned, as the creature did a slow pirouette and showed off all sides of his crablike shell and his red underbelly, then smashed back down into the water with a titanic splash. Even from what looked like two kilometers offshore, Isobu was perfectly distinguishable and his joy was dead obvious.

So when the inevitable tsunami rolled in as a result of his frolicking, I didn’t say anything about it. “Mass” and “water displacement” and “I can’t fly to get away when you do that in the real world” came to mind, but it was all secondary to getting to higher ground post-haste. And not ruining Isobu’s fun.

A real ocean! Isobu sounded happier than I had ever heard him. I am free!

Feeling guilty about that was a waste of energy, but I felt sick anyway. Sure, part of that could be attributed to the way the ground seemed to sway dangerously when Isobu’s tsunami made landfall, but not all of it. Isobu deserved to be free in the ocean and be able to go wherever he wanted, but he’d long since resigned himself to only being able to chase that dream after I died.

...And yet somehow I wasn’t dead. Isobu was out there, I was still walking around, and we still had a connection.

Wait. This is wrong. Isobu’s joy suddenly cut off as the realization struck him, too. Are you dead, Kei? Are we both dead and waiting to be reborn?

I’m pretty sure I’m alive, I told him as I peered at the ground from the top of the...coconut palm. At least, I was pretty sure that’s what the green things were. If we were dead, I think we would have gotten some kind of warning—or gotten to say something cool before dying.

Good. Isobu blew out a stream of bubbles in his version of a relieved sigh. Baffling, but good.

Any ideas? I asked. I still hadn’t gotten out of the tree.

The Great Belly Flop Tsunami was already receding, without causing too much damage to the inland jungle or to the tree I’d been cowering in. I’d gotten out of the way in time. That said, it had
left a few dump trucks’ worth of sand and ocean-borne matter that didn’t really need to be in the trees. I’d still stay out of its way until I was sure Isobu couldn’t cause another one by accident.

My apologies, Isobu said, once I finally sent him my impressions of the last few minutes. I was...overwhelmed.

No harm done, I assured him as I finally climbed back down to solid ground. But I take it you’re confused as hell, too.

He didn’t answer that.

Once there was enough solid ground—as opposed to wet sand or fields of mud—I made my way through the beach detritus to the actual beach. While it had only been a few minutes, all of the light gray sand had been transformed to grayish sandcastle fodder and thrown all over the place, with upended driftwood and random seagoing wildlife strewn across everything. An awful lot of edible-looking wildlife was just begging to be examined with a stick, though the specified species of any of them eluded me.

You know, I said, as approached a shark of some variety to use as a test subject, I think our seal is still intact. It’s just that you’re somehow on the outside instead of the inside.

The seal is not a door, Isobu argued, though I could tell he was as spooked as I was.

I continued prodding at the shark to get some idea of what it ate and also to keep my mind occupied. There was so much that I didn’t know about this situation that I’d take any information I could get, no matter how irrelevant.

It let me keep enough of my cool to say, I don’t think there’s such a thing as a delayed reaction to having my soul ripped out as collateral damage. And we both know that’s what happens when these seals break.

…Well, you may not be entirely wrong, Isobu allowed. He turned this way and that in the ocean, or at least sent me his impressions of doing so. He was fully submerged again, weaving through the water with ease he’d never quite managed in my mindscape, where everything just wasn’t right for him. I have missed this feeling. I know you wish you were in your home, but this is my home. The waves, the open sea… I just need a little longer to enjoy it.

I could never begrudge him that. Take all the time you need.

While Isobu patrolled the coast in a way he hadn’t since before I was probably born, I did some beachcombing. The localized beach disaster left fish all over the place, so I grabbed a weird leaf the size of my entire torso and started gathering some of them up.

I rescued the sharks first, picking up anything with triangular teeth and carefully escorting it back into the surf so it could go on its merry way. They kinda looked like lemon sharks, so there was a bit of cultural baggage lingering in the back of my mind about shark-fin soup and rampant slaughter. Even forty damned years after I’d learned that shark fin soup existed, I still hated that practice. So I wasn’t going to leave them to suffer.

Anything that was not a shark and bereft of spines, however, was probably on the menu. Eventually.

You and I can both make potable water. Isobu reminded me unnecessarily, even though he was supposedly devoting his attention to chasing an entire school of silvery fish. It was one of those
things that Shirozora had taught me how to do while trying to get me to launch dragon-shaped waterspouts, but apparently Isobu had known the whole time and just never given enough of a crap to tell me. **What you need is a container.**

And thus did I begin following survival advice from a giant sea turtle monster who otherwise wouldn’t leave me alone. Who had not, to my knowledge, ever really needed to know how or why fresh water even existed, never mind actually needed to hydrate. Giant chakra monsters were above such plebeian concerns.

Eventually, I got several things sorted out to something approaching satisfactory standards. Food (fish and coconuts), water (jutsu-desalinated), and a mediocre shelter made of palm fronds were pretty easy to put together with the amount of survival training that had been hammered into my head over the years. I needed a base camp of sorts before I could feel secure enough to explore and probably get into trouble, knowing my luck.

While I worked on that, Isobu did what he wanted. Isobu’s colossal shell spines slowly approached the beach as I looked up from time to time. It wasn’t obvious at first—he was so damned big even at a distance that the size change was subtle at best—but it eventually became apparent that he was approaching slowly to avoid causing another massive wave that would have wiped out my work. His spines looked a bit like a shark’s dorsal fin, and for once I couldn’t see his head as he swam. He’d never lowered his head in my mindscape, because he probably didn’t see the point of actually swimming efficiently in my mindscape. There was no real point in an unreal space.

I went back to setting up a fire—Local Ninja Cheats at Making Fire with Sticks, More at Eleven—and thus cooking the catch Isobu had conveniently swept up for me. Anything I was dubious about got fed to the gulls, but gutting all the fish with my survival kunai would have given them plenty to eat anyway.

*I am going to be the next Bear Grylls at this rate,* I said to Isobu, who was finally in waters shallow enough that he couldn’t keep his head below the waves.

**He was an ordinary human,** Isobu said, even as he finally started putting his arms into action and dragging himself further up the...continental shelf? Either way, if he kept going he’d beach himself.

Well, it wasn’t like he couldn’t turn into a giant rolling spiked ball of death to move however he wanted on land. I left him to it and kept cleaning fish.

Isobu finally made it to shore as I was gutting a blue fish that looked a bit like a parrotfish, but without a beak. I’d hoped it meant the creature would be eating less in the way of rocklike substances, but I couldn’t be sure.

And then Isobu interrupted my thoughts with, **The fish here are all unfamiliar to me. They seem to be similar, but when I look closer all I see are differences.**

I looked up from where I was throwing entrails to the seagulls, flinging things off the end of my survival kunai. And I kept looking up, because although Isobu had always been damned near the biggest living thing I’d ever seen, I had thought he maxed out at a hundred meters. He already would have blotted out the now-risen sun and cast a shadow over the entire beach, but what the fuck?

**“You will catch flies with your mouth open like that,”** Isobu told me in a somewhat reproachful tone. His voice, even in his most modest, self-effacing squeak, and even from nearly ten meters away, would have rattled glass windows. It certainly blew my hair back from my face.
Still, I shut my drooping mouth long enough to come up with something slightly more productive. It was: “You had a growth spurt.”

“I cannot hear you,” Isobu said, lowering his huge head so it was level with the sand. He had to move his spiked arms out to the sides, bracketing me and my little campsite almost without thinking. **What did you say?**

*I said you got bigger,* I told him, suddenly quite worried. *I hope you’re not too big to notice me shouting now.*

**Not when you mutter like that,** Isobu replied, and I sighed aloud in relief. **I know you said something, but your voice does not carry well to my ears when I am...** Isobu’s right hand made a vague gesture that I recognized as one of my staples when I couldn’t find the right word. He probably meant “colossal,” but it was a bit of a toss-up if he’d even noticed his size change until I’d brought it up. **This is easier. And it does not hurt you.**

Hooray for functional telepathy. Highly selective telepathy. Which was attaching my brain to that of an island-sized turtle monster who nonetheless cared about me enough to be concerned even in the midst of his dream come true.

I smiled. Selective telepathy was just fine.

**So, what else is weird about this place?** I asked, while returning to the task of cooking. Specifically, to skewering all the fish I wanted to cook on sticks, and then carefully angling them toward the fire in such a way that they didn’t fall in.

It was kind of silly, really. I wasn’t hungry yet and Isobu didn’t need to care about eating. Despite being larger than before, he probably hadn’t made the transition to a biological existence or else he would have complained about it already.

If he somehow had made that kind of change without either of us noticing it, then there was no way I was going to be in charge of *feeding* him. He could kill his own armadas like a big boy.

Isobu didn’t seem to take any note of my griping thought process. Instead, he said, **For a start? This.**

When I looked up, he was already turning his huge shell to one side so I could see his leftmost tail better as he lifted it out of the water. It took some shuffling, because even with his arms he wasn’t terrible maneuverable unless he wanted to try his hand at turning himself into a tractor tire.

There was something big, brown, and very much *hostile* wrapped around Isobu’s tail like an attacking anaconda. It even had its double row of teeth hooked into the particularly spiky end of Isobu’s tail-tip. Going by the way it coiled around his tail so many times, it was probably twice as long as the appendage even if it was skinnier.

I stared in open-mouthed shock.

**These are not a feature in our oceans either,** Isobu said bluntly, before he swung his left tail in a motion not unlike a cracking whip. The big brown sea serpent flew off the end as though suddenly turned into the world’s fishiest Slinky. If not for Isobu’s spikes, I might’ve even entertained the idea that it survived the toss without getting itself gutted all the way back to its backbone from multiple angles.

But alas, no.
I sighed aloud, plunking myself back down on the driftwood log I’d chosen for a chair. *We’re a hell of a long way from Konoha, aren’t we?*

**That would be putting it mildly,** Isobu told me.

Dammit.

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

I ran my hands through my sand-encrusted hair, shaking little grains out and onto my shoulders. My fingers ended up snarled in salty tangles, and I pulled the knots out with all the ferocity I usually saved for combing.

I needed to think through this.

I hadn’t ever really made a habit of asking Isobu about his life before being caught by the First Hokage and handed over to Kirigakure. Isobu, until now, had never offered any of his experiences for reference or otherwise, probably because reminiscing about his freedom was too painful. But I was pretty sure that a Tailed Beast was about the best possible expert on fish, monsters, and other things to be found in the vast blue ocean. After all, he’d been one of them.

And if he was right, then I was farther away from my other friends and family than I’d been since I was born. Immediately, my thoughts jumped to Kakashi and Hayate, because those two were going to start a fucking riot if I went missing without a trace. Obito would help until Sensei got him to start searching, and Rin would probably have to run every kind of damage control in existence. I could only hope they were all safe and hadn’t been targeted by whatever the fuck had sent me this far out into the middle of nowhere. Oh god, and what about my students? I’d been putting them through Chūnin Exam prep and they’d be expecting me to show up for training. And Sensei and Kushina and Tatsumaki and Naruto and his team and Gai and oh my fucking god I needed to get home.

And I didn’t have the slightest clue how to do that. If even Isobu was lost, then I was dead.

**You still have me,** Isobu broke in, before the weight of that realization crushed me.

I looked up, belatedly realizing that at some point I had gotten to my feet and started doing a pitch-perfect headless chicken impression. I froze in place and let my arms drop to my sides, even though Isobu had been inside my head for so long that there was very, very little I could do that could really embarrass or surprise him. Still, behaving like a panicky kid was not helpful.

Isobu’s red-on-gold eye didn’t waver, and he lowered his head so I could easily approach him. He even crossed his arms underneath his spiky chin so I could use them as platforms. With that kind of invitation, how could I say no?

Once I was sitting on the lower jaw spikes that camouflaged Isobu’s mouth from immediate view, I sat back until my back was against one of them and I had a foot next to Isobu’s strangely humanlike nose as a way to brace myself.

“Sorry for panicking,” I said somewhat grudgingly, though Isobu had known me for long enough by now that he wasn’t surprised. I laid my right hand flat against the tip of his nose. In a clearer voice, “You’re the best survival buddy anyone could ask for.”

**I did say we were partners. That will not change even if you are preoccupied with your problems.**
An embarrassed flush crept up the back of my neck. “You didn’t have to say it like that, jerk. You were worried too.”

And I will still be worried five minutes from now, an hour, or a day as long as we are in an unfamiliar place. But I wanted you to know that you can rely on me. Isobu sighed, and salty air blasted up from his mouth with enough force to ruffle my clothes. Since you seemed to have forgotten.

“Well, you know me. I’m a slow learner that way,” I said sheepishly. I looked directly into his eye, which on its own thoroughly dwarfed me. “So, I guess we need a plan.”

Isobu just sighed again and nearly blew me off his face. In the interests of that not happening a third time, I climbed up from his face and onto his head, then flopped onto my back to think.

I was a jōnin of Konoha. I was marooned on some foreign shore, sure, but I knew how to survive in the great outdoors. I was not alone, as Isobu would remind me until the end of time. I would survive this and go home and see everyone again.

I just had to figure out what I was going to do. I rapped my knuckles gently on Isobu’s head. “So, is this an island?”

I have given serious thought to scouting around this...landmass properly, Isobu said rather than answering me immediately. He lifted his head, and me, to look around. I will tell you if it is an island, and then we can prepare to leave it.

“And while you do that, I’m gonna scout the island itself for resources. If it is an island,” I said, sitting up. I rolled fully to my feet and glanced down at the drop off his head. Pretty high, and with zero leeway, but maybe I could dive…

Don’t, Isobu interrupted, dropping his old-fashioned affectation in impatience. Do not even think about it.

“Spoilsport,” I muttered, but climbed down his head anyway. A hop, skip, and a jump and I was back on the beach. Any normal person would have broken at least one bone, but hey, ninja training and conditioning was good for something.

Avoid being eaten by anything too small. It would reduce the chances I would find you whole.

“In something’s stomach!” I yelled up at him, but he was already pushing off into the sea again. Keep me updated on what you find. I’ll do the same. And you stay safe too.

Isobu huffed a laugh, dislodging the more enterprising birds that had decided to colonize his head after I left it. As if anything around here could hurt me.

Given the sea serpent, I wouldn’t have been quite so quick to assume that. But leaving Isobu’s bravado aside, his mission was important. And he wouldn’t have been the most feared creature in our world’s oceans if he hadn’t been able to take care of himself. For the most part.

I heard that.

I snickered under my breath, then devoted my attention to cooking the rest of my catch. I’d start my first shift as an adventurer afterward.

A total lack of paper or ink meant storage seals were not going to be a thing. I could reseal the
survival kunai into the already-existing one on the sole of my foot, but making these inflexible things reusable came at the cost of storage capacity. Preserving or packing anything would have to come after I’d made a container. Knowing my luck, there wouldn’t be any convenient beach trash for me to use and I’d have to make everything out of coconut fibers.

What I wouldn’t have given to live in the era after the invention of duct tape.

Anything interesting? I asked Isobu through our link, since packing the fish up in leaves for transport was a fairly mindless task.

After a few seconds, Isobu finally said, You are definitely alone. There is an old fishing village on the opposite side of the island, but no boats in the water or people on the beach.

Well, shit. Then I guess I’d better head over there and check it out, shouldn’t I?

It depends on why this place is abandoned. Isobu sent me an image of sun-bleached buildings and a thoroughly empty main street reaching back from a sheltered bay. There were docks and ships around, but the ships were shipwrecks and the docks looked like they’d seen better decades.

Still, free shelter and firewood. And I’d probably be able to steal any crockery I wanted for the next leg of the journey.

You know, we haven’t really tested our capabilities like this, I said to Isobu, after deliberately not making any move toward heading for the abandoned town. He’d just snap at me if I did, especially without considering warnings. I don’t feel any different, but do you think I’d still be immune to poison or disease if you’re out there instead of in the seal?

Isobu thought about it, in between sending me more images of underwater life that I couldn’t recognize. There is no way to be sure until you test it.

I looked down at my hands. Well, then it’s a bit convenient that I just cut my finger on what looks like an oyster. I’m pretty sure I’ll be fine, but...

WHAT?

While Isobu bellowed at me from the other end of the island—and disturbed birds so thoroughly that they fled over my campsite—I started braiding thin vines to form rope. Once I had enough, I tied all the slightly charred fish into a bundle so I could finally travel with them. Stringing coconuts together was a waste of the water inside them, so I just carried two with me and set out on my journey. Assuming I found what I was looking for, I wouldn’t be back.

I’d never been trained in jungle traversal specifically, but treating the place like the Forest of Death seemed like a good start. Half of what was in that place was either poisonous, predatory, or both, and a number of the animals had decided to imbibe Miracle-Gro instead of food during their formative years. Seeing thirty-foot-long tigers never exactly got old, but it was certainly a hell of a rude awakening for foreign teams. Konoha-born shinobi just rolled with it.

...Or freaked out. But most of the kids got over that part pretty quickly.

My only specific concern was that I was still underdressed in the shoe department, so I had to be more careful where I put my feet. Staying off the forest floor was harder than it would have been in the Forest of Death—smaller tropical trees did not a walkway make—but I did my best. And when I did have to return to the ground, I made sure to avoid anywhere that looked like the dirt was moving. Other life forms could deal with the jungle ants. I refused.
I made it to the top of some kind of hill, then climbed even further up a tree to get a better view. In about twenty minutes, I’d ninja’d my way through what would have probably taken a normal person a few hours to cross. When I spotted the village’s highest building, it was like all of my survival training and the associated bruises had been worth it.

Now, I just had to get there. Crossing the forest would do for now, but I had to wonder if just hitting the beach and running around the rocks would be the faster choice. Sticking to my choice for the moment, I asked Isobu, *Find anything else that’s interesting?*

**There are more serpents where the first one came from.** I got the distinct impression that Isobu was using a sailor’s knot to turn one of said beasties into a non-issue, but he was kind enough not to send me a visual.

I was suddenly a lot less willing to run over the waves after that little tidbit. Not that waves and water walking skills really got along that well. *How many of those things do you think you’re going to have to beat up?*

**That depends,** Isobu said, and this time I got the image of a...what the fuck?

*Why does that sea serpent have hair?* I demanded, because unlike the first one? It didn’t really resemble a fish so much as a biome-displaced legless horse. With hells of sharp teeth and the kind of face that looked entirely too small for them, but regardless of the minor details like that it *didn’t look like the other one.*

**You may as well ask why my siblings and I do not resemble one another.** He was already tossing the aggressive thing away, giving it a swat with his right tail.

*Weren’t all of you guys deliberately designed?* ...By Kishimoto, anyway. I had no idea if the Sage had decided that rampant biological impossibilities was the popular trend, too.

Isobu gave me the impression of a shrug.

He could do that as many times as he wanted and I would never understand how he did it. His joints and that gesture, together, didn’t make any sense.

I gave up and started trekking toward the village again, noting absently that my mollusk-inflicted cut had already healed. Isobu could fight as many overgrown mutant eels as he wanted, as long as he was still having fun. The jungle was less fun for me, but hey, I’d be fine.

When I finally got there, assisted by one last chakra-powered leap into the village, my first impression matched Isobu’s.

The village was almost entirely gray, with faded, peeling paint providing the only notable color. Whoever had been here last had just left the exposed wood to rot in the salty sea air. Some of the buildings looked like they’d fall over if I touched them. I’d never managed to destroy a bar with one finger, so I was briefly tempted to try it out before my impulse control caught up. I would need some of the bottles in the bar, and would need to hold off until I was done scavenging.

So I eased the door open and stepped inside with my bundle of fish. I dropped my coconuts on the counter and commenced the world’s quietest liquor raid.

Weirdly enough, most of the various bottles I found were unopened. I dumped out something that smelled like grain alcohol for the bottle alone, then reconsidered and decided to look for something else when the contents started eating the floorboards.
You see why I was being careful? Isobu was chewing experimentally on one of the other sea serpents. Not sure why he bothered—he’d told me once that he didn’t have organs so much as a TARDIS-like internal dimension. Maybe he wanted a pet and it had refused to comply. If I had approached too quickly, he went on as if he didn’t have anything in his mouth, the wave alone would have washed the town away.

And since you were thoughtful enough not to, I now have all the...beer bottles I need. And they were legitimate beer bottles, which didn’t exist in Konoha. I didn’t recognize any of the brands on the faded labels, either, and the thick layer of mingled mold and dust on the entire damned bar was making the entire process of assessing my score messier than it had to be.

I finally decided to just grab a few of the larger non-corrosive liquors and dump the contents out for convenience’s sake. I also stole a bag from a side room, just to keep everything together.

This is kinda like playing a more insane version of some survival horror game, I said to Isobu after a moment’s thought. Only I’m pretty sure there’s less radiation.

...And how would you know?

...God dammit, Isobu. I didn’t need that thought.

He laughed at me, because apparently I was more entertaining than whatever new sea beasts he was “befriending.” In the superior firepower kind of way.

With my prizes secured, I set about exploring more of the town.

Its second impression wasn’t any better than the first. In fact, it was indisputably worse.

The village’s more residential area looked just as bad as the main road, with the cherry on top being a half-dozen flattened houses. I didn’t see any signs of actual people, corpses or otherwise, but something big had descended from on high and just mashed the structures down like sandcastles. No storm would have left a fucking handprint in the foundations, and I was at a loss to define what would have. The boot prints around the place were equally large, and seemed to walk out toward the nearest stretch of coastline.

Akimichi clan members were capable of getting that big but lacked the requisite malice, and I was sure that a Susanoo or other projected attack would have left other signs. This part of the village well and truly looked like a giant had gone to town.

Isobu, take a look at this, I suggested, sending him the clearest mental image of the damage I could manage. I had to jump about ten meters straight up to get it.

It looks like something my siblings or I could have done, Isobu said, after a small delay. But there would have been other evidence. And we do not have feet shaped like that.

...Out of all nine of you, Saiken, Kurama, Gyūki, Son Gokū and you are the ones that have hands, right? Isobu didn’t even have rear legs. I sat back on my heels as I thought, running a hand over the ridges in the massive boot-print. They were impressions made in dry sand—or at least sandy soil that had long since dried out—and crumbled at my touch.

This mystery was starting to freak me out.

One could make the argument that Shukaku can make his paws into hands, at least. And Saiken’s hands are much too small.
Which still probably meant that Saiken could pick up a small car and throw it. Size was entirely too relative when it came to Tailed Beasts.

I sighed to myself, then paused and sighed out loud since it wasn’t like anyone was around to hear me. *I’m going to keep exploring. Let me know if you find any interesting ships on the bottom of the bay or something.*

Isobu made a noise that was some kind of affirmative before going back his explorations.

Looking at the devastation of the village, I bit the inside of my cheek to help myself think. Though I was no expert on the local anything, I could get more information if I had a pair of eyes in the sky. Kind of silly that I hadn’t realize I could just bring Tsuruya into our little conspiracy. And hey, she’d probably even know how to get home!

...Well, assuming she knew where we were. And if not, well, she could always go home once the summon time limit ran out and tell everyone else that I was alive.

I picked at the newly-healed cut on my finger. I’d summoned Tsuruya so many times that the blood price was practically painless at this point. And besides, I was a fast healer.

*Boar, Dog, Bird, Monkey, Ram.* With the hand seal sequence complete, I pressed my right hand against the ground and watched the seals start to spread. “Summoning Jutsu.”

The universe stuttered. I felt the jutsu take a small portion of my chakra, as it always did, but then the air itself seemed to punch me directly in the chest, right where Isobu’s seal sat. Distantly, I heard Isobu shout something in surprise, and then I was lying flat on my back in the dirt and something was blotting out the sun.

*Isobu?* I thought up at him, once I’d gotten my breath back. I couldn’t have been stunned for more than a few seconds, since Isobu didn’t comment immediately on it, even to complain.

**What just happened?** Isobu asked, leaning down to look at me more or less directly. The gold in his eye seemed to glow even in the shade, and he had me surrounded by his arms as though I was a child he needed to protect. His voice took on a concerned tone as he asked, **Did you just summon me?**

_Actually, I was hoping to get Tsuruya_, I admitted as I sat up and shook the dirt from my hair. Despite the initial surprise, I was fine.

**I admit to not understanding the mechanics of space-time ninjutsu as well as you do,** Isobu said after a moment. **Explain your thought process to me.**

_If I could summon her, we would have been able to get a message or maybe a lift home. But something, I don’t know, redirected me? Like a phone operator, even though I know I signed Tsuruya’s scroll. And even if the contract was cancelled, it should have just gotten me nothing. Or else teleported me to a summon realm. Like Jiraiya and Rin. Though since I had signed Tsuruya’s contract back when I was thirteen, I wasn’t sure if there was any other animal that I had an affinity for. Surely that much time to influence me would have made it permanent?*

_I do not like the implication that whatever sent us both here has the power to sever contracts written in spirit and blood_, Isobu told me, settling more of his weight on his elbows as he focused on me.

He didn’t really need to—if he flicked his tails hard enough he could probably launch himself back
into the water without any problems. And I knew he loved being able to swim freely. But apparently he thought I needed a babysitter.

Until I got over yet another person this situation had taken from me, I had no choice but to agree.

“I don’t like it either,” I said aloud, pressing my fingers over the seal on my chest. The pain and shock of it were long gone, but it had been an unpleasant surprise. Now we just needed to adjust our plans for the fiftieth fucking time to compensate for it. So I would redirect my thought processes if I had to use a crowbar to pull it off. “But, well, now that we know summoning links you to me, should we try this the other way around?”

**You want me to try summoning you.** Isobu’s mental voice came out as flat as the average local topography (mainly literal sea level) and his vast red eye narrowed. **What usually happened when you allowed the crane use the Reverse Summoning on you?**

I shrugged, then decide to sit up. “Mostly, I felt like I was getting yanked someplace. It didn’t hurt, and it got me where I needed to be, so I put up with it.”

There was a reason Rin fussed over me despite my jinchūriki status. I ignored pretty much anything that didn’t actively hurt me, symptoms-wise.

Isobu slowly raised one hand to his face in a gesture that was all too familiar to me. Clearly, we need to leave the matter of food and shelter for just a moment. We need to know what we are capable of here, or else we may get other unpleasant surprises.

I tucked my legs into a yoga sitting position, then raised my hand like I was in class. “Isobu?”

**What?** He’d hooked his blunt fingers in the spikes along his jaw and sighed, looking down at me again. I was a natural when it came to exasperating people, even when I wasn’t trying and the victim was a giant turtle monster and also one of my best friends.

How to put this…? “I feel like I should point out that summoning you didn’t actually cost me any more chakra than summoning Tsuruya did.”

**Is that so?**

“Yeah, it is,” I replied, and rolled to my feet. “Wanna go test if you can randomly throw me in the water?”

Isobu rewarded my flippant tone with a long, level stare. It was a little like being under my mother’s judgmental eye whenever I did something particularly reckless. Sure, she’d been dead for more than ten years and Isobu wasn’t a parent, but the feeling somehow remained.

Fine. I will head out to sea and summon you. Be prepared to hold your breath.

Oh, *that* boded well.

Isobu avoided using his rolling death tank mode, instead choosing to drag himself out to sea like the giant turtle he was. He could probably have leapt, too, but even thinking about that option reminded me of the Great Belly Flop Tsunami and how I didn’t need to see a repeat performance. Or worse, Isobu trying to top it.

He may have flattened a bit of prime beachfront real estate, but who cared at this point? It wasn’t like there was anyone around to appreciate it besides me, and people had accused me plenty of
times over the years of being a bit too destructive.

I still couldn’t figure out if Isobu was a bad influence on me, or if I was the bad influence on him. **I am ready to begin the summoning**, Isobu sent, once he was a distant gray-green mountain of spikes in the bay. Only humans need to use blood, conveniently enough.

Yeah, that’s pretty easy on you and your total lack of a circula—And then there was the same sensation of being pulled to one side by a vaudeville hook I remembered. Then *cold argh fuck* and I was underwater.

There was something about the ocean, even in tropical waters, that was always a shock to the system. Figuring out which way was up took about half a second, and then I was on the remainder of my lung capacity without needing to worry about water shooting up my nose. I didn’t need to surface just yet, but it felt wrong to be upside-down, since Isobu always just knew and was probably judging me.

Then I opened my eyes.

The water was *clear*. Not just clear, like in a glass of tap water or anything so mundane. Beneath the waves, I could see the sandy bottom of the bay and the sunken galleon hiding there. I could look up and see the sun hitting the surface of the water and shattering into a million pieces and refracting like crazy. Fish darted around, a riot of color and activity patrolled by the occasional shallow-water shark that probably hunted all night. I’d seen a lot of great views in my lifetime, but this had to be one of the best underwater ones.

And if I swam forward just a little, I could grab onto Isobu’s chin spikes and get hauled back to the surface with no trouble at all.

*You know what’s weird? I don’t really feel any pressure right now. I know I’m about two meters below the surface, but I’m fine.* I thought at him, while I used his spikes as a wall to kick off of. I spiraled lazily through the water, though I knew by the end of this little journey I’d be dealing with wet clothes and complaining all the way. It was just too pretty to not enjoy the moment.

*I had wondered about that.* Isobu’s pupil was much wider than it normally was on the surface, even though the light wasn’t all that bad. Since we arrived here, have you noticed any other adjustments to your body? I know I am larger, and perhaps my fingers are more flexible.

Well, I’ve always been a pretty fast healer, thanks to you, but I didn’t used to see cuts close in seconds. And obviously my lung capacity is different, I told him. Granted, a couple of minutes was nothing by shinobi standards, but I had never been specifically put through underwater endurance training like Kiri-nin. What really worries me is that I don’t feel the water pressure. I just feel the water itself.

*That is probably due to my influence,* Isobu replied. When I gave him my best disbelieving look, even if it was underwater, he said dryly, You are the partner to a Tailed Beast who specializes in Water nature transformations. I have more than a few tricks up my nonexistent sleeves. Granted, I have never given them to a human, but so much about this situation is already strange that seeing us influence one another is almost at the bottom of the list.

*But before this the connection was mostly through chakra,* I pointed out. Any non-spiritual physiological differences are still weird enough that we should at least track them. I paused. Also, what the fuck? It would’ve been nice to know if I had some kind of resistance to killer water
Isobu rolled his eye—okay, I was officially the bad influence of the two of us—and tilted his head forward, scooping me into the dip between his jaw spikes and the rest of his face. I let all the air in my lungs stream out in a rush of bubbles, and was free to take a deep breath when we hit the surface.

Sure, I was still sitting in the improvised bucket of seawater that was Isobu’s facial structure, but hey, I could breathe again. While he tilted his head to empty the water out, I clambered up his face and onto his head for the second time that day.

**I will drop you off on the shore. And then you will work your way through your entire arsenal if you can,** Isobu stated. There was no arguing with that tone, so I didn’t bother. **We need to know not just the changes, but the limitations of those changes.**

*Fiiiiiiine.* But really, it would be something more productive than even exploring the island. Isobu’s lap around the place had confirmed there were no other settlements, and I hadn’t seen any signs of large predators that’d target a person. Surviving on a deserted island with all the right skills was more an exercise in avoiding being irrevocably scarred from isolation and boredom once things were all sorted out, right?

**How would you even know?**

...*I think I read a book on this kind of thing, once?* Isobu dumped me on the shore with no ceremony whatsoever, then settled back into the water to lurk.

Half an hour of experimentation later, and I’d confirmed that all of my Water ninjutsu more or less worked as I remembered. I hadn’t practiced with seawater in ages, but the chakra costs were the same as with the rivers and lakes I was more familiar with. I’d gotten into the habit of brute-forcing my way around having to actually use environmental water in my attacks over the years, so going back to my roots (and the somewhat lower chakra costs of *actually using water that was there*) had actually been kind of nice.

So, that was about one-third of my arsenal taken care of. I launched one last Water Dragon Bullet out to sea, where Isobu obligingly bit its head off, then started work on the rest of my techniques.

Unfortunately, I was out of options as far as fūinjutsu went. While I was capable of inflicting horrific damage with spontaneously generated explosives, as always, my bigger and more complex seals aside from the revised summoning technique all needed me to put their structure together on paper if I wanted to get the maximum effect out of them. Sure, there *was* a workaround to most of that, but I liked my soul where it was and feeding myself to a Shinigami didn’t really have much appeal.

And then there was the matter of my kenjutsu techniques, which all were stymied by my lack of a sword. Projecting my bastardized edition of the Samurai Sword technique through a kunai just didn’t compare. In the end, it was yet another thing that had to go on my shopping list for whenever I found human civilization again.

The last thing on my list? Isobu’s chakra. Reaching for it produced a sensation not unlike slamming my fingertips in a door, and a complete lack of response in Isobu that was more worrying than my pain. His chakra was still in the seal and still flowed inside my coils, but apparently I was down to passive abilities (that I had never noticed before) and had to leave his
energy out of consideration for my arsenal.

While I contemplated the sharp reduction in my ability to defend myself and started meditating on ways to compensate for the loss, I pinged Isobu. *Ready for a status update?*

**Report,** Isobu said, in a passable imitation of Sensei’s commanding tone.

*Kenjutsu relies on a weapon I don’t have, Water Release ninjutsu is fine, fūinjutsu is down to anything without paper or ink, and when I tried to use your chakra just now I got an emphatic “nope.”* I sighed when I finished rattling things off. *Though I also have the Academy Three and the Rasengan, among other things.*

**So, you are reduced to your own skills and strength.**

*Yeah, back to basics over here. You?*

Isobu made a scoffing noise. *Unlike you, I have never needed to rely explicitly on the strength of our bond. My power is my own.*

I mentally subtracted the attitude implied by his word choice, then said, *But you can still use the Rasengan and fūinjutsu, right?*

Well, as much as Isobu had ever used. He mainly manipulated the properties of matter to make them explode, like I did. It wasn’t from a lack of talent—rather, he didn’t *need* the vast majority of utility seals that I’d ended up learning to make my life easier. Other than helping his fellow Tailed Beasts through fūinjutsu, he could do all I could and more just by throwing his power against something with enough force. Now that he could write in the real world whenever the hell he wanted?

**I am as strong as ever.**

That answered that.

So that was why the seagulls were going nuts. Isobu’s experiments with control leaned, on the whole, toward “this user has no sense of scale” than anything, and local fish paid the price.

I bit my lip as I thought. While the skills we had carried over, Isobu’s chakra itself didn’t.

Until I could figure out what the hell had happened and deal with it, I’d need to focus on what I *could* do.

**It is not all that different from the time before you got that tattoo, is it?** Isobu mused.

I raised my left hand overhead, as though grasping at the sun. The sleeve tattoo seal that ran from my wrist to my shoulder blade was active so I could channel chakra through it. If I pushed a bit more, I could make the ink seem to sway under my skin, letting the crane and the copy of Isobu seem to be occupying an active ocean. Without Isobu’s chakra in the mix, I could probably do...well, basically anything I wanted with it. Frying my own chakra coils *again* wasn’t something I was capable of under my own power.

Gotta look for the silver lining, right?

*Ah, well, I suppose if we see anyone and I have to fight them, it’s not like I’m defenseless.*

I punched the air a couple of times, then settled into the Strong Fist starting pose. I wasn’t anything
like as strong as Gai, but his intense training methods gave me a good base to work from.

Isobu snorted. Be realistic; we hardly need fear anything in these waters. All we truly require is planning time and supplies before we set off.

Does that mean I get to ride on your head until we hit the next island?

I will consider it. Or he’d make me ride in his stomach because it was safer to hide in a pocket dimension than to travel the sea on the back of a giant turtle. There were still big sea serpents out there somewhere.

...Gai would probably try to fight them. It’d been a long time since Manda, hadn’t it?

If the next thought in that sequence is “I should try fighting one,” I am going to veto it.

I laughed quietly to myself, shaking my head. Boredom hadn’t eaten my judgment away that much. Not yet.

Isobu and I passed the rest of the time until sundown with yet more companionable ribbing. I gathered food for what was going to be my first real sea voyage in years, then set up a real shelter in one of the surviving buildings in town. There was still enough scrap material to MacGyver a canoe or something if I knew the first thing about engineering seaworthy vessels, but Konoha training sadly neglected that particular skill. All I really knew was that things needed to be waterproof and have a...thingy that sat in the water and kept them from turning over. Inverted shark’s fin.

Basically, I completed what tasks I knew how to tackle. Isobu entertained himself.

It was almost like home.

Just before the sun finally disappeared under the western horizon, I finally gathered as many blankets from around the abandoned town as I could find, then made a nest on the floor of my chosen den for the day. And of course, that was the local dive I’d raided for bottles earlier. With a cheery little blaze in the fireplace, heat suffused the building even as the sun finally gave up and went to bed.

I found a buoy, Isobu said while I rolled one of the blankets into the shape of a lumpy pillow.

I frowned. As disinclined to the entire discipline of oceangoing anything as I was, I was...pretty sure that buoys were those floaty things that people used to mark coastlines. Some of them had lights on them, to warn ships of one hazard or another. What’s it look like?

Take a look. Isobu ran an assessing eye over the entire device, then sent it to me.

The buoy in question bobbed in front of Isobu’s eye as he surfaced, his night vision being far better than mine. The base looked like the usual rounded, fluid-filled vessel I barely remembered from pictures, but made of rusted iron instead of neatly painted steel or aluminum. Rather than any kind of ladder structure, or a light on top, someone had attached a wooden sign and a big, clanking bell. It was also sadly bereft of lazy sea lions.

Is this thing attached to the seabed?

Yes, Isobu responded, in the kind of tone that implied I was a complete ignoramus for not understanding how buoys worked.
I liked to think of myself as more “ignorant” than “ignoramus,” but Isobu’s nautical understanding frankly would have made most of my comrades sound clueless anyway.

I looked through my mind’s eye at the emblem on the wooden sign in front of Isobu, while my real eyes closed. Painted black wood served as a background, while the middle ground was two crossed bones as sharply angled as the cardinal points on a compass rose. The foreground image? A grinning skull bisected by a crescent moon with both points facing upward. Or maybe it was a mustache.

I scratched my head. ...Well, I’m stumped. Do you think it might be a pirate flag?

In what universe do pirates have flags? Isobu demanded, turning the buoy around with a careful twist of his chakra in the water. The other side had a plain white cross with the same crescent balanced across the middle, sans the skull.

You mean the ones that attack the Land of Water don’t use them?

Why would they need to? The majority of water-bandits in the ocean are shinobi or former shinobi, or else dead men walking. And you know exactly how interested many shinobi are in advertising themselves without backing from their villages.

My brain stuttered for a second, unable to process the idea that pirates wouldn’t, before I remembered that I’d lived at least one lifetime where both Captain Hook and Captain Jack Sparrow were cultural icons. Sure, they weren’t real, but skull-and-crossbones flags were always pirates. Unless they were football teams. I refused to believe that my brain was lying to me.

...Those are stories.

Shhhh, let me be excited for a second!

Isobu waited precisely one second. Go to sleep. If this is important somehow—

And if it is, how should I know? Other than pirates-versus-ninjas being an age-old debate—

—it can wait until morning. I will keep watch for ships.

Isobu, who was not a cetacean, could nevertheless sleep kind of like one if he wanted to. It wasn’t a biological requirement to avoid his brain breaking down, but he took naps if there was nothing else going on. Try not to sink them instantly?

If they do not seem hostile, I may not.

I sighed. Good enough.

Isobu settled deeper into the water, sinking down toward the seabed and the anchor that held the buoy in place. If I looked out to sea, I would not have seen anything but placid water despite knowing damn well there was a giant sea monster out there.

...Wanna watch what I remember of the pirate movies I’ve seen?

Isobu rolled his eye, looking up at the moonlight filtering down through the waves. The sight of it was strangely comforting. Good night, Kei.
Rolling Girl

Chapter Summary

Kei: Continue bizarro side-plot and find threads.

I slept badly. I would go so far as to say that if there was a time I slept worse in this particular way, I couldn’t remember it.

While I could write off nightmares as a cost of doing business in a very bloody business, my dreams had always been a bit screwy. Between a childhood spent talking to me, myself, and I in lucid dreams, the turtle sitting in my headspace for the other half of my life, and the existence of the Tailed Beast mind-skype, my head was crowded at the best of times. I had precious few normal dreams, and the last one I remembered involved an old-fashioned fisticuffs brawl with a starfish.

This situation decided not to follow that pattern. Starfish or otherwise.

YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED.

Just like that. No dream scene, no mindscape—just words drilled into my head like they’d stomped in without checking in with the ears first. Sound didn’t even get a say.

YOU ARE THE THIRD.

I tried yelling back that whoever was sending the message needed to take a number, but no sound came out. Annoyance bubbled to the surface of my mind, redoubling in strength when the second attempt produced no results either. So much for lucid dreaming.

YOU WILL ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

Oh fucking hell n—

And then I woke up.

It was kind of a shitty dream.

I groaned and rolled over, out of my nest of blankets and onto a dusty floor. I managed to avoid getting splinters in my face through sheer luck, because nobody had planed, polished, or indeed swept the floor in quite some time. Then I wriggled out from under the table I’d been using as a last-ditch guard against the effects of spontaneous roof collapse, rubbing my face with the inside of my forearm.

I sat there, blinking, as I spotted something amiss. My left arm and the epic ink adorning it were the same as ever, my right wasn’t supposed to have anything on it other than the occasional kenjutsu scar. Instead, a black band encircled my wrist like one of those carnival bracelets that were always a complete pain in the ass to remove without scissors. Rather than meeting neatly on the inside of my wrist, the band broke and left a neat square inch free. And in that spot, glowing, was a neatly drawn character for “three.”

A chill crept up my spine.
“Being Screamed at by Some Asshole, A Concert in C Minor,” was officially the shittiest dream I’d had in a very long time.

I tried digging my fingernail carefully under the band, but the damned thing sat flush against my skin like I’d gotten another tattoo. Being solid black, I couldn’t see any seal lines to analyze. And it was still fucking glowing. Purple, even.

I shook out my wrist as the glow faded, but my nerves refused to settle entirely. Having evidence that I was being shoved around on a cosmic shuffleboard court by powers unknown was rather uncomfortable.

And then, finally, I looked out the door and saw nothing but gold and red in shadow. I blinked twice, and so did it.

There is a ship, Isobu said, as I tried to figure out how the fuck he’d gotten on land, on the opposite side of town from the sea. Then what he’d just said got through to my brain, and I gave up on that thought.

What does it look like? I asked, while gathering up the blankets and tucking my very meager belongings into one of them like a sling.

Isobu shimmered in place, and then poofed away as I finally recognized the genjutsu for what it was. In his place, and significantly smaller, Isobu projected the image of a rotund ship with a sort of…whale motif. He slowly rotated the projection like it was a three-dimensional diagram, and I approached to poke at the image.

I wasn’t familiar with figureheads, not really, but was pretty sure I’d never seen one take up the entire front of a ship since the heyday of the trireme. Said figurehead was in the shape of a white baleen whale, though sadly there was no matching tail at the stern. It had four masts, with the shortest one in the back and the other three four sails tall. Each of the three taller masts one was topped with black flags flying the same symbol that Isobu and I had noticed on the buoy last night. Overall, it was a bit tubby-looking despite both the implied size of the ship, given the humans Isobu had projected running around on the deck, and the way the sides bristled with cannons.

...How can you even see that? I wanted to know. Isobu couldn’t have been on the surface with them, or else the ship probably would have started shooting at him already.

Artistic license. Isobu cut the genjutsu, then simply sent me a mental snapshot of what he could actually see: the bottom of the ship, complete with the little fin things that helped them stay level in the water. I still wasn’t sure what they were called. And those are an extension of the keel.

Why do you know that? I paused. Also, what the hell is a keel?

I have spent hundreds of years in the ocean, Isobu told me with all due bluntness. And I have been attacking ships for most of it. It pays to know where an object’s greatest weakness lies.

...I don’t know what to say to that. I walked outside, shading my eyes with my left hand as I peered out to sea. Next time I went to a beach, I was bringing binoculars. So I take it they’re not hostile? I mean, you didn’t rip the keel out and let everyone drown.

I did not rule it out. Isobu lurked underneath the approaching ship like the ultimate tribute to Jaws, only with a shell. I am merely keeping my options open until you inevitably botch first contact.
I groaned aloud. I’m not that bad.

You are worse.

Oh, shut up. I spent so much time talking to Isobu that nearly everyone in Konoha thought I was either completely expressionless and judgmental or not paying attention at all. The latter crowd were generally more correct, because ignoring Isobu bordered on impossible. All the same, I refused to screw up something so basic as greeting people in a brand new place.

I doubt they can see you as you are, Isobu remarked. As he settled onto the seabed to wait, a big green sea serpent passed in front of his face, blanched, and swam rapidly away.

I could try lighting one of those SOS bonfires, but… Well, if the crew was heading here already, what was the point? I ran a hand over my face and decided that I could at least do the bare minimum to look like the marooned sailor the pirates probably could expect to find. As opposed to a misplaced human superweapon.

Though all bets were off if I felt threatened. There were limits to how much I would tolerate from other people before just deciding to take to sea via Isobu and leaving burning wreckage in our wake.

If you are going to speak with these humans, I suggest keeping an open mind, Isobu suggested lazily.

Easy for him to say. Aside from me, he didn’t deal with people regularly. When he did, his past go-to options included “kill them all” and “kill almost all of them, but leave enough to spread rumors.” Only his siblings consistently required more effort from him than that. And, well, okay, he was a pretty effective communicator when it was just us.

Not so open that my brain falls out, I argued, then stopped to smack myself in the forehead. I let myself get distracted way too easily. Okay, no, you’re doing the thing again where you play devil’s advocate to everything I say. I want to see what this big ship is for, who’s on it, and what they’re like. I am going to set a bonfire to get their attention in case I don’t have it already.

And without waiting for Isobu to call me on not walking the walk, I set to work. Scrap wood, loose shingles, and whatever else I could find that wasn’t structurally important to anything went into the pile, which I ignited a careful distance away from any of the remaining buildings. Of all the silly things I could be proud of, the fact that I’d made a proper beach fire was probably one of the more mundane ones, but I’d take it.

I sat down at the fire and started reheating one of the fish from the day before, on a stick. I’d eaten the other silvery fish yesterday with no ill effects, so they were probably safe for human consumption. If they turned out to be poisonous or something, well, too late now.

They just launched a smaller boat. I count three people on the shore party, Isobu reported. He sent me a quick image that almost overlapped with the fire, of a seabed-side view of a boat being rowed to shore. I cannot tell you what they are saying, but I am not sensing any particular hostility.

That’s a start, I said. Thanks.

Then I broke out the rest of the fish and set about heating all of them back to piping hot, too. If I was going to host a shore party, I could make it a beach party easy enough. I could barely see the little dot on the horizon that was probably the boat Isobu was talking about, nearly swallowed by
the all-encompassing bulk of the parent ship.

…Wait, this was where the term “mothership” had come from, wasn’t it? One big capital ship and then a bunch of little ones attached to it?

**How is that relevant?**

*It kind of isn’t. I’m just amazed I can use that word in the correct context, and not about aliens.*

Isobu gave a silent groan of frustration.

I left him to it and climbed onto a high point on the nearest sand dune, for at least as long as it lasted once I stepped on it. Standing on the tips of my toes, I greeted the rowboat with the widest wave I could manage.

Someone stood up on the bow of the rowboat and waved back.

**Two other ships launched, heading around the bay. One is going toward our landing site. The other is traveling the long way around the island.**

*They’re probably scouting for whatever ship could have realistically put me here.*

**The second ship is much smaller. It likely holds only one human and…it just took off.** Isobu paused, sounding irritated all of a sudden. **That vessel is traveling ten times the speed of the other two.**

I frowned thoughtfully, then retreated to snatch the fish out of the fire before they charred all the way through. Once the food was safe, I leapt into a tree and shot up the rough trunk for a better look. Jumping would have been easier, but I had no intention of revealing my abilities to strangers before I damn well had to.

True to Isobu’s word, I could see what looked like an over-engineered raft. Some kind of engine stuck to the back and there was a sail for some obscure reason, and the little monster of a craft cut through the water like it was flying.

*Isobu?* I thought at him as I slipped back down the tree.

**What is it?**

*I haven’t seen a vehicle that fast since the last time I was alive. What the hell kind of tech levels are we working with here?*

*I would not know. I just recall hearing you complain about radios and a total lack of adequate pens existing at the same time.*

Well, crap.

I scratched the back of my neck, wandering back over to the dune and plopping myself down on it. Given the choice between going out to meet the boat or picking at the bizarre binding on my right wrist, I chose the more immediate problem. The pirates could handle their own shit.

*I know you are not the type to drink yourself into a stupor and make poor decisions—past even that first one—but I do not recall you getting another seal permanently added to your collection,* Isobu commented as I scratched at the kanji and only succeeded at raising red lines on
my skin. Those faded fast, but the black marks remained. **Even a tribute to me.**

*It doesn’t hurt, but dammit, this makes me feel like that one asshole with a barcode on the back of his head.* Sure, kanji wasn’t quite that bad, but I’d been *branded* by some faceless creep and was still trying to decide if I was more afraid or angry about that. Maybe both.

Frustrated, I turned a key in my head and gave Isobu access to the memories I’d accumulated for the past twenty-four hours. The dream was the important part, and thus what I pushed to the forefront. Then I dragged my hand over my face and stared blankly out to sea, watching the pirates slowly approach.

...**When we see this creature again, I will kill it.** If Isobu had been one of the Tailed Beasts with claws, he’d have pierced stone. As it was, his fingers digging into the seabed crumbled boulders into powder. **How dare anyone try to control us?**

I slowly shook my head. *I don’t know what to tell you. I woke up after the dream and it was there, and I don’t know what it’s supposed to mean.* I paused and replayed Isobu’s first statement in my mind again. *Also, I never really saw it...*

Regardless, *it will be destroyed,* Isobu snarled. After a long moment, he glowered up at the various vessels floating in the water. **These humans had better be more helpful to you than that was.**

*Low bar to clear, Isobu. A very low bar.*

I lazed around for a little longer in the morning sun, probably for about another few minutes. But after that point, I hit my personal boredom tolerance limit and decided I had better things to do than court sunburn. Or build sandcastles, though the idea struck me anyway.

No, instead I trekked back over to the town and toward the unmaintained docks that somehow still stood there, awaiting their next visitors. I’d forgotten about them until I noticed the pirates heading to it, so I figured I had enough manners left in me to say hello in person. As long as doing so didn’t require me to acquire splinters, anyway.

As the pirate...rowboat finally got within jumping distance of the dock, I took a second to try and assess my possible new friends.

There were three of them thus far, not counting whoever had gone off to circle the island like an overenthusiastic pond skater.

Honestly, even though I knew Jiraiya and other tall people, I had to do a double-take when I finally figured out the relative scale I was working with. Standard deviations of human sizes went out the window, because the big guy in the back was easily twice the size of the guy at the bow of the ship. Vertically, and then maybe another three times horizontally. If not for the pirate regalia, I would have pegged the guy as basically Hagrid.

...Probably evil Hagrid. That grin was kinda unsettling, especially coming from a stranger twice my height. Seemed that he’d been mainlining whatever local Miracle-Gro variant was in the water here, because those sea serpents sure hadn’t been eels either.

After that, realizing that the dude in the cowboy hat was about twenty centimeters taller than me, and that the guy with the turban and paired katana was considerably shorter than I was, were really just footnotes.
Maybe that was why I dropped my planned “Ahoy there” for a considerably less enthusiastic, “Yo.”

Kakashi would have been so proud of me.

When the first pirate looked totally wrong-footed, I made it worse with, “Welcome to wherever the hell we are. Do you know where this is? Because I sure don’t.”

Cowboy Hat schooled his features into some kind of order, then said, “We saw your bonfire. Uh, did you need a rescue?”

I looked around at my total lack of boats, boat-building materials, and anything associated with either that hadn’t rotted or dried into uselessness. Also at my lack of shoes, hat, or any other real survival gear for an island adventure. Then I looked back at him. “Yep. Thanks for being willing to stop by. I’ve only been here a day and already I’m sure I don’t want to make it two.”

“Why are you even on this island? There haven’t been any storms in weeks and the Sea Kings kicked all the actual residents off ages ago!” screeched Turban. Because, well, he hadn’t introduced himself and he wore a turban.

I wanted one of those swords, though.

I raised a finger, opened my mouth, and then paused. *Uh, Isobu, do you happen to have any idea? Because I just remember waking up on the beach.*

**I remember only that I awoke in the ocean.**

*Well, dammit.* And in the meantime, the pirates sort of leaned forward collectively, as though trying to catch the next detail of a grand story. Which I did not have, because either my memory had been fucked with or there genuinely *hadn’t* been anything between me being in bed in Konoha and then suddenly being transported to this random beach.

I disappointed them by shrugging and saying, “I have no idea.”

The Cowboy Hat and Turban looked so crestfallen I almost felt bad for them. Like, I’d last seen that kind of exaggerated despair from Naruto when I told him he had to let other people eat mochi before he claimed the rest of the batch.

I sat back on my heels and accepted a rope passed up from the somewhat-bigger-than-average dinghy, so I could help them secure it. There wasn’t much to secure it to, given the state of the dock, but there was such a thing as optimism even in the face of defeat. Maybe I should say something to change the topic…

“So, are you guys pirates?” I tried, hoping to get some information about their crew. Pirates were supposed to be braggarts in the stories, so maybe they’d be happy to gush on that topic?

It quickly became obvious that this was not the right question to ask.

“ZEHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Now, the big guy had been pretty quiet until I said that, and for a second I’d *almost* forgotten he was there in favor of salvaging my first impression on the other two. But while his crewmates puffed up like angry birds, probably to shout “What are you, stupid?!” in my face, the big guy’s weedwacker of a laugh almost made me jump out of my skin.
Does that mean you would rather not—

_I know what your solutions tend to be, so please stop there._

Not all of my solutions end in the deaths of hundreds.

_Sure, you say that now…_

“Say, how long did you say you’ve been out in the sun?” asked Cowboy Hat. When I focused on him again, as opposed to the voice in my head that also happened to be out at sea, I found a rather concerned expression staring back at me.

“Uh, like a day?” If my memory was right, anyway. I rocked back on my heels until my butt hit the boards, then flexed my legs out so they could dangle over the edge. _Now I just need to come up with a plausible lie._ “I’ve kinda been getting by on coconuts…”

Cowboy Hat and Turban exchanged worried looks, they hopped up out of the boat and onto the dock. With the big guy and his awful voice balancing the little boat, they didn’t trip or anything. I craned my neck to look up at them, but otherwise didn’t move. Instead, I said to Turban, “You’re pretty worried over someone you just met.”

“Even if you’re an idiot, you’re still in Whitebeard Pirate territory. We look after our people,” said Turban. And he handed me a canteen.

I tried gently pushing it back into his hand, but he insisted. I quirked my lips wryly and said, “Look, I’m fine. I sometimes stop paying attention if I hear something. It’s no big deal.” With that, I stood up with the canteen still in hand, while Turban looked like he would rather have made me sit back down for my own safety. I dodged the attempt without looking like it, then added, “Actually, since you’re here to rescue me, maybe I can pay you with lunch? I have fish, fish, more fish, and coconuts. And questionable booze of several types.”

Look, I had some idea of how to be a good host. All the particulars had been chucked out the window, and some of the stuff I was offering wasn’t strictly speaking mine, but hey, I tried.

“Well, if you’re offering, we’ll take it!” said Evilest Hagrid, and I suppressed an inward shudder at hearing that laugh again. But the smile pasted on my face seemed to pass for real well enough. No one commented or grimaced.

_Phrasing, you jerk._

Are you certain—

_I’m fine._

A quick hop off the docks and a walk across the beach later, and we found my food. Really, it was kind of worrisome how many fish had been caught by Isobu’s wave, and I didn’t really try to justify to anyone how I could have caught so many with no equipment whatsoever. Luckily, they didn’t ask. I would have had to lie, and I wasn’t really much good at it.

“So I never did introduce us,” says Evilest Hagrid, picking up one of the coconuts and making it look like a grape in his massive hands. He pokes it open with a knife that might as well be a sword. “Marshall D. Teach, of the Whitebeard Pirates.”

They had middle names here? I was officially not in Kansas anymore.
Also, Evilest Hagrid suited him better. The name “Teach” rang a bell, but it was a quiet sort of bell that frankly was more of a chime. Still, I made a mental note and decided to check in with Isobu later.

I tilted my head to one side, looking from Teach to the still-unnamed members of the crew. Assuming they were of the same crew, anyway. “So…you two are…?”

“Eastwood,” said Cowboy Hat.

No.

“Sinbad,” said Turban.

Noooo.

**What is it this time?**

“I, uh,” I said, still not over those names.

Ignoring Isobu, I shook myself, and then found myself defaulting back to *old as shit* guidelines. As in things I hadn’t needed to use in my entire life span, but my forefathers had during the Clan Wars. Sure, I wasn’t directly descended from a single shinobi clan, but surely some customs had crossed cultural barriers for the sake of my internal logic if nothing else?

“You can call me Kei,” I said, meeting each pirate’s eyes in turn. Then I shrugged. “Everyone else does.”

“Who else?” asked Teach.

Shoulda figured I’d set myself up for that. So I slumped down and picked up one of the fish, picking listlessly at it. I was an old hand at acting like a sack of concentrated sad anyway. It probably looked like a total emotional shuttering, but I was just drawing on genuine feelings of homesickness and a half-assed acting ability to sell it.

I bit down on the silvery fish, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“H-hey, isn’t that poisonous?” Sinbad asked, panicked. “Ah, no, please don’t eat that!”

I blinked at him, then swallowed the bite. Well, the inside of my mouth might’ve tingled a bit yesterday, for about as long as it took me to finish eating, but I was fine. Aside from being hells of hungry.

“You have so much to live for!” wailed Sinbad, while Eastwood just looked like he was gonna cry.

Teach stifled a laugh, but not very well.

“I ate one of these yesterday. I’m fine,” I said, nonplussed. *Isobu, was this actually poisonous?*

**Not to me. Probably not to you, either.**

Oh. Yay for more passive abilities I hadn’t known for sure were a thing.

**Just avoid asking friends to sample your cooking.**

*Shut up.*
“But you can’t die before the division commander meets you!” Sinbad said, though I was still eating the fish.

“I won’t. So, is the rest of this stuff poisonous?” I asked, waving a hand and, though touched by Sinbad’s concern, I was not really in the mood to receive it.

Eastwood picked up a fish on a stick—not quite a fish stick but I didn’t care for technicalities like that—and pointed at me with it. “None of the rest of these are. Just quit eating the Grand Line lead bullet fish before you make us all sick by proxy.”

Too late. I tossed the stick I’d used to cook the fish into the fire as a form of trash disposal, but by that point all that was left was a fish head and a tail fin anyway. I was still hungry, but the rest of the food was for my guests. “Done.”

“That is not remotely what I meant,” said Eastwood, with just a hint of nervous sweat crawling down the side of his face.

Still, Teach and Sinbad both picked a fish out of the pile, and Teach’s was about the size of the sharks I’d rescued yesterday. Sinbad bit a flat-faced fish’s head off almost instantly.

“It’s fine, though. The rest is for you guys as a thank-you.” I stretched my legs out all the way and then crossed my ankles, leaning back in the sand.

“You said something about booze?” asked Eastwood, after the other two were occupied.

“I’ve only got these, but there are more in town.” I held up a beer bottle I’d kept unopened, since the others were being used as improvised water bottles instead. They still tasted like burning, even after I’d made sure to rinse them out with the smallest water ninjutsu I was capable of. “Other than that, all I’ve got are coconuts.”

Eastwood frowned, rubbing at the stubble on his face. “I’m surprised anything in the town’s still edible even after all this time. It was abandoned five years ago.”

I wobbled a hand in midair. “There definitely wasn’t any food. But alcohol keeps pretty well.”

Eastwood or Sinbad probably would have replied, or maybe Teach might’ve started on that motorized laugh of his that was starting to remind me of a dental drill. However, I heard the sound of a craft rocketing through the water, and then everyone paused to listen as it got louder. It wasn’t obvious at first, necessarily, but then it finally engulfed the wave-made backing track of my life.

And then the aforementioned little watercraft shot up the back of a wave like a ramp, sending it flying right into the shallowest possible end of the surf. The craft’s nose barely avoided embedding in the sand like a dart.

The craft’s rider was not so lucky, face-planting squarely in the first patch of dry sand in his wake and sending his orange hat flying. Eastwood and Sinbad both winced, but Teach just started chuckling again.

I shot to my feet, bounding over the piles of driftwood and reaching the downed man in maybe two quick leaps. A part of me belatedly blared a warning—that I shouldn’t reveal any of my skills to people I wasn’t sure I could trust—but the rest of my mind jammed in medic mode and didn’t let that first part steer. Sure, I hadn’t been officially certified for medical ninjutsu usage without assistance in over a decade—and had never technically been a medic-nin before that, either—but I could do first aid.
I got as far as rolling him over onto his back before I realized he was snoring. The guy didn’t even look like the impact had made him flinch, much less mussed his black hair or left a mark. No, instead his snoring continued unabated.

He was a younger man than any of the pirates I’d seen so far, and in pretty decent shape, so I cautiously narrowed my list of possible instant-onset unconsciousness conditions by ruling out heart attack and stroke. It wasn’t like I had medical equipment to do a full battery of tests, or a brain full of diagnostic criteria.

Cautiously, I tried prying an eyelid up and watched the pupil still respond to light.

“Don’t worry so much! The commander’s always doing things like this!” Teach said, around his laughter.

“Teach is right! He’ll be up again in a few minutes,” added Sinbad, who by that point had cut the top off a coconut to make a very low-effort rip-off of one of those weird tiki drinks. I…probably would have been exactly that lazy when it came to using my swords as utensils, at least when I had one.

I frowned. I couldn’t sense the commander’s chakra at all, which ordinarily would mean he was dead. But he was still breathing. And aside from Isobu, there still weren’t any chakra signatures in range at all. Despite the obvious abundance of life-forms running loose around here, apparently the Ten-Tails had never landed in this (part of the) world.

It made my diagnostic jutsu, which relied on reading chakra flow, pretty useless.

“Did he seriously just fall asleep?” I asked, even as I gently took hold of his tattooed bicep and shook it. All it did was change the tempo of his snoring.

“It happens,” Eastwood said dismissively, removing his cowboy hat for a second to run a hand through his light brown hair. “So, you a doctor something?”

“Actually, I failed my exam,” I said, picking the still-unnamed commander’s hat out of the dirt and brushing it off. After a moment’s consideration, I dropped it over his face. “Smarter people banned me from practicing medicine for the sake of my patients.”

At least I was knowledgeable enough to know my limits.

If this was, say, narcolepsy, I really wasn’t trained well enough to help. Rin would have snapped her fingers and recalled some kind of solution to any problem ever listed in a Konoha medical textbook, but I maintained my streak of ending up in over my head. I, instead, was just about qualified to be an EMT. In the middle of a minefield.

Really, though “demolitions expert” and “doctor” both started with the same consonant, my skills leaned heavily in the first direction. Not like I’d actually mention that to these people unless I had a reason to.

“You can’t be that bad, can you?” Sinbad asked blankly, his large eyes rather wider than before.

Eastwood made a face. “Maybe we should mention that to Pops…”

I was about to ask them if they were second-generation pirates carting a retiree out to sea while going around plundering, but at that point the commander woke up. Specifically, he sat up like he’d been shocked and had one arm raised in a half-wave.
“Hey every—wait.” He looked at me, since I was crouched next to him. Then he picked up his hat, which had dropped into his lap, and stuck it back onto his head in its proper place. “Weren’t you on the beach?”

“And now so are you,” I said. I raised a hand in greeting. “Yo.”

For a second, the guy was so totally guileless that I wondered if he’d managed to concuss himself on landing. Either that or, between the freckles and the total lack of lines on his face, he was really young. As in, I wouldn’t have followed his directions if he was my commanding officer out of sheer paranoia that he’d fuck up due to inexperience.

Kinda funny coming from me, really. I’d been in some sort of command position since I was like eleven.

A lightbulb switched on inside his brain. Or so I hoped. “Oh, right, you. Who are you again?”

I fought down the eye tic I just knew I was developing. “The name’s Kei. I’ve been stuck on this island for two days. And you are…?”

The guy sat up fully, then pulled off what my old elementary school teachers would have called “crisscross applesauce.” He rested his right hand on his crossed ankles, and tipped his hat with his left. “Portgas D. Ace, Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates.” He dropped his hat back on his head and leaned back, spotting his fellow pirates, and added with a sweep of his arm, “And these guys are my men.”

“I met them while you were taking a dirt nap,” I said, getting to my feet. I offered him a hand up. “So, gonna join us for lunch?”

“Sure!” Ace replied, and I got to watch his crewmates making frantic “no” motions over his shoulder. They stopped when he turned around and immediately started marching toward food.

I trailed uncertainly after, especially once I realized that Ace was reminding me of someone.

By the time I made it back to the fire, Ace had eaten about half the fish in no seconds flat. And then I realized that he reminded me of about half of my friends after long physical training sessions. Together. We were hell on restaurants.

“Where does it all go?” I wondered aloud, as every remaining scrap of my food-finding mission disappeared in short order. Ace wasn’t big enough to eat like that, right?

“I’ve asked the universe that every day since I first met him,” Eastwood replied.

“Ever get an answer?” Sinbad asked mildly, protecting his coconut from Ace’s grasping hands.

Eastwood tilted his hat so it covered his face. And then he let out a pained, “I wish.”

While Ace continued to devour anything foodlike that couldn’t talk, Teach got to his feet. I had to admit that I was side-eyeing him, because I still wasn’t used to being in the presence of a human that damned big, but all he did was push off with a wave and a “I’m going to scout the rest of this island.”

Ace made a noise that might have been along the lines of “sure,” but Teach was already leaving.

Well, he was about the size of an elephant. Must have eaten his greens and drunk a lot of milk as a kid. He’d probably be fine as long as he didn’t find the few sea serpents that Isobu hadn’t
“Wasn’t the best I’ve ever had,” Ace concluded, a fishbone hanging from his mouth as he talked, “but it was all right. Bit overcooked.”

“Given that I was just using fire and brute force, I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said, resting my face on the palm of my hand.

Ace snapped his fingers, and a tiny puff of flame shot out above his knuckles. He didn’t seem to notice or care, while his crew didn’t look bothered either. “Oh, right, I remember now! Pops wants to know if you wanted to head out with us?”

I blinked, trying to figure out how he’d done that with no chakra whatsoever. Then I registered what he said, and came up with, “Well, I don’t want to spend more time on this island. Any help avoiding that would be great.”

 Luckily, I’d never intended to come across as a particularly well-spoken person.

“Well, that is what Pops asked. You’re gonna have to talk to him about your plans, though,” Ace said, which was probably not the most reassuring thing he could have said.

I had no idea what their damned captain was even like. Still, I shoved down any sense of unease with the knowledge that Isobu had my back regardless of what happened next.

“Then I’d better go say hello,” I said, forcing a somewhat lopsided smile.

“Right. So, Eastwood, Sinbad, can you make sure Teach gets off the island alive? Or that he finds water or something.” Ace clearly didn’t need to look after his men like a mother hen, at least. As he got to his feet, he added, “I’ll take Kei back to the Moby Dick right now.”

“On that?” I asked, jabbing a thumb at the raft he’d cannoned in on. It was upside down and if the universe had any sense of humor it would have been on fire to complete the look.

“Striker’s fine,” Ace insisted, while his men moved off to locate their giant comrade. But he betrayed some sense of nervousness by how he darted over to the craft. “The engine works, it has to work—”

I helped Ace flip his boat over again, though besides the engine it was a pretty light craft. It looked like a raft and a speedboat had a baby with some impressive hybrid vigor, and yet still hadn’t gotten rid of the vestigial sail. While I stood back a bit, Ace checked the thing over for damage like a guy trying to make sure his car had gotten out of a fender bender intact. Something like that, anyway.

Once the inspection ritual was over, we got to work. Since I had the bow—if a tiny craft like this could even have such a thing—I guided it out into the bay, the water lapping up to my knees as I went. Ace was already on the lone seat by the time I got that far.

Walking on water would not have helped my cover.

Ace looked down at me as though assessing me for something. I must have met general approval, because he said, “Grab onto the back.”

“And not the front?” I asked, since there was just empty space by Ace’s feet. I could sit pretty low in the water and not unbalance the boat no matter how fast it went.
Ace shrugged, leaning back in his seat with his hands laced behind his head. “Hey, they’re your feet.”

…What.

**Do you need some kind of encouragement? This is taking far too long.**

Come to think of it, the bottom of the boat looked a little…scorched.

I climbed up onto the craft and hooked my arms around the mast, trying to stay as low as possible even if I had to turn myself into a yoga-based knot. If we crashed, I’d probably faceplant into the mast and crack it while my elbows brained Ace, but if he thought that was an acceptable price, whatever.

“Ready?” Ace asked, glancing back at me.

“I would hate to see what this would look like if I wasn’t,” I said dryly, since I had my arms and legs wrapped around the mast. I probably looked like a koala.

Ace grinned, and then his feet caught fire.

I suppressed a squeak of surprise, overriding it with sheer fascination after a second to get over the shock. From the ankles down, his feet actually disappeared, like he was turning into fire. Fire Clones didn’t last all that long, but as I watched as the fire was diverted continually from his body and into the engine’s intake. And he didn’t lose mass! It went against every rule of chakra usage I’d ever learned, including not apparently using any for an exciting effect.

A split second later, the raft shot toward the big whale ship as though my added weight meant nothing at all.

Definitely not in Kansas anymore.

…Maybe I should have ridden like a killed deer. Or sidesaddle. Or made Ace stand up so I could sit in front of the damned mast. My arms had not liked that jolt or any of the ones after that, as the raft bounced all over the damned place.

**You say that like the situation could not be much worse.**

Don’t give me ideas. Or worse, give the universe ideas.

“Hanging in there?” Ace called back over his shoulder.

“You are so lucky I don’t get seasick,” I grumbled back. Sure, I’d never spent a lot of time at sea, but ninja shenanigans involved so many acrobatics that people with sensitive inner ears didn’t do all that well. If I didn’t throw up after ricocheting off thirteen non-horizontal surfaces in a row and then having a flip-heavy swordfight, mere waves were nothing.

Ace barked out a laugh. “You’ll be fine; we’re almost there!”

I tried to glare a hole through his back. The big Whitebeard insignia tattooed across his back made a pretty good focusing aid to that end.

“So, anything I need to know about your captain before I meet him?” I asked, as the engine started to slow and I finally understood how huge the white whale boat really was.
Ace said nothing, but I got the impression that he was grinning in anticipation of that question coming back to bite me in the ass. Call it a hunch, based on the way his shoulders were shaking.

Apparently, I was mastering the art of asking questions pretty much everyone already knew the answer to.

**Perhaps you should add that to your list of epithets. Tidal Blade, the Fourth Hokage’s student, jōnin-sensei, and now “asker of impertinent questions.”**

*You are doing the opposite of helping.*

“You still there?” Ace asked, since I’d gone quiet.

“Yeah.” I shifted my grip on the mast as we finally pulled up next to the ship. Using just a tiny bit of chakra to secure my grip, I swung around to the front of the mast the second that Ace abandoned his seat, giving me a place to put my feet without exposing my abilities. “Maybe I’ve been out in the sun too long.”

“Check in with the doctors once the meeting’s over, then.” Ace took one step toward the curved bow of his little raft-boat-thing and bellowed, “Someone throw me a line for Striker!”

Obligingly, someone threw heavy rope over the railing. Ace caught the line and immediately started binding Striker’s bow to the much larger ship. I leaned back against the mast and planned my ascent up the side of the ship.

“Do you need a ladder?” Ace asked, belatedly realizing that I might actually have a problem with being asked to climb up sheer wood with only a bit of help from two rows of cannon-ports. Which were a good twenty-five meters above the water line.

I shrugged, finally letting go of the mast. I was gonna get my sea legs somehow, dammit. “Give me a boost and I’ll handle the rest.”

Ace lifted the brim of his hat, measuring the distance from our position at sea level and the Moby Dick’s deck. It was probably a good fifty or fifty-five meters, which sounded fucking ridiculous on its face, but Ace didn’t seem to find anything wrong with my assessment.

I probably needed to drastically revise my idea of what “normal” was here, and act on that instead. So I took the first step of that plan.

Ace held both his hands out, knitting his fingers together. “Okay, Kei. When you’re ready.”

I quirked my lips to one side, even as I prepared to jump. “Was that a pun?”

“Hey, you’re the one whose name’s a letter,” Ace replied. Tch. Wasn’t like anyone had noticed before.

Without a further word, I leapt with my right foot forward, and maybe I put a bit of chakra into it for the sake of showing off how high I could go in a single bound. Superhero shit, for nostalgia’s sake. I could have landed neatly on the railing just under my own power.

I just didn’t expect Ace to be able to provide enough force for me to *easily* land on the deck on his own.

Thus, instead of landing where I planned, I kept going up until I stuck myself to the big spar
running across the top of the top sail of the middle mast. I swung around it as close to the bar as I could manage, to avoid hitting the sail itself, and ended up sitting on top of the thing like it was a gymnastics balance beam.

“Well, now I guess I know if I can make it to the top of the Hokage Mountain in two leaps,” I said to myself, looking down past the furled sails and toward the deck. Hopefully, no one had heard my shriek before it morphed into a whoop of joy.

I did.

You hear everything and therefore don’t count.

“Ace, what the hell??” demanded a somewhat indistinct shape that must have been the guy who threw Ace the mooring rope.

“I don’t know!” Ace yelled back, even as he zoomed up to the deck with his legs transformed into a single pillar of flame. At least, he seemed to glow orange a bit. “Kei, are you all right?”

I waved down at them, and at the crowd suddenly milling around on the deck. Apparently, we’d caused a bit of a commotion.

Interesting first impression.

Shhhhh.

“Do you need help?” Ace called up to me, though the wind was doing its level best to snatch the sound away.

“Probably!” I shouted back down.

While the sheer height on the jump was a surprise to me, the sensation was short-lived once I’d realized I needed to start the gymnastics routine. The pirates, on the other hand, seemed to be having a lot more fun gawking, making fun of others for gawking, and laughing at Ace. Made the whole thing just take longer, really.

The Moby Dick, I realized belatedly, was a fair bit larger than it looked at first glance. On top of being somewhat snub-nosed but over two hundred meters long despite that, the deck was almost half that length wide. While the polished wood was obscured by the number of people on board, I had to imagine that the ship was well-maintained despite its size. If I looked over the back side of the mast I was sitting on, I could see what looked like a massive chair made of some kind of yellow material, but my sense of scale was a bit screwy. There was no way any single person could use that thing, right?

Then I remembered how big Teach was and told my skepticism to take a back seat already.

After a few moments of watching the people milling below like comically-inclined ants, I swung around on the spar to head toward the crow’s nest. A redheaded man with a pretty ridiculous-looking pompadour sat in the little basket of a structure, and he’d been working on stifling his guffaws for at least a minute before I moved.

I meandered over to him with my arms out to the side mostly for show, treating the mast’s swaying like a balancing act. Or a training exercise. With Gai taking the lead on every major shift in training my social circle seemed to commit to, everything ended up being a training exercise sooner or later.
I leaned over the edge of the little railing, chin resting on one hand. I extended the other in a wave. “Yo.”

“Yo’ yourself,” the guy said, and finally looked up. He appeared to be five to ten years older than I was, with a scar on the side of his face and a goatee-style beard that was such a different shade from the rest of his hair that I assumed one or the other had to be dyed. “I’m not sure if you can see their faces from up here, but—” He started laughing again, since laughter was literally contagious around here or something.

“I have a pretty good imagination,” I said mildly, while he doubled over wheezing as he tried to catch his breath. “So, can I climb down now?”

“Sure, sure—wait, don’t you want a lift?” the man asked, snapping back from cackling to concern in a flash. “I can make the jump just fine.”

Good to know. I could officially add “invulnerable to fall damage” to the list of things people around here were expected to be. I just didn’t want to try it with bare feet.

“Oh, I think I should just try things the old-fashioned way, given how the last offer went,” I smiled somewhat sheepishly, already clambering around him and to the rigging.

“Pff, Ace just doesn’t know his own strength. And now he can’t rescue you since he’d set the sails on fire,” he said, still amused. When I was halfway down the first sail, he added cheerfully, “I’m Thatch, by the way!”

“Nice to meet you!” I called back, before focusing on my descent. Something about his name stuck out, for some reason, but I filed it away for later.

It took me about a minute to get to the lowest mast, at which point I just decided to drop to the deck. I landed in a perfect shinobi crouch, almost like I hadn’t felt the impact at all. Hooray for chakra, superpowers, and really forgiving physics.

Most of the pirates around me burst into applause, making me blink at them in surprise. It wasn’t like they couldn’t have done the same, if Thatch was any indication.

“Nice recovery!”

“Was it fun?”

“Way to stick the landing!”

“Oh, thanks?” I managed, and got a hearty clap on the back from Eastwood, who must have managed to row all the way back to the Moby Dick pretty quickly for a guy whose counterweight outweighed him four times over. Unless they’d made Teach row, too.

I’d never known what to do with being the center of attention in a non-hostile sense. Hostility was easy—killing everyone was simple. But I did not do large crowds.

And then Ace delivered a flying kick to one of his crewmates—apparently selected at random—with a shout of, “Everyone get back to work already!”

The crowd dispersed with some grumbling and a few not-so-covert cases of money changing hands, and I glanced around with absolutely no idea what the hell had happened. Pirates were weird.
“Sorry about that,” Ace said, once I decided to focus on him again. He bowed his head in a formalish apology that I personally hadn’t seen used since the last time Hayate had blown up something he wasn’t supposed to.

“It’s fine. I’ve climbed bigger trees back home,” I said, not really sure which part he was apologizing for and hazarding a guess. “Uh, also, your crew’s pretty nice.”

Seriously. I’d gotten a much colder shoulder from everyone I’d ever met back home, except for Obito, Rin, and my family. Maybe Konoha’s society was just a stuffier place than a pirate crew could ever be. Homesickness ached like the blazes, but I didn’t miss that particular problem.

“Only some of them are mine,” Ace corrected me. As if I’d be able to tell who was in the Second Division just by sight. “But they’re all my brothers and sisters.”

My eyebrows rose. Not so dissimilar from Konoha’s team structures, then. Just…bigger. While the Moby Dick was probably the size of a cruise liner or something, I had no idea how many people could be on the ship without any chakra for me to sense. Not guesstimating the number of crew members from observing the crowd suddenly seemed like a rather important mistake.

“Then where is ‘Pops’?” I asked, shoving my unease out of the way.

“This way,” Ace said, and set off immediately toward…one of the cabins. Past the giant lounge chair.

There were probably a lot of those. Not for the first time, I wished I knew more about ships than just the names of some of the parts, the fact that they floated, and that potato-peeling was probably a chore on them. All of my practical knowledge was geared toward land-based combat and the million ways there were to make it easier on me.

Well, this particular cabin door linked up with the deck directly. Maybe it was the captain’s cabin?

...Why was it about six meters tall? Actually, everything on this ship was over…sized...

Aw, hell.

I somehow get the feeling this is going to be one of those situations where if I let my surprise show on my face, I’m going to get laughed at.

Better than being attacked, Isobu rumbled. His chakra marked his position almost directly below the Moby Dick, poised for the perfect strike on the ship if negotiations—if that’s what these were —went badly. For the attackers.

“Pops, we picked up the stray!” Ace called out, rather than knocking or really bothering with any kind of formality. Probably said something about…everything regarding this crew, really.

I stood up on the balls of my feet to get a look over Ace’s shoulder, but needn’t have bothered. The guy stepped aside as soon as he got a response.

The response in question was in a booming voice that rolled like an earthquake. The actual thing he said, after that, was, “Come in and let me take a look at you.”

My first thought upon seeing the captain, after all the hype built up for the last hour or so, was… mixed.

On one hand, he was huge. Like, at least two meters taller than Teach, built almost identically to...
Jiraiya but with a serious infusion of giant genetics. The guy was probably twenty or more years older than my sorta-grandfather, going by the deep-set crow’s feet around his face and the wiry cast to his huge hands. Sitting back in a giant reclining chair, he looked like nothing less than the bewhiskered king of this show.

On the other, he was surrounded by women in pink nurse’s uniforms, and hooked up with half a dozen machines and IV lines. He had a catheter running from a ventilator to his nose, and his skin looked clammy and worn-out even when I factored in his age.

All of these assessments crossed my mind in about three seconds, and the thing that followed them was, “So, Ace, I think I owe Teach an apology.”

“What?” Ace asked in genuine puzzlement.

“I’ll tell you later.” I stepped forward, met the captain’s eyes for just a split second, and bowed with my hands clasped modestly in front of me. I kept my head down as I said, “Thank you for saving me, Captain Whitebeard.”

We could have easily traveled to the next island without his assistance, Isobu butted in, just to be perfectly clear.

Shh.

“There’s no need to be that stiff. It was nothing.” When I glanced up, the captain waved one hand that had to be big enough to pick up a wine barrel single-handedly. In fact, the mug by his elbow was a barrel. Still, I recognized the dismissive gesture for what it was. “Rescuing a lost sailor is reward enough for any son of the sea.”

“Then I’m glad your code extends to me,” I replied, ending my bow. Well, if this guy went by “Pops” with his entire crew, maybe he wasn’t much for formality in general. So, I stuck my hands in my pockets and asked, “What happens now?”

“First thing’s first,” said one of the nurses—a woman with a severe-looking expression who was probably around forty years old. She looked me up and down, and if anything her face pinched more. “You’re getting a checkup and then new clothes.”

I mentally ran through the varied outfits I’d seen since getting onto the ship, making the occasional adjustment for how badly I’d underestimated the variety of shapes and sizes of the Whitebeard Pirates’ members, then said, “I didn’t think pirates had uniforms.”

I mean, my pajama pants had originally been a part of my uniform, but their days were long past. The T-shirt had been a happy accident of a gift from Aunt Inari, who misread a size or two and gave me something I could practically disappear in. The combined effect did sell the “marooned islander” look I’d ended up with. I had to wonder what would have happened if I’d been in full Konoha uniform and not looking like a castaway.

“Only the nurses have uniforms, but at the very least you need shoes,” said the nurse. She patted my shoulder, but with her expression the effect was somewhat incongruous. “We’ll handle everything in time for lunch.”

As I was whisked off to the medical bay, I had enough time to think, What have I gotten myself into now?

Isobu’s answer was a snort of laughter, and I mentally flipped him off before surrendering to the inevitable.
A Vow of Unity

Chapter Summary

Kei: Learn fast.

Chapter Notes

This song is from the Tales of Vesperia soundtrack and serves as the town theme of Dahngrest. Which is a Guild city, outside of the reach of the Empire, that is run by a guy named Don Whitehorse. Funny, that.

After the nurses mobbed me—and subsequently discovered that there wasn’t anything wrong with me other than a touch of dehydration—I was ejected from the medical bay and into the care of a crewmate who hadn’t been on deck when I decided to go for Olympic gold.

“My name is Izo,” he said when I asked. At that point he’d had a length of measuring tape around my neck. My body language must have come across as rather jumpy, because the next sentence out of his painted lips was, “Relax and drop your shoulders. You’re throwing me off.”

“Sorry, I’ve just, uh, never gotten an outfit tailored.” Still, I did as ordered. “ Couldn’t I just visit a shop on an island and buy clothes? It feels like I’m wasting your time here.” Sure I didn’t have any money, but I could probably scrounge up whatever the local currency was if I tried hard enough. It would just take longer.

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘if you want something done right, you do it yourself’?” Izo asked rhetorically, measuring across my shoulders next. “Because that is precisely what is going on here.”

“Oh,” I said, trying not to crane my neck to see what he was doing. “I still feel a bit guilty…”

“The others know better than to tell me what to do with my time,” Izo replied to my unasked question. “If I couldn’t pursue my hobbies, being in charge of the Sixteenth Division would be a lot less fun.”

How many divisions did this crew even have?

My first impression of Izo had been a bit confused. I hadn’t expected to find anyone wearing full makeup on a pirate crew, mostly because I could barely see non-specialized products surviving on land, much less at sea. But Izo, with only a single lock of hair dangling out of his intricate coif, clearly had mastered every cosmetic available. Rin could have asked him for tips on the makeup. I was personally more interested in how he avoided wrecking his silk kimono if the Moby Dick got into a firefight, since even my Konoha uniform tended to come out worse for wear after I did much of anything.

“Besides, it’s been a long time since I’ve been able to work on entirely new designs,” Izo went on,
measuring around my waist after a bit more careful prodding. If he pulled any more of an Ollivander, I would have accused him of witchcraft. “Do you have strong opinions on how the final product should look?”

I looked at Izo’s pink kimono, then thought of the other crew members’ outfits I’d seen. Well, if this didn’t turn out the way I wanted, I would just have to come up with some spares on the next island. “No flowing parts, and I definitely need pants with pockets.”

“And the pattern?” Izo asked without looking up.

Very few people had ever bothered asking that question. It was why I had so many scrap-worthy cheap T-shirts. “Waves would be nice.” I pursed my lips as I thought. “Also, long sleeves. I didn’t know it was possible to get sunburn on top of tattoos before.”

Izo nodded to himself, then finished up the rest of the measurements without further comment until, “Grab one of the pairs of sandals, then head to the galley. We’re done here.”

I stepped off the block, then found half a dozen pairs of plain straw sandals in a basket next to Izo’s paired flintlock pistols (and hadn’t those been a surprise). After a quick shower to get rid of the beach smell and a change of clothes into old but serviceable replacements in the same style, I was feeling considerably better.

Well enough to actually listen to Izo. I asked, “Could I get directions to the galley?”

“Just follow the crush,” Izo replied, already turning back to his design desk.

True to Izo’s words, there was a crowd of pirates shooting off toward some collective destination just outside his soundproofed studio door. I waited until the majority of them had passed before sauntering vaguely after them, though my stomach insisted I needed to move faster.

The galley, once I got there, proved to be absolutely huge. Like everything else on the ship. I didn’t know if the pirates ate lunch in shifts or not, but it still seemed like a massive crowd of people I didn’t particularly want to wade into. While there were about a zillion tables for people to congregate around, the food service section was pretty much cafeteria-style. Hanging out in the kitchen, behind the big serving window, was Thatch.

I made a beeline for him, figuring that as long as I got food, the rest would sort itself out.

“Hey, it’s you,” Thatch said in greeting when I finally moved my tray his way.

I looked down at the tray for a second, then up at him. “Did you make all of this, Thatch?”

“Yes!” Thatch grinned. “My cooking is my pride and joy.”

That was more than I could say for my cooking skill. I’d describe myself as “passable,” and I’d only really gotten that much figured out because it was a necessity.

“Thank you for the food, then. I’m sure it’s going to be great,” I told him seriously.

I looked around at the food, momentarily stymied by the choices. Konoha, for all its many virtues and productive farms, didn’t have anything too far out of what old-me would have called a Japanese selection. Apparently, the Whitebeard Pirates somehow had access to corn, Western-style cherries, the recipe for meatloaf, and a hundred other things I hadn’t seen in decades.

My stomach was going to stage a revolt.
I decided to save myself some misery and mostly picked items that were more familiar to me. Rice, fish, and pickled vegetables were much safer options. I did think about picking up the world’s tiniest slice of cherry pie, just to test myself, but the tin was empty by the time I got there. Giving up since apparently the universe was putting me on a diet, I turned to the galley at large and tried picking a spot to sit.

High school all over again. Or literally every time I ended up in a new garrison, during that one hell year.

I sighed to myself and headed for the door, deciding I could eat outside just fine, when a familiar face flagged me down.

“Over here, Kei!” said Eastwood, waving a hand. Signal locked, I immediately headed toward him and his tablemates—Sinbad and Teach, again. And a pile of plates.

His table groaned under the weight of the plates piled onto it in the approximate shape of a fort. Teach sat tall above one end, so part of the structure had to be his fault. The only person missing from the obvious quartet was Ace, and I could see a hat on top of the leftmost stack that indicated otherwise.

“Ace is playing dead again,” Sinbad said with a wave of his hand, indicating the fort.

I leaned forward in my seat, peering over the pile, and spotted the back of Ace’s head. He’d face-planted into his plate...after conquering a good two dozen others. The last appeared to include crab legs, which could defeat many an unwary foe. A loud snore confirmed that he was still alive.

“Did he choke,” I began, “or is this the same thing as last time?”

“It’s the second thing,” said Sinbad. “Just go ahead and eat. Thatch outdid himself today.”

I ate in relative silence, letting the storm of chatter wash over me. If I closed my eyes and pretended hard enough, I could almost be in one of Konoha’s public parks during Tanabata, or some other loud festival.

I didn’t really taste anything.

Ace popped back up almost as soon as I finished my plate, with pretty much the entire contents of his plate of fried rice stuck to his face. While I stared across the table at him, he blindly groped for a napkin and failed to find one. His head dropped back onto his plate once as he nearly nodded off again, then he popped back up like a groundhog.

I threw my napkin across the table in the shape of an origami bird and hit him in the face. Not like it made a difference in the overall mess, but going too easy on a pirate would probably be misconstrued as pity.

Look, I’d learned something other than fūinjutsu from Konan over the years.

Teach cackled. “Is that a new fashion statement, Commander? Someone should tell Izo!”

“Screw you,” was probably what Ace said, but he unfolded the napkin to wipe his face anyway. The rest of the table burst into laughter again while they waited for him to catch up on what he missed.

I, on the other hand, noticed that there was one untouched plate left at the table. “Is that cherry pie?” I asked Teach.
“Of course! It’s the best thing here,” Teach replied, grinning and showing off all of his oversized teeth. “And it’s all mine!”

My eyes narrowed. Then I’d just have to beat him there next time.

...And there I went, thinking that there’d be a next time and I could form a rivalry over food. I deflated, shaking my head. I would get another chance at trying out old food choices assuming I stayed with the Whitebeards, even if I had to use my shinobi-derived thieving skills next time.

I just wouldn’t directly confront him about it.

**You never seem to.**

*Confrontation isn’t my thing,* I replied, drumming my fingers against the inside of my other arm. *Until it is.*

“You got really quiet there. Is the pie that important?” Sinbad asked, after he’d waved his hand a bit to get my attention.

I blinked. “Oh, no.” I covered my mouth as I faked a yawn—which became real halfway through. “Sorry, I didn’t sleep very well last night.”


“Uh-huh.” I gave him my very best skeptical look. This coming from the guy who had face-planted while operating a motorized vehicle, and then again into his lunch. In the same day. Often enough that his friends all knew about it and wrote it off as “it just happens.” Rin would have benched him immediately.

The rest of lunch passed pretty much without incident—aside from a food fight apparently started somewhere in the Fourth Division’s seating area, which I avoided—and when all the pirates ran around to work on their various responsibilities, I was left to relax.

It lasted about long enough for me to realize I didn’t have any reading material or any training I was willing to do. Since my third option after that point would have been to find the nearest person in need of assistance and help out, but I lacked any idea what I could do to help with the running of a ship, this translated to me quickly getting bored.

I didn’t know much about furling sails or weighing anchors or whatever other nautical things I’d never had to learn. The size of my ignorance both worried and amazed me in turns, and as a result I just tried to keep out of everyone’s way as they went about their chores.

I sat on the railing near the bow, mentally running down the checklist of what I was willing to do to alleviate my boredom.

Then I made my decision.

Thatch, it turned out, was very expressive when it came to jaw-dropping disbelief. I could have put his picture in a dictionary if I found a camera.

Did this world have cameras? Or dictionaries?

Thatch found his voice in time to stop that train of thought before it careened out of control. Still looking baffled, he said, “Wait, you’re telling me that peeling potatoes is the only thing you’re
“Sure you know how to do on a ship?”

“That’s overstating it a bit,” I muttered, but I kept peeling potatoes at a speed that probably would have put mechanical peelers to shame. Twenty years of blade skills added up to something, even if Mom had probably never imagined I’d be paying my way across the sea through food prep. “I can cook some basic things if I have the right ingredients or enough time to plan.”

“That’s not what I was asking and you know it,” Thatch said. He shook his head, even as he chopped his way through two racks of ribs. “But really? You don’t know anything about ships?”

“I really don’t,” I replied. “I’ve never tried to steer anything bigger than a rowboat.” And even then, it wasn’t like it was really necessary. Hello, water walking and other assorted shinobi cheats. And a total lack of sea-based missions because no one would ever dare let me near Kirigakure. “Didn’t I mention this earlier?”

Thatch’s voice came out pained. I was a frustrating person to deal with when I was being deliberately unhelpful. “No, you didn’t. How did you even get on that island?”

“I have no clue.” I finished off the potatoes, then finally met Thatch’s gaze squarely. “I woke up on the beach, I ran around until I found that town, and then I met you Whitebeards. This is the extent of my knowledge.”

“And you don’t have a hometown or something that we can bring you to?” Thatch suggested after a while to digest that. He also kicked a barrel full of eggplants in my direction, presumably for more peeling duty, and I accepted the trade by shoving the potato barrel back at him across the meticulously-cleaned kitchen floor.

I picked one of the fatter eggplants up, inspected it for bruises, and then said, “I doubt you’d recognize the name.”

“Try me. I’ve been almost everywhere since I became a pirate,” Thatch said rather more cheerfully.

“Konohagakure, the Hidden Village of the Land of Fire,” I said bluntly. If I’d had my headband I probably would have pointed at the carved leaf symbol, but unfortunately I didn’t. “City and country, in that order.”

Thatch paused, and he was silent for long enough that I started peeling the new veggies, too. He cleared his throat, then admitted, “That’s a new one.”

“Yeah. It’s on a continent that I’m pretty sure isn’t anywhere near here.” I sighed, pausing in my peeling and plucking the end of the eggplant skin off, allowing the resulting dark purple spiral fall into the garbage bucket. “It’s another reason I’m glad you guys picked me up. Even if I don’t know anything about boats, it’s great to have people around who do.”

“You’re welcome,” Thatch said, with his knife embedded partway through the pig’s backbone. When I looked up again, he frowned thoughtfully and added, “But what’s a continent?”

I brought the heel of my free hand up to smack solidly against my forehead. *Yep. Houston, we have a problem.*

“It’s a landmass that’s a lot bigger than an island,” I said once I’d clamped down on the urge to scream in frustration. I couldn’t provide too much information about Konoha or the Elemental Nations to just anyone—or indeed, to anyone—but the pirates and I were clearly not using the same frame of reference.
“How big, exactly?” Thatch asked, sounding more curious than anything. He’d even stopped food prep to listen.

“I don’t really know what comparisons I can make,” I said, frowning thoughtfully. “I think...wait, first, do you use kilometers or miles?”

“Miles,” Thatch said instantly. “I don’t know what a kilometer is, but it’s distance too, right?”

Well, there went a lifetime of retraining my brain to think in metric. Now I had to unlearn it. “It’s not uncommon for continents to be a couple million square miles.”

Thatch boggled. “What.”

“I take it you don’t have them here?”

“No, no we—” Thatch shook his head rapidly. His pompadour flailed. “No, we definitely don’t. What do people even do with all that land?”

“Fight over it, mostly,” I replied, because that was what shinobi had been invented to do. I started on the next eggplant, then said, “But hey, it’s home. The ocean really isn’t.”

The two of us worked in silence for a while. Thatch finally got around to fully dismantling the pig carcass he’d been preparing for the hundredth serving of ribs, while I carved my way through the rest of the vegetable courses’ preparation like a devoted lawnmower. Around us, the kitchen did not bustle because Thatch didn’t really recruit “volunteers” from other divisions until later in the day.

I had legitimately volunteered. This made me something of an anomaly, but I stood by my assessment that I’d be in the way elsewhere.

Thatch broke the silence with, “Do you think it could be?”

“Do I think what could be what?” I asked distractedly, having forgotten the context by then. In my defense, I was descaling a fish the size of a small rhinoceros, which required more concentration than vegetables did. I liked my fingers where they were.

“Do you think the sea could ever be home for you?” Thatch looked so serious then that I honestly didn’t know what to say.

That did not stop me from opening my mouth anyway.

What. “Is this a proposal?” I asked blankly, against the tide of rising what the fucking hell? I liked Thatch as a human being, but no. Just no. All of the no. “Because, well, what? We met literally two hours ago—”

“Not what I meant!” Thatch held his hands up defensively in attempt to stall me before I freaked out at him, though he did forget to get rid of his knife. “Not remotely what I meant!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I gasped in relief, because wow my brain was jumping to all kinds of weird conclusions lately. Once my heart stopped its staccato beat in favor of something a bit slower, I took a deep breath and asked, “So what did you mean?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t say anything if Pops didn’t…” Thatch mumbled.

I chopped my hand through the air. “Hey, no. I need to hear this if people are making decisions
about me behind my back.” I’d learned after the last time that had happened and I’d gotten badly hurt as a result. It took months for everyone to forgive Sensei for it, too.

Thatch looked like he wanted to protest, but my glare made him reconsider. He left his knife stuck in another pig carcass, then said, “Pops will probably ask you if you want to join our crew.”

Eh? “You’re not serious.”

Thatch looked momentarily crestfallen. “Of course I’m being serious! Pops always is when it comes to finding new members of the family.”

“Why?” I demanded, because this kind of shit didn’t happen unless Naruto browbeat his enemies into being friends. Ninja villages trained their own soldiers from the ground up primarily to avoid these kinds of offers ever getting any traction. The exceptions generally either had to lose everything they’d previously cared about to be accepted—like my parents—or were hunted down ruthlessly as missing-nin. “Even if I didn’t just admit to being hopeless at sailing, I barely know any of you and while I’m grateful I’m not still on that island, I haven’t even told you what my goals are.”

As if on cue, my right wrist started to ache exactly where my brand-new mark sat. Dropping my knife into the barrel of vegetable scraps, I rubbed at it and the kanji that was making my life so complicated.

I will find the being that marked you and tear it limb from limb.

Leave some for me.

“Rescuing people gets us a lot of new recruits, actually,” Thatch pointed out and in the process ended up totally missing my point. When I started to grit my teeth in annoyance, he got back on topic. “Our crew is our family. And Pops has a tendency to take in people who don’t have anywhere else to go. Once you’re one of his children, you always will be.”

“...That does not actually change the fact that I barely know any of you,” I responded in a voice so flat it was nearly hostile.

I didn’t need any more reminders of how desperate I was to get home. The captain might’ve thought he and his crew would fill some of that void, but they were all dead wrong. My family was out there; I just needed to find my way back to them.

My wrist tingled.

I already had my first clue.

Still, I decided to take pity on Thatch and his crushed hopes.

I took a deep breath and said without looking up, “Look, you seem like nice people. But in the end, my family’s at home and I need to find my way back to them.” Even if my only lead thus far was an obnoxious monster that had branded me to make me dance to its tune. “It’s not fair to you if I join your family and then bail at the first opportunity to go back.”

There. I’d phrased it as a matter of the heart. I’d taken the captain’s feelings into account, or at least tried to. I hadn’t used words that implied fault or blame, because neither party was really responsible for my shitty situation. When I dealt with the one who was I’d get my hands around its maybe-existent neck and wring it like a dingy washcloth.
Hopefully that would work.

“So,” I concluding somewhat lamely, “I can’t join your crew.”

“Th-that’s…”

I looked up and—was he crying?! I was a monster. “Agh, no! I’m sorry I can’t, but I have really good reasons!”

“Th-that’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard!”

...what.

The next thing I knew, I was comforting a seven-foot-tall pirate as he cried over a barrel of onions. Whether it was the onions or my half-assed sob story that were the worse influence on his mood, I had no idea. I just got him a glass of water and a handkerchief and let him mostly sort himself out.

It was, however, the first time I had ever seen a grown man not use the “cutting onions” excuse when it was perfectly valid. There was even an impaled onion on his cutting board.

Isobu?

Yes?

This place is weird. I passed Thatch another hanky, then amended it to, But it’s kind of growing on me.

Like a fungus.

Aside from bunking somewhere in the nurse’s quarters—since the smell of antiseptic was almost comforting after the sheer funk of unwashed humans in the crew quarters—my next three days with the Whitebeard Pirates passed more or less in the same fashion as the first day had. Every day there were meals, chores, freak weather occurrences including but not limited to rains of animals, and food prep with Thatch. I got my sea legs quickly, no one breathed a word of any more recruitment efforts to me, and Izo finally came up with clothes he could stand to see me in (which was not the same as “clothes the nurses had to wear”).

I wasn’t really at first sure if I was allowed to wear clothes from Izo since I’d said I wasn’t going to join the Whitebeards, but Izo insisted. And whether because I was a doormat or just grateful that Izo had still gone to the trouble of completing the outfit for me, I complied.

It was nice to have my own shoes again, even if they weren’t the sandals I was used to. Flats were a decent compromise.

There were a few incidents, though.

Like getting caught staring at Namur. “What do you want, guppy?”

“I’m sorry, you said you were a fishman?” I asked reflexively, since I’d been caught.

“I didn’t say anything,” Namur snapped, which kinda just made me feel like I was being an ass. “Never seen a fishman before?”

I hesitated under the weight of his glare, not sure if I was about to screw up epically or not. “No, I have not. I’m sorry about staring.”
“HEY!” And both of us turned to find Ace running over. When he skidded to a stop—thankfully not igniting anything—he bowed to me and said, “I’m sorry about the misunderstanding.”

Namur and I looked blankly at each other, even though we’d been close to having a very awkward conversation a second ago. Some things ran deeper than mere conversational flubs, and shared confusion was among them.

Namur went first. “About what?”

Ace was still bowing. “Kei, I’m sorry if I offended you by addressing you as a man anytime this past week.”

“...You would not believe how often people used to do that back home. Or maybe you would.” I scratched the back of my head. Then it occurred to me that that wasn’t what Ace probably wanted to hear. “I accept your apology.”

Ace straightened up immediately, almost dislodging his hat, and then then looked at Namur. “What were you two talking about?”

“I was just going to apologize,” I said, shouldering any responsibility for offending Namur immediately. “I’ll stay out of your way, Commander Namur.”

Both Whitebeard commanders didn’t seem to know what to say to that, or at least didn’t manage to come up with anything before I made my escape.

Izo was sympathetic for about five minutes before he told me to get out of his office so he could finish working on the “surprise.”

I could take a hint if I was hit hard enough over the head with it. Checking first to see that Namur was cruising the water beside the ship instead of lingering on deck by looking out a porthole, I decided it was probably better to face the somewhat distant music. While the corridors and masts of the Moby Dick were nothing like the forests back home, the deck felt open. Exposed. Heading up there again felt like I was being forced to abandon a hiding spot.

I was still climbing the stairs when the current lookout shouted, “Marine ships, port side!”

I see them. Isobu’s chakra slowly turned in the dark waters underneath the Moby Dick until his head was pointed in the direction of the enemy vessel. Do you want to see what the pirates will do in response to an attack?

If it’s not too much trouble.

Not attacking is never the trouble. You know that.

And because I didn’t want to be a target (and Marco could take care of himself), I slunk across the deck instead of running as the pirates ran all over the place. One of these days, I’d actually be able to deal with being on a pirate ship like a normal individual, but today was not that day.

“Who the hell are the Marines?” I asked Eastwood while he checked his pistols. I was crouched behind Whitebeard’s throne, while Eastwood stood tall and proud and perforate-able.

“World Government forces,” Eastwood replied distractedly. “And as you might imagine, not too fond of pirates.”

“I dunno, pretend I don’t have an imagination,” I snapped, and once again I internally cursed the
fact that nothing in the armory had been a) open for guest use or b) suitable for my use. Haruta had broken the last spare sword recently, according to the quartermaster. And I sure as hell didn’t know how to use a rifle well enough to make a difference. “What do we expect from them?”

“Oh, probably a Vice Admiral or two. Someone to get the commanders’ blood pumping,” Eastwood said, cocking the weapon in his right hand. He pushed the brim of his hat up with the end of the barrel. “Don’t worry about it.”

I glared up at him, then went to find a spot where I’d be out of the way (or maybe available to help reload). I only had a kunai to fight with, which wasn’t gonna be a lot of use in a naval battle. Didn’t ships usually kill each other from miles and miles away with massive bombardments?

Isobu was probably busy rolling his eye as he said, What was that phrase before? “In for a penny, in for a pound?” You are traveling with pirates, have become friends with pirates, and are now considering taking up arms alongside them.

I was still being a bit of an indecisive brat about this, wasn’t I? Can you blame me for not instantly wanting to piss off what sounds like the only local authorities?

...Do you want me to answer that with any level of seriousness?

I pouted while a cannonball sailed overhead, drastically overshooting the ship. Yeah, I know, shinobi are basically government-sponsored mercenaries. ANBU are worse. I don’t have much moral high ground, but maybe I don’t want to fight everyone yet. Until I know who “everyone” is.

I could just remove the problem by removing the enemy ships. No one on board either of them would have to know that you and I are in contact, which would suit your need for secrecy.

...Maybe I can just let them handle it. From the sound of things, the Whitebeards were a well-oiled fighting machine, and didn’t need a wrench like me getting involved in combat operations.

I finally looked up from my epic wallflower impression as Ace wandered by, apparently unconcerned with whatever new implement of death was flying through the air. Why wasn’t he at least paying attention?

“I heard from Thatch that this might be your first sea battle,” Ace said. “You holding up all right?”

“I’m fine,” I grunted. “It’s just been—”

And that was about as far as I got before a cannonball punched through him in a burst of fire. The hit took out the lower third of his ribs, that section of spine, and probably most of his vital organs, but there was no blood.

In fact, he was leaning over and looking a little confused at worst, though the railing behind him had been obliterated and his body was missing significant chunks that were...on fire. What?

“What’s with that face?” Ace asked, while I gaped and his entire torso knit itself back together in a roiling wave of flame. “Never seen a Logia before?”

A what? I demanded internally, getting to my feet and feeling my attention trying to jump in six directions at once. Ace getting thoroughly hole-punched was just one of them. My fingers itched to prod at the missing space or maybe stick my hand through despite the flames, as much out of horror, wonder, and surprise distilled into a single emotional cocktail as just reflex. How is he not
Ace still looked confused, probably mirroring my face perfectly. I still couldn’t get over the missing chunks problem. “Wait, you saw Marco turn into a giant fiery chicken yesterday and this is what throws you off?”

“I heard that, Ace!” Marco called down from the crow’s nest.

“So what?” Ace shouted back up. Then he turned his attention back to me. “I ate the Mera Mera no Mi, you know, a Devil Fruit? Logia-class? Lets me turn into fire?”

“...What.” I managed, then smacked my hand into my face. “What the fucking—”

I’d just seen him pull off an automatic dodging ability on par with Obito’s Kamui, and it was because he ate a fruit of all things? At least the Transformation technique was a basic Academy skill with a hundred variations. Obito’s power was literally unique. The only way to use it was to have one of Obito’s eyes.

I was probably freaking out.

It sounds somewhat similar to the process that created the Ten-Tails, Isobu commented. Specifically the part about fruit.

That is not helping!

I smacked my face again, willing myself back under control as Ace completely put himself back together. “...Forget it. Just.” Razzem frazzum aaaaaargh.

“You need a minute?”

I automatically ducked out of the way of more long-distance shots in our direction and into cover, though Ace had yet more rounds fly through him to no apparent ill effect. If the shot that had temporarily dismembered Ace hadn’t compromised the railing’s structural integrity, I might have beat my head against it. Despite the lack of convenient brain-reset options, I still managed to say, “Go. Set the thing on fire.”

What kind of hell have we gotten into this time, Isobu?

I could provide a list of the factors that put you on the deck of this ship at this time, and how the situation could escalate. But that is not what you really want to hear.

...No, it’s not. I just...I really want to go home. Even if I get frustrated with things here, it’s familiar. I pressed my left forearm over my eyes, blotting everything out. If not for the total lack of chakra besides what Isobu and I were toting, I might’ve been able to pretend just for a second that I wasn’t out on a pirate ship out in Middle of Fucking Nowhere, Random Ocean. Or whatever Thatch had called it.

The New World. An apt name, unfortunately.

You said it, I groaned internally.

But there was nothing for it. My wrist ached like an old bruise, a reminder of the thing that wanted me to venture out into this seafaring island-ridden world.

I probably only sat there for a couple of minutes, but eventually the powder magazines on the
Marine ships ended up exploding one after another, which put an end to the battle. At that point, I wandered back over to the other side of the ship and watched the burning wreck go down, spitting flame and smoke and leaving lifeboats in its wake.

“That was a bit boring,” Eastwood remarked from my left. When I glanced at him, he added, “Only Namur, Marco, and Ace even got close. Usually, we end up boarding, but I guess the three of them got into a competition.”

“I missed that part.” Because I’d been busy moping. “So, which one did most of it?”

“Oh, Ace. Marco’s flames don’t actually burn.” Sinbad jumped in, having procured a spyglass from somewhere, and handed it to me. “If you look close, you can see Namur throwing marines into the sea from here.”

I looked through the spyglass and, on the second ship I scanned, I did indeed see the fishman performing one of the least gentle search-and-rescue jobs I’d ever seen. It kinda looked like...yeah, he was punching them off the ship. I revised my assessment accordingly.

“I can see Marco circling, I think,” I said. If I looked close, I could see the simpler version of the Whitebeard insignia on the bird’s chest, exactly where Marco’s tattoo was. Fascinating, if kinda confusing given that he was made of, well, fire. “…Did Ace’s powers really come from eating a fruit?”

“Hm? Yeah. That’s what Devil Fruits are for,” Eastwood said, oblivious to my continued internal crisis. “Logias are pretty rare already, but Marco’s a Mythic Zoan. They say the only other one that’s ever been found got eaten by Fleet Admiral Sengoku.”

“I think I understood most of those words, but not in context.” I handed Sinbad his spyglass back and sighed. “Well, great. I have no idea what’s going on anymore.”

I never really had, had I?

No.

Sinbad patted my back. “It’s all right. I didn’t know much about Devil Fruits back when I started out back in East Blue. You’ll learn.”

“Does kinda raise the question of how you got this far out into the New World without knowing, though,” Eastwood mused. “You must have had a weirdly quiet trip.”

_Does sleeping through it count?_

I wandered away without replying and Eastwood and Sinbad both let me. Maybe I’d go and take a nap or something if this was how I was reacting to things outside of my understanding. Or finally request access to the _Moby Dick_’s library, like I’d been avoiding doing because being a meek little mouse of a guest was apparently a thing I did now.

Or I could catalogue socks, I supposed. Hadn’t had more than one pair of those in over twenty years.

Turning a corner or five, I found myself staring down the hallway that led to both the medical bay and the nurse’s rooms. While I could go and hide in my hammock until everything outside calmed down, the idea only held so much appeal. Being on deck meant I could see what happened to the various pirates, or maybe the Navy personnel, but frankly I wasn’t sure I could take another bad shock like the Devil Fruit powers people played with.
I sighed and started to turn around. Maybe I’d find the library if I kept walking around. Better to ask forgiveness than permission or something, right?

**I may be wrong,** Isobu said, cutting through my wandering thoughts like a hot knife through butter, **but I seem to recall humans being capable of floating.**

...*Sort of?* I hedged. *We don’t tend to have a lot of body fat relative to marine mammals, and I’m sure whales and walruses or whatever can just float by not moving. We’re kinda not designed for water. Why do you ask?*

**I ask because it seems one of your friends has the approximate buoyancy of an anchor.**

I took a very deep breath, closing my eyes. *Show me.*

Isobu’s eye view overrode the dark inside my eyelids. At first all I saw was the brilliant blue world he lived in, but then he focused on the comparably tinier flecks of debris and wreckage. I could see bodies, and chunks of the Navy ships that had been gutted by the Whitebeard Pirates. Isobu’s view shifted again, and it took him a bit too long to focus on Ace plummeting toward the infinite blue abyss like, well, an anchor. He was already twenty, thirty feet down and sinking rapidly.

Ace was looking directly at Isobu, and he made no attempt to so much as twitch in panic. Actually, the lack of movement aside from his eyes was probably the weirdest aspect of the situation in my opinion. The fact that there was a giant turtle monster in the water just didn’t register with me anymore.

And then Namur streaked through the water like a torpedo, scooped Ace up like he weighed no more than a damp kitten, and disappeared. He didn’t appear to take any notice of Isobu, who probably looked more like amazingly hostile seabed than any living creature. Or maybe he just wasn’t letting it show?

...*That was weird,* I concluded, once I could see the insides of my eyelids again.

**He may have seen me,** Isobu said dryly. After a few seconds, I felt his chakra start to move farther away from both the wrecked Navy ships and the *Moby Dick.* Unlike whales, who couldn’t literally control the medium through which they moved, Isobu would leave no waves or other evidence of his existence in his wake.

Unless, like with the sea serpents, he decided otherwise.

**If this is the case, your cover as a mild-mannered, uneducated vagrant may be a thing of the past.**

*I’m not sure I follow,* I told him as I headed for the library instead of the deck. I had some reading to do. *I mean, if they only see you once, it’s not a pattern.*

I know you. Sooner or later, the truth will out and you will browbeat people into accepting your strangeness or wash your hands of them.

*Do I seem like Naruto to you?* I wondered as I headed into the library and was greeted by shelves upon shelves of hard-backed books. It was like an alien landscape.

**You do not want me to answer that question.**

Given that I’d lost every snark battle I’d had with him for the last week? No, I probably didn’t.
So I gave up.

Somewhat later, while I was reading up on some kingdom somewhere called Wano that kinda reminded me of the Land of Iron, I heard riotous laughter and both Ace and Namur shouting, “I’m telling you, there’s no way it was a sea turtle!”

I turned a page and let them run off with the context to that punchline entirely unexplained.

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Doing some research in the Whitebeards’ library gave me a few survival tips. Among them, the three basic categories of Devil Fruits.

I refused to be quite so ignorant again.

Zoan: Animal shapeshifters who could take on traits of whatever their fruit said they could. Marco the Phoenix and Fleet Admiral Sengoku were at the far end of the power scale as far as Zoan-type fruits went, but there were dozens of others. Zoan-type users had three forms: human, human-beast, and beast form, and healed bizarrely quickly compared to baseline humans.

Logia: Elemental shapeshifters, such as Ace’s Mera Mera no Mi. Users could produce, transform into, and control whatever type of energy or matter defined by their fruit. There were a couple of notes about other elemental forms—smoke, magma, light, ice—but most of the info I found indicated Logia fruits were the rarest of the lot. Except for Ancient and Mythic Zoan fruits, as Eastwood had told me.

Paramecia: Catchall, basically. Paramecia-type fruits laughed in the face of logic or common sense, ranging from the ability to produce shockwaves in anything (as Captain Whitebeard’s did) to sprouting blades out of nowhere and so on. That said, they also contained the largest proportion of useless or even actively detrimental powers.

And for some reason, none of them could swim. I didn’t buy the explanation that it was some kind of sea curse, though only because it sounded pat. The note about how it took a minimum of knee-height submersion to cancel out a Devil Fruit user’s strength was useful to know, but anything about sea prism stone just made my hands itch. No one apparently knew what it was, which made me want to run experiments with it.

*Isobu, make a note. Once I figure out how to use the Coral Palm again, we need to find a hostile Devil Fruit user and start testing.* The coral produced by the technique stopped even Sensei dead before, and couldn’t be removed by the victim. Maybe it could stop Devil Fruit power the same way it disrupted chakra.

**Noted. Though I could test it now if you were not so devoted to the idea of keeping me a secret.**

Who the hell were we going to experiment on, the Whitebeards? Even if they did attack Isobu as soon as they saw him in person and Isobu was literally immortal, I didn’t want anyone to get hurt in that confrontation.

“You’re still in here?” asked a voice, and I looked up to see Haruta looking down at me with an expression of open curiosity on his face.

I mirrored it, because even after seeing Haruta’s Shakespearian getup three times, I still didn’t get it. Especially the Elizabethan collar. “Uh, yeah. Dinner rush prep was hours ago.”

“Did you even eat anything?” Haruta asked, looking around at the mess I’d made of the library
table. While I had put books here and there, and taken a mess of notes, there was no plate or cup to be found.

“Uh, maybe,” I said, since I couldn’t think of anything to say at first.

Instead, I leaned back in my chair and stretched with my arms overhead and my fingers knit together. My shoulders and my spine gave a series of pops, telling me I’d been stuck in one place for entirely too long. Cycling my chakra kept my muscles from falling asleep, but joints were another matter. The second I finished, my stomach rumbled ominously.

“Guess I can take that as a no,” Haruta said, amused enough to stick his tongue out at me in the face of my halfhearted glare. “I figured something was up when we didn’t see you in the galley at all.”

I felt the very tips of my ears heating up, but otherwise the only sign of my embarrassment was how I looked away rather quickly. “I get caught up in reading sometimes.”

“No kidding.” Still, Haruta led me out of the library and to the galley without further comment on my reading habits.

We didn’t spend all that long in there, effectively raiding the fridge and then running away while Thatch was elsewhere. Haruta might’ve said something about pranks, but I didn’t pay all that much attention. I just felt like I needed to go back to the library as fast as I could. It wasn’t—I didn’t need to do whatever research I could with the kind of feverish devotion I once used for constructing seals I needed but couldn’t ask for.

I was stronger than that.

**Then you could at least attempt to calm down. You are agitated.**

Haruta followed me pretty much the whole time, looking steadily more worried about my mental state until we got back to the library with food in hand. I tried to find the less-heavy fare I’d most likely not regret eating, though I was aware I was playing Russian roulette with ingredients lists anyway.

“Hey, Commander Haruta?” I asked, while I poked at what looked like some kind of onion soup. It had cheese on top, but could I call it “French onion soup” in a world that didn’t have a France?

“You don’t really need to be that formal,” Haruta replied, while struggling to avoid getting any soup on his ruff.

I could be polite, though. “Okay. But I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure,” he replied. “Something bothering you?”

“Yeah, I…” Well, a lot of things were bothering me. I’d just have to prioritize. “I don’t even know enough to know the right questions to ask. Maybe I should just try later…”

Or not. Drat.

“Would it be easier if you had a chance to visit an island or something?” Haruta asked.

“Being on land doesn’t help,” I replied, then I gave in and tried the soup. Per Thatch’s usual, it was excellent. Given that the recipe was so foreign, it didn’t stir any feelings of homesickness—or at least, any more than usual. “The rules are just too different.”
Haruta stuck his tongue out again, thinking. Then, “Well, if one of us goes with you—we could be like interpreters, or something! And you could explore the New World a bit? Learning stuff through books is great and all, but it’s more fun to actually visit some of the places we look after.”

I stared at Haruta for a long moment, my expression blank. At this point, I didn’t know why the Whitebeards were still trying to recruit me, but it seemed like they were a stubborn bunch. It wasn’t like I had a single skillset—that I’d shown them—that they couldn’t already replicate. And I certainly hadn’t been all that social, either.

“Oh, Kei?”

“It’s nothing, Commander Haruta.” I sighed to myself, then focused on finishing the soup so I could go back to studying. It was a bit too hot to slurp, though, so I probably just ended up looking disinterested.

We sat in silence for a little longer, while I finished my soup, until Haruta broke the awkward pause wide open with, “Well, what do you do for fun?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. All of my go-to options were a million miles away. A chance glance around the room resulted in my eyes alighting on Haruta’s sword. An easy answer came to mind immediately. “Well, uh, I know how to use swords...sort of...”

“Great! Well, I’m not as good as Vista, but we can spar later? I’m sure there are some practice swords lying around, somewhere,” Haruta said, with forced cheerfulness.

I rested my head against my hand. Haruta really was trying.

Still, it wasn’t a bad idea. I’d been hiding away in the library since the events of the attack the other day, except for when it was time to help Thatch work. Maybe a workout would help...

But not too much of one. “Go easy on me, okay?”

“Ah, don’t worry! I’ll play nice.”

I didn’t show off a single one of my advanced techniques during the spar. Really, my loss was an impressive bit of acting, the story of which I decided I would share with my students once I got back home.

I’d been aboard the ship for ten days before reality blindsided me again.

Now, I hung out with Thatch a lot. While I was picking up seafaring terms, I had a tendency to make experienced pirates cringe when they heard me try to use it. Taking this as a sign that I was probably a liability on deck, no one objected to me staying in the galley during chore time and helping feed what amounted to a literal army. No one had said anything to me, but I had no interest in being a total freeloader. Thus, peeling spuds became my new semi-official day job.

And then, one day, he wasn’t there.

“You looking for Thatch?” asked one of the pirates who had been shanghaied into food prep. There were consistent volunteers from the Fourth Division (insofar as they really could, given who their commanding officer was), but this guy was a new face to me.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, ever the epitome of composure and grace. I’d been getting better since getting used to life on a ship, but I definitely preferred sticking to people I knew. “So, where’d he go?”
“He’s out on an expedition right now,” he replied.

That didn’t mean much to me. It seemed like all the commanders had duties that ranged from “cook everything that isn’t actually poisonous” to “check every single cannon on board” to “drown in paperwork.” Thatch’s mission or vacation or whatever it was could easily have been a common occurrence. I just hadn’t been around the crew long enough to know.

“But I can work here without him supervising, right?” I asked, suddenly unsure.

The pirate I’d been talking to used one hook-hand to yank a sack of potatoes in his direction. “Just don’t cut yourself or you might end up like me!” he said with a grin.

That certainly answered my question.

One day, you are going to become restless with your mundane life choices before I do, Isobu muttered as I got to work without complaint. Have you forgotten about that creature?

I cut into a potato with perhaps more force than strictly necessary, earning an earful from a pirate about wasting food that I only listened to enough to nod in the right places.

No.

We have not made a move to leave the pirates and set out on our mission since you arrived. Isobu was probably four or five miles away, underwater in some kind of trench, and I nonetheless oriented toward his exact position before trying to glare a hole through the wall.

I didn’t need the reminder.

You are becoming complacent. Isobu started swimming farther afield, aggravated enough to stir up the local serpents—or Sea Kings, as the pirates called them—and subsequently getting into a fight with them in the abyss.

He needed to work off some stress, too.

I continued butchering vegetables.

You… Isobu’s tails lashed, gutting a creature that had not learned the first lesson everything else that fought Isobu would: Fighting him in the water was certain death. Going back to the village may mean I am forced back into the seal. I can almost accept that. But I am also looking out for your interests, not just mine. And you need to go home.

I put down the knife before I stabbed someone. The pirate from before must have seen my expression, because he snuck the knife away without comment.

Isobu?

Yes?

That plan is the one that wants me to basically reassemble the fucking Ten-Tails, I said in a frigid tone. When Isobu went silent, I continued, Even if I didn’t know that there are other, stronger, hostile jinchūriki out there—what else could “the Nine” even be—we could actually doom this world if we screw this up!

I was selfish. If I hadn’t met the Whitebeard Pirates, I doubt I would have really cared about that point. I would have just wanted to get home so badly that no other considerations would matter. Isobu and I probably would have cut a wide swath through their oceans in order to complete our
mission.

But at the same time that I was selfish, I had a heart softer than any ninja should.

I’d been befriended, and now I didn’t want to leave what meager comfort zone I’d managed to scrape together. Not in favor of a mission that could end hundreds of lives if I wasn’t careful. Especially when I still didn’t know enough about how to avoid that.

You really are a soft-hearted fool.

Either that or I’m well past succumbing to Stockholm Syndrome.

I ended up ejecting myself from the kitchen for being a safety hazard while distracted. And I went to go take a nap.

The nap went thus:

YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED.

YOU ARE THE THIRD.

YOU WILL ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

And then I woke up upside-down, one foot stuck in my hammock and my face mashed against the floor, to the sound of a commotion up on deck. My wrist ached again, right where the kanji sat, and even I had to admit that this was getting out of hand.

But hey, the outside world called.

“Did something happen?” I asked from the floor as a nurse ran by.

“Thatch is back!” she yelled, having not stopped to check if I was upright or anything. Which, well, okay. I probably wasn’t gonna die of tripping onto the floor.

That was fast. Still, I got up and headed after the crowd, because apparently pirates were like magpies—chasing after something shiny all the time. And I wasn’t really any better.

The deck of the Moby Dick seemed to be the party’s epicenter, like every other major event I’d seen thus far on the ship. The crowd of pirates focused inward, so I stalked around the outside of the celebration until I could find a better vantage point.

“Yo, Teach,” I said, once I found the easiest landmark in the crowd.

“Hm?” The guy had to look down almost until he was staring at his elbow to even notice me, which was a biitiiit pathetic in hindsight. Friggin' giants.

“What’s going on?” I asked, peering over people’s heads as well as I could.

Thatch was in the center of the crowd, carrying both a travel bag of some kind and a big purple thing that looked kind of like what would happen if an enterprising botanist successfully crossed a durian with a bunch of grapes.

I didn’t end up getting a direct response.

“What kind of Devil Fruit is it, Thatch?” I heard Ace’s voice ask.
“I don’t really know,” Thatch answered with a laugh. “I don’t even know if I want to eat it. It does look pretty neat, though!”

“One more hammer in a crew full of them isn’t going to be a problem,” Namur said, though the joking tone didn’t really make much sense to me. How many of the Whitebeards were drowning hazards already?

“Hey, I actually like swimming,” Thatch shot back at Namur. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Perhaps it is the fishman’s duty to retrieve… “hammers?” Isobu muttered. I still prefer to call it being an anchor.

Sounds more nautical, at least. “I wonder if there’s any way to know what type it is?” I muttered to myself.

If there was, I imagine you would have seen it during your research. There were no pictures.

Yeah. Still, I wonder why they can’t swim after eating one of those. Is it a question of density? I shook my head. No, that would make too much sense for what I’d seen. Ace could eliminate half his body mass or more by turning into fire, and heat rose. It also didn’t explain the apparent full-body paralysis.

At the same time, Isobu sighed. Our theory still fails utterly to explain why. Perhaps it really is a kind of curse?

Honestly, I probably would have left the entire crowd to their celebration so I could go back to pondering the shape of the universe. It was just that I happened to look up at Teach’s face, since he hadn’t answered me before, and saw the expression there.

I have seen Kurama make less terrifying faces. And I know for a fact that he has ten more teeth.

Even from my bad angle, I could see Teach’s pearly whites—well, what ones were left—all on display in a way that put Namur and his shark head to shame. The sheer greed in Teach’s maniacal grin was startling in its unexpectedness because I was literally hanging with a pirate crew. It shouldn’t have been unexpected.

And yet here Teach was, standing out like the sorest of thumbs.

I looked away, but I kept his face in the corner of my eye just to know when things changed.

As quick as the expression appeared, it vanished like it had never been. Burned into my memory, sure, but probably not into anyone else’s. They’d all been focused on Thatch and his Durian of Doom.

Isobu?

If it is about apologizing to this human again, I advise you to retract it preemptively.

No. But it does have to do with him.

I faded toward the back of the crowd, then left.

I just had one more reason to talk to the captain, now.
“YOU’RE LEAVING?”

Once I was sure the yelling was done with, I lowered my hands from my ears and said, “I have to.”

Somehow, me deciding to leave meant that all the division commanders who had befriended me were choosing to flip out. I’d gotten used to the idea that my departure might not be greeted with cheers about the time I realized how friendly these people were, but seriously?

Somehow, I’d still been surprised that Thatch, Ace and the others reacted so much.

“Who says? Who’s scaring off my best assistant?” Thatch demanded, as though he hadn’t been flailing his arms and carrying on a moment ago. He met my eyes squarely and promised fervently, “I’ll fight them!”

“Thatch, your entire division helps you out in the kitchen,” Haruta said bluntly.

“It’s not anyone’s fault,” I explained patiently, slipping the loop of my sleeve off my middle finger. I pulled the cloth back from my right wrist to show off the mark the Faceless Bastard had put on me. “This mark is a symbol of my mission. And I can’t complete it if I don’t leave.”

“What kind of mission?” Eastwood asked, looking blankly at the mark. It probably didn’t mean much to him. Hell, without context even the kanji sitting on my wrist seemed arbitrary.

“It’s something I have to do before I can go home,” I said vaguely, and Thatch’s anger abated despite me not actually explaining anything. He knew how much not being able to go home was hurting me. “It’s the price for being able to.”

Ace crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re not gonna give us any details?”

“It’s probably better if I don’t.” Because otherwise they’d get involved. How to phrase this… I tapped my right index finger knuckle against my lower lip, thinking. How would I get Gai to butt out of a fight? ...Oh, right. Then I said, “This is one of those things I need to do myself.”

This seemed to strike a chord with everyone.

“That kind of mission sucks,” Sinbad muttered. “What kind of family makes people deal with things all on their own?”

There they went assuming that I even wanted to see half of the other jinchūriki. I’d met Gaara and knew Kushina, but the rest? The Whitebeards didn’t need to be involved in the inevitable fights to the death. Not over me.

I just shook my head rather than sharing my thoughts. “I wasn’t going to join the crew anyway, Sinbad. I already said so.”

“But you’re hopeless at sailing!” Sinbad argued.

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. I wasn’t a part of their crew’s hierarchy and thus didn’t really need to obey their orders anyway.

Just because I’m getting a boat doesn’t mean I’m gonna be using the thing.

I will meet up with you the moment you are out of their sight.

Even I didn’t have the ability to fail so utterly at sailing that I could capsize before Isobu could eat it. I could drift and do better, even if parts of the New World oceans had such unfair features as
Izo looked around at all of the worry on his crewmates’ faces and said, “You know very well that we can’t force anyone to stay if they don’t want to. If Kei decides to go elsewhere, then that’s her choice.”

...God dammit why was I always a sucker for being guilt-tripped into things? I gathered my willpower and still said, while looking down at the floor, “I’m going to leave tomorrow morning. I’ll send you letters, if I can.” Then I bowed deeply, adding, “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it,” Haruta said, and I gave the commander of the Twelfth Division a crooked smile when he stuck his tongue out to soften his words. “Seriously, though, if your mission gets too tough, you can come back. It’s not goodbye forever. It’s more like ‘see you later.’”

Assuming I ever managed to find my way back to them without any chakra markers? “Sure. You’ve got it.”

“Good!” Haruta replied, clapping his hand on my shoulder. “You’re the biggest clumsy goof of a landlubber we’ve ever met, but you’re our friend!”

“Do I get any say in this?” I asked, only half-joking.

“NOPE!” everyone replied.
I did not sleep well that night.

Even if I hadn’t had another dream that consisted of a disembodied voice screaming in my head, going to bed early screwed up my schedule. I snapped awake at some ungodly hour as soon as I felt the air pressure drop hard enough to make my ears pop, then sat up in my hammock with a groan. The *Moby Dick* was anchored for the night, but storms bothered me for a reason totally unrelated to seasickness or barometric pressure.

I stretched far enough to crack every vertebra that would allow it, then wandered up toward the deck as usual. My roommates were variously asleep, reading, or elsewhere, but no one commented as I left and wandered out for some fresh air.

Once there, I sat down where the railing had previously been destroyed. The carpenter—shipwright, they called him—was a champ about battle damage, apparently, since there was no sign it had ever been.

“Can’t sleep either, Thatch?” I asked of my erstwhile insomniac companion.

Thatch shrugged, still engrossed in staring at the purple hell-fruit he’d brought back to the ship. As I watched, he rolled it around in his hands. “I just have job to do and a decision to make. You?”

“...I’m just really homesick.” When Thatch looked at me askance, I went on, “Storms like this remind me of people back home.” Then I dragged my hand over my face and sighed again.

“Do you want to talk about them?” Thatch asked. I looked up past my fingertips and he gestured with his Devil Fruit-laden hand as he said, “I don’t know if it’ll help, but otherwise we’re just going to sit here moping.”

“Well, I’ve probably done enough of that already,” I admitted, resting my head against my upraised hand. “It’s the thunderstorm, you know?”

“What about the storm?” Thatch prompted.

Out at sea, lightning struck a wave and lit the sea in an eerie green glow. The main mass of thunderheads loomed on the horizon, but that bolt was almost like Thor was conducting test-fires. We’d get hit with a killer thunderstorm shortly assuming that the New World’s weather patterns actually followed normal rules. Or maybe we’d be hit by the business end of a cyclone when the
local weather god threw a fit.

“Some of the most important people in my life remind me of storms. Or maybe storms remind me of them,” I said quietly, rubbing one of my eyes and dislodging sleep dust. I flicked my fingers and a loose eyelash flew over the edge of the *Moby Dick* and out to sea.

Thatch rubbed the scar on the left side of his face in a nervous gesture I’d last seen with Iruka. He sat down next to me, hooking one of his legs around the nearest railing post and putting his Devil Fruit down on the deck.

I side-eyed the evil-looking death-fruit, but didn’t say anything about it. Instead, I kicked my legs idly as I thought. “One of them is—he’s like a bolt of lightning all on his own. I thought that when I first met him. I even called him ‘Sparky’ before he introduced himself.”

Kakashi and I were both bad at first impressions. He came across as a cool, collected badass when really he was a giant dork. I was a giant dork from start to finish, S-class shinobi or not. And I missed just the two of us reveling in our bookworm sessions so much it almost burned. Having him by my side, feeling his warmth and knowing if either of us stumbled, we’d be together—

I’d get back to that as soon as I fulfilled my quest conditions. For now, it couldn’t hurt to be optimistic.

“He’s a huge fan of these cheap romance novels and he got me into them, too,” I said fondly, since it wasn’t like Thatch was going to tell anyone I was a sucker for the *Icha-Icha* series if he didn’t know what they were. “He wants to just read them, but I like pulling them apart and arguing with the author, so we have to pick what times we can do either one.”

Thatch snorted, and after a second I found myself smiling faintly. With any luck, I’d see him soon. I’d even let him sit with his feet in my lap instead of the other way around when we got into our book battles.

“There’s my kid brother, too—though maybe I shouldn't call him that anymore,” I went on. “He’s twenty-three and likes to tell me he’s not a baby anymore, so I can’t tell him what to do.” I rubbed my arms to calm the goosebumps struggling to rise under my sleeves as the thunder rolled closer. “That feeling, when the world’s standing on a razor’s edge and all your hair stands on end…” I paused. “Well, maybe not your hair.”

“That would be the power of hair gel at work,” Thatch said, which honestly raised more questions than it answered about the tech level of this place.

“I can see that,” I said after a while, eyeing Thatch’s pompadour. I shook my head. “But I feel that kinda thing now, and it reminds me of him. When I get back, I’m going to probably have to make up for being gone with so many training sessions. Or promise to pay for all the takeout he’ll order for the next year.”

If he—if he lived long enough to even decide on a punishment like that. The Chūnin Exams could still screw that up.

“The last one is one of my students,” I said, trying to stay on topic for one last hurrah. I leaned back, pointing at one of the biggest, angriest-looking clouds on the horizon. “See that cloud, with the lightning that keeps doubling back?”

“Yeah, I see. I wanna hear how this comparison goes,” Thatch said, attempting to hide a snicker and failing. “Somehow, I can’t see you as a teacher.”
“I didn’t say I was any good,” I muttered, but it was just simple humor. I felt a smile creep onto my face anyway as I finally let the urge to pace and talk overwhelm my reservations. On my feet, I felt more in control and not like I was floating around at someone else’s whim.

Without apparently really thinking about it, Thatch mirrored me, but leaned back against the railing and let me gesture as I needed to without getting anywhere close to accidental hitting range. Describing any one of my students always required movement.

“Kaito’s a handful. Soaks up everything I teach him, keeps up in any exercise I can think of, but the second he gets riled up, oh man. As much as I love the kid, his temper’s a bit…” I twisted my hand in midair, at a loss for the exact word I needed. “But, hey, when I get home I’ll be able to help him with that.”

...Kaito, Aiko, and Roku were going to break me in half through the force of their hugs alone when I got back.

It was probably a bit messed up that I was looking forward to that almost as much as deconstructing Jiraiya’s works with my boyfriend or owing my brother six months’ worth of sparring matches.

“So,” I said after my mental daydreaming fog wore off, “what are you doing sitting out here, Thatch?”

“Me? I’m on first watch.” Thatch grinned at my disappointed frown. And after I’d poured my heart out—well, a small fraction thereof—to the sea and a sympathetic ear, too! “Sorry if you wanted any longer stories, but sometimes the reason is pretty simple.”

“And you took that with you as a snack?” I joked, jabbing a finger at the Durian of Doom.

Thatch laughed. “No, no! Besides, everyone tells me these things taste horrible.” He bounced the thing in his open palm, as though juggling one-handed. “It’s a big decision, you know?”

I stared blankly at Thatch for a long moment before giving him my best clueless shrug. “I really don’t. So, I guess I can’t give you advice or anything.”

“That’s fine; I wasn’t looking for any,” Thatch quipped easily, rolling the Devil Fruit along his arm like it wasn’t some kind of weird superpower-imbuing food. Even if it was to taste what nails on a chalkboard was to hearing, the motion struck me as a careless gesture.

My gaze followed the faintly glowing thing as though nailed to it. “Do you plan on getting rid of it?”

There was no chakra—and I cursed myself for thinking danger would have that much of a blatant warning around here—when I got hit.

If I hadn’t been standing, I would’ve been crushed against the deck or the railing. Instead, the hammer-blow that slammed into my side sent me sailing right over the edge of the Moby Dick in an arc just as a bolt of lightning illuminated the deck.

I caught a glimpse of Teach looming over Thatch before I fell.

And then I was falling.

What is happening?! Isobu demanded in shock, his chakra whirling in the distance and changing direction. Neither of us had expected to be attacked. He was on the other end of the island, out of
immediate reach.

I didn’t have time to answer him.

Years of training kicked in, sending chakra toward my hands and feet as I twisted with the force of the hit. I only needed one hand sign properly formed to use my countermeasure, and I did so without reservation. If I hit the water, it would take me too long to get back to the fight.

Down below, the waves surged up to meet me in the form of a roiling, glowing waterspout, shedding water like flecks of foam from slavering jaws. A fraction of a second later, two glowing yellow eyes peered out of the mass, and the head of the waterspout contorted to form the Water Dragon Bullet’s signature shape.

It roared like a living creature, joined by the distant snarl of Isobu breaching the surface of the waves kilometers away. Isobu’s voice rolled across the water before being swallowed by thunder, but the message was clear: He was on his way.

The dragon’s head caught me around the waist, flinging me back upward and arcing onto solid wood just above the first row of cannons. I hit the hull with three limbs at the same time, let the dragon dissipate into harmless water, then dashed directly up the side of the ship with hardly a pause to form chakra scalpels around my fingertips. In my left hand, I carried my unsealed emergency kunai for what good a real blade might do.

I threw myself up and over the railing again, cataloging changes and reassessing the situation almost automatically. Thatch: Down and bleeding on the deck. Teach: Already running for the other edge of the ship. With Teach retreating, I defaulted to my oldest training: in absence of other help, I was a first responder.

I hurled my kunai at Teach with as much Water and Wind chakra as I could coat it with. I was already turning my attention to Thatch by the time Teach yelped, stumbled, and plummeted off the other railing and into the dark.

I darted back to Thatch, assessing his injuries even as I stripped off the bolero jacket Izo had given me, using it to bind the bleeding man’s arm. I couldn’t do the same for what looked like the second stab wound, since it was on Thatch’s torso, but I could put pressure there. I could do something.

Speaking of something. Isobu, if you see that bastard in the water as you get close, kill him.

Show me exactly what happened, Isobu said, even as he surged underwater toward the Moby Dick.

I sent him as many of the confused images as I could bring to mind. There was no continuity, not like a proper film, but Isobu could link it all together. I just tried to focus on making sure as much of Thatch’s blood stayed inside his body as possible.

The entire time, I never used chakra. I couldn’t risk it.

Even if I hadn’t been specifically banned from using medical ninjutsu back home, I didn’t know enough about local human anatomy to risk going in blind. I hadn’t sensed any chakra besides mine and Isobu’s in the entire time I’d been here, and I couldn’t assume that anyone just happened to have a chakra circulatory system they weren’t using. My world had been shaped by the Ten-Tails’s rampage across it, as had the people living there. These people—there was no way that they had any resistance.

People belowdecks had started running around starting from the time Isobu roared. Someone
kicked a door open—against the hinges and splintering the wood—and then there were people all around me and Thatch. Mostly Thatch.

I snapped my gaze up and met the eyes of a nurse named Janey, saying as if by rote, “Teach stabbed Thatch and ducked over the edge of the ship. I’m keeping pressure on the injury, but someone needs to find that bastard before he hurts anyone else.”

Ace, who had just arrived, burst into flames and stalked toward the other railing. I noticed, then dismissed his rage as not my immediate concern. A blue flare overhead a moment later told me Marco had joined him in the search for the traitor.

“Let me take over,” Janey suggested, and I spotted two more pink-uniformed nurses over her shoulder.

Good enough. I let Janey get past me and put pressure on the wound as people shouted for stretchers, doctors, and the rest of the nurses who generally tended to Whitebeard. Pirates scattered around the ship, shouting orders at each other and trying to do too many things at once.

Thatch was bundled up in a stretcher and taken into the ship without much specific fanfare.

**Which direction did he head in?** Isobu growled, half to himself. I was sure I heard him mutter something dire about New World weather and rains of frogs, but was already getting to my feet and trying to figure out what to do next.

*I have no idea. Do the best you can—but make sure you don’t attack Ace or Marco.*

**How you think I could mistake a fiery blue bird for a man on the run is a question I do not need answered. I am not farsighted.**

*No, you’re farsighted.*

Maybe that wasn’t going to work out. Already the wind howled overhead like a monster Isobu’s size, lightning spewing everywhere. And the *Moby Dick* was the tallest object around, with the main mast getting struck repeatedly.

I stopped the nearest Division Commander, Namur, and almost forgot the awkwardness between us as I said, “Teach should be wounded. I threw a knife at him before he went off the port side.”

I didn’t *just* throw a knife at him. But I wasn’t sure I’d compensated for his body mass correctly. What would have killed a normal-sized man might not have been enough for him.

“We’ll get him,” Namur snarled, but he was already looking past me and darting toward where, belatedly, I realized Teach had left a blood trail before falling off. A shark fishman would be able to track him even in a storm, right?

He couldn’t have gotten far away, could he?

*Isobu, watch out. Namur’s in the water. Make sure you don’t kill him by mistake.*

*I understand.*

“Kei, are you all right?” asked a rather sleep-rumpled Haruta. His sword was stuck in his belt without its sheath and the Shakespearean collar he wore normally was entirely missing.

I looked down at myself, because I wasn’t sure of the answer to that question. My hands were
covered in blood, as were the knees of my pants from Thatch’s blood pooling on the deck. My left side ached where Teach had hit me, but my healing rate would take care of that problem practically before bruising started. Still, I wasn’t hurt so much as I was angry at myself for not expecting something to happen, and for letting Thatch get stabbed.

And not to mention I was missing my holdout weapon. One last cherry on top of this terrible sundae.

“None of the blood is mine,” I told Haruta, sighing. “Worry about Thatch and Teach.”

“Oh, we’re well ahead of you there,” said Vista as he passed by. “And Haruta, get up in the crow’s nest. Marco went out without checking in.”

“Fine, fine,” Haruta said, and was gone in an instant.

I drifted over to where some members of the Sixteenth Division were starting to clean up the blood, with Izo supervising. Mops and heavy-duty cleaning agents made their first appearance in maybe twenty minutes.

“Let me help,” I suggested quietly when Izo turned toward me. Without anything to do, I was just spinning my wheels in place.

Izo took one long look at me, gripped my shoulder, and then said, “You saved Thatch’s life. Thank you.”

Running on reflex alone, I might’ve denied it. All I’d done is keep a bit more blood in him and wound the man who’d attacked him. We didn’t know if Thatch was going to live or die. That was down to his will and local medical procedures. So really, Izo was being a bit optimistic.

But it didn’t feel right. So instead, I merely said, “I did my best.”

Izo patted my shoulder and let me go with a vague suggestion to sit down somewhere.

All we could do was wait. Wait for Thatch to recover or die, wait for Teach to be captured or escape…

I sat down in an unoccupied corner of the deck, nearly curled into a ball with my face hidden under my hand. Not because I was afraid, or even tired. No, I was doing my level best to suppress my adrenaline-enhanced chakra and be productive about it instead of burning someone.

Isobu? If Thatch dies, we’re adding “killing that fratricidal bastard” to the to-do list.

If he escapes, I will have no objections. Isobu was already around the tip of the island and searching for any swimming shapes that didn’t belong to Namur. In fact, I will see to it personally. No one strikes you and lives.

“THAT BASTARD!”

It was probably for the best that Whitebeard’s cabin was reinforced. I’d never seen Ace lose his temper (without a target), but he was currently burning up and not in the figurative way. I surreptitiously stepped to the side as he raised the ambient temperature by an uncomfortable amount. Marco’s flames were neither active nor hot, but being a phoenix apparently gave him the leeway to just stand next to Ace, hand on his shoulder, and not melt.
Whitebeard sat on the edge of his bed with a jug of sake at his knee. The jug itself was probably as big as the barrels he’d been using as mugs earlier, but none of the nurses had taken this particular vessel away from him before the meeting.

Probably for the best, too.

“Thatch is still alive,” Marco reminded Ace, and though Marco’s hand was fried to a crisp more than once, the blue flames overrode the damage time and again.

*Kinda masochistic of him*, I thought.

**I suggest you listen to their conversation rather than thinking up witty asides.**

Ace took a deep breath and the flames finally went out. Shortly after, Marco’s hand stopped needing to regenerate. I caught a glimpse of hideous blisters and desiccated flesh before the blue flames swallowed it up again and left whole skin in its wake. *Not* something I wanted to see again.

“And meanwhile the guy who stabbed him in the back is still out there,” Ace snarled, looking like he was ready to burst into flames again at any moment. “And he was one of my men.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, finally speaking up. The only reason I was even here was because I was the last person to see Teach, since Thatch was still unconscious. When the others noticed I was still there, I said quietly, “I was the one there. I was careless.”

“You already suspected Teach?” Marco asked, his eyes narrower than usual. It wasn’t quite an accusation, but I didn’t want to push my luck either.


“You were worried about how it’d sound if you accused him of something,” Marco suggested, but I was already shaking my head.

“Commander Marco—” He’d never given me permission to *not* use his title, right? “I’m not a part of your crew. Teach was. It wasn’t my place.”

As though drawn there by a magnet, all three of our gazes drifted to Whitebeard.

The old captain was...I didn’t know the exact word I was looking for. While the initial reaction to Teach’s betrayal had been only subdued compared to that of his commanders, the old man wasn’t the type to maintain a boiling rage. He was proud, sure, and stubborn, but he was experienced enough to calculate risks. I could see the same number-crunching that he’d gone through earlier on the deck of the *Moby Dick*, with Thatch’s blood still trapped between the boards.

Whitebeard had wasted no time making Teach the first son he’d ever disowned. Teach, any allies he’d ever find, and all of his deeds weren’t going to be scrubbed from the records or anything like that, but if he ever appeared again he’d certainly need to watch his massive back. He was an enemy from this day onward.

Or at least that was how Vista explained it to me.

But Whitebeard had made his judgment and now his first and second mate were trying to hash out the details.

“At this point, it’s more your place to say things like that than it is his,” Marco commented darkly,
and I had to admit he had a point. Though I still wasn’t truly involved in the pirates’ affairs, an enemy deserved far less consideration.

“And you’re sure it was the Devil Fruit that started it?” Ace asked, though I’d already said more or less just that.

“I only know what I saw,” I said, though I had my suspicions. It was never quite that simple. There had to have been a confluence of factors the Whitebeards had never put together, one of which was simply that Teach hid far more ambition than anyone suspected. The Devil Fruit was just an excuse. A trigger at worst.

*It’s just like Orochimaru before he started experimenting on children, and look where that got us.* But it wouldn’t help if I said that, so I kept my trap shut.

This silence did not seem to go over particularly well. The longer it went, the longer everyone stewed, and then the tipping point arrived.

“I still should have known!” Ace growled. He looked almost like he was going to explode into flames again, but he instead ran one hand through his hair and knocked his hat off. “He was up for promotion before I was, but he’s been with us for years and I didn’t see this coming.”

“None of us did,” Marco reminded him. The were-phoenix looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then said in an attempt to change the topic, “Kei, how did you get away unscathed? Thatch is a division commander. You’re…not.”

“You’re right, but…” I raised my left arm, so he could see the bruises there better. They already looked like they were three days old, even under my Isobu tattoo. “Teach hit me, but I heal really well. The second…” I made the Tiger seal with my fingers.

Both Marco and Ace jumped back as water spiraled out of the air and condensed into a puddle a foot to my left. Then it sprang up into a humanoid shape, still transparent, before turning into a proper Water Clone. Then there were two of me standing in that room.

“What the hell?” Ace demanded, flames flaring along his shoulders. So much for self-control.

“You see,” I said, as both my clone and I turned to face the pirates, “water is my weapon. I can’t use it for everything, but when I got thrown off the ship, the sea tossed me back up.” I shifted my weight, then twisted my wrist. The Water Clone popped and dispersed into ordinary, inert water that I gathered into a Rasengan-like ball above my upraised right hand. “Teach didn’t know I could do this. So he just smacked me around and actually fought Thatch.”

“But…you can still swim.” Ace strode my way, then reached out and touched the ball that was about as dangerous as a water balloon. Under his flaming hand, the ball quickly started to boil. It was, after all, only ordinary freshwater. “I checked that right when you got on *Striker* with me. If you’d eaten a Devil Fruit, you wouldn’t have been able to do anything as soon as you touched seawater.”

“It’s not a Devil Fruit power,” I said, closing my fingers under the water ball and letting it flash away into steam under Ace’s fire without my reinforcement. I turned my face toward Whitebeard and simply said, “But I survived Teach hitting me thanks to this. The fall would’ve killed me otherwise.”

*Only if he had managed to actually stun you, and thus render you incapable of catching yourself on the water’s surface. And even then, I would not bet on the ocean.* Isobu said it like
he didn’t harbor a vicious streak a mile wide and a grudge toward Teach for activating it. He could have been discussing the weather.

*Teach thought it would kill me. It’s the only reason I can think of that he didn’t bother, say, stabbing me like he did Thatch.* It seemed that my goofball tendencies had served me well. Given how I’d been acting over the last week, no one would have guessed that I was a deadly fighter when I wanted to be.

No one would have guessed that Teach was a murderer, either. Other than those who read the dictionary definition of his career choice.

And we’d both blown our respective covers, both with regard to each other and in general. I hoped his stab wound ached at least as much as my arm did, if he hadn’t just shrugged such a tiny projectile off.

“Devil Fruit or not, the important thing is that everyone is alive,” Whitebeard said, either no longer angry enough for it to show in his voice or pushing it aside for more productive emotions.

I closed my eyes, bowing again for lack of any better options. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop him from getting away, and for any trouble I’ve caused you.”

My shoulders twitched as Whitebeard laughed. “There is nothing to forgive. As long as my sons are alive and well, what do I care that a guest of ours has strange powers? This is, after all, the New World.”

I still wasn’t all that sure what it meant, but I could understand the general sentiment. The Whitebeards were accepting my choices even if they didn’t agree.

Marco stepped back, and I watched his sandaled feet move across the floor toward me out of the corner of my eye. “Go ahead and stand up. You did well.”

Ace sighed aloud as I looked up. “Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to be angry at you for keeping secrets. Everyone here has a few.”

“I’m not so much keeping secrets as not mentioning things,” I muttered, but I relaxed anyway. Meeting each man’s eyes in turn, I finally said, “If that’s all, I’m going to go change and then maybe visit Thatch, if it’s allowed. Thank you.”

I left Whitebeard’s cabin silently, since I was no longer hiding at least some of my skill level.

“Wait up a second,” Ace’s voice said, just before I turned the corner toward the medical bay—which was where I was bunked anyway.

“What is it?” To be perfectly honest, I wanted to just not deal with the various Whitebeard commanders for a while. A vigil with a guy who was unconscious from blood loss felt about my speed.

His face was as placid as the thunderstorm that had raged outside barely an hour ago when he rounded the corner himself. But he managed to achieve something more akin to equilibrium by the time he was close enough to talk.

What he said next was a perfectly neutral, “I’m gonna visit Thatch, too. Maybe if he hears us, he’ll wake up faster.”

But I remembered what I’d seen.
I watched Ace’s face carefully for any further warning signs. Not of rage directed at me, but anger and loss twisted around on itself like a double-edged kunai. Even if I hadn’t been from Konoha—and therefore the home of the fucking Uchiha clan—I doubted I would have had a lot of respect for vengeance as a motive. Maybe I was too wishy-washy to commit, but my relationship with vengeance was pretty hit or miss. Either I got my payback sorted out immediately, or I let it lie.

Call it a hunch, but this was not over.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

I later kicked him out of the medical bay and adjoining areas so I could change, but hey, he really should have expected that.

I didn’t leave the Moby Dick the next day. Or the one after. Or the one after that.

The first couple of days were frantic. The various commanders scoured the sea and the nearby islands for any sign of Teach in shifts, while Isobu swore that he would control the capricious ocean of the New World if it was the last thing he ever did. Given his immortality, he had plenty of time to practice with his chakra control and make the sea obey him.

It didn’t make Teach any easier to find in the meantime.

As strange as it sounded, the thieving backstabber—because it turned out the Devil Fruit was gone, too—had successfully gone to ground. I would’ve thought that he wouldn’t be able to blend in when all fifteen active Whitebeard commanders were out and about with their divisions and chasing him where they could, but apparently the New World was wilder than I’d given it credit for. And it was already breaking the bank.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I’d expected to be thrown off the ship because I was the only one who’d seen Teach’s betrayal and could talk about it. The situation as it stood was effectively my word against that of a man the Whitebeards couldn’t find. But Whitebeard believed my account of events, as did his commanders.

I was still a bit wary.

“We don’t even have a brig, not really,” Vista said, when I hesitantly broached the idea anyway. “It’s more of a drunk tank. Sometimes crewmates get out of hand, so we stick them in there until they sober up.”

“I imagine the hangovers would make them easier to manage after that point,” I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck.

Vista grinned. “You’re not wrong.” Then he paused, looking down at me since I was more than four full feet shorter than he was. “Were you really worried we’d lock you up?”

“Ace said Teach was on the crew longer than he was, and no one expected anything like this,” I explained, still a bit uncomfortable. “I’ve been here for less than two weeks. It’d—it’d make sense if people were angry at me.”

“You’re not wrong.” Then he paused, looking down at me since I was more than four full feet shorter than he was. “Were you really worried we’d lock you up?”

“Ace said Teach was on the crew longer than he was, and no one expected anything like this,” I explained, still a bit uncomfortable. “I’ve been here for less than two weeks. It’d—it’d make sense if people were angry at me.”

It’s a little difficult to be angry at someone who clearly saved a crewmate’s life,” Vista pointed out reasonably. “If it wasn’t for you, Thatch wouldn’t have lasted long enough for the nurses to get there.”

More like if not for Isobu. His roar had woken the entire ship and sent them scrambling for battle
stations. My awareness had narrowed just to Thatch and his injuries, for all the good I would have done without Janey and the others.

“Anyone else would’ve done the same thing…”

“But no one else was in the right spot,” Vista said, and I had to nod in agreement. He reached down and patted my shoulder. “I’m on my way out. Did you want to come with?”

I blinked. “Uh, I haven’t really been off the ship…” Nor had I gotten a chance to replace the bolero Izo had given me, what with the ongoing manhunt. I hadn’t actually seen Izo since Teach’s betrayal.

“An excellent time to start, then.” Vista apparently viewed this as the end of the conversation, and walked off.

“…Okay then,” I mumbled, and went to go find a spare coat just in case.

The coat I ended up retrieving from the spare clothing bin was apparently designed for someone about a foot taller than me, so the rough red material went a fair bit past the ends of my fingers. It also had the Whitebeard Pirates emblem displayed proudly across the shoulders, which mostly ended up reminding me I was a bit of a fake for using it.

Still, Vista seemed to approve. “Now you look like one of us.”

“I suppose I do,” I admitted, as we headed toward the starboard side of the deck. “Is anyone else going to, uh—”

“Foodvalten,” Vista supplied.

“—Yeah, that place,” I finished, since it wasn’t like I knew where anything was out here.

“I think a couple of members of the Second Division are coming along,” Vista said, finally answering my question. “Supply runs need to be completed whether we have other problems to deal with or not.”

I thought that over. “And if you just so happen to run into Teach along the way…?”

“Then we’ll get to cut the manhunt short, won’t we?” said a new voice, and I turned to find Eastwood and Sinbad among the group milling around on the deck. I didn’t recognize most of the pirates around them, who seemed to be part of Vista’s Fifth Division instead.

Vista gave a noncommittal shrug, though his eyes hardened. “Let’s concentrate on our jobs for right now.”

“Where’s Commander Ace?” I asked, while the Fifth Division pirates got a couple of smaller scouting vessels ready to go. Landing vessels? Anyway, they were more rowboat than anything, despite the sails.

“He’s staying with Thatch,” Eastwood said, checking his pistols one last time. “So, any idea what you want to get on Foodvalten?”

“…If I had the slightest idea what was there, maybe,” I said somewhat sheepishly. “I just need something to do and Commander Vista invited me along.”

“Well, I hope you like being a manual laborer for the day,” Sinbad said, “because food runs always
take elbow grease."

“I think I can handle that,” I said, flapping a dismissive hand—and sleeve—at my skeptical pirate friends. “I might not seem that tough, but I’m not a stranger to hard work.”

It was very difficult to both be Gai’s friend and unaware of the concept, at least. Sinbad and Eastwood just exchanged shrugs and helped me into the boat despite my lack of need for it. I probably could have walked down the side of the *Moby Dick* to about the same effect, but still didn’t have any interest in exposing more of my tricks to anyone.

Foodvalten was a…really, I would have called it a rock formation more than anything. It looked like a free-standing chunk of stone that had been eroded away via rivers instead of an ocean, topped generously with bird-delivered plant life and also a small town somewhere in the middle of the bay. The people on the island wore feathers on their heads—which made me give Eastwood’s cowboy hat a sidelong look *yet again*.

While someone in Vista’s division oversaw the bulk purchases—flour, pickled everything, and so on—the rest of the Whitebeards fanned out to search for whatever they wanted.

“What are you getting?” Sinbad asked, having founded and purchased some kind of knife set from a local shop. There wasn’t a weapon shop on the island for what I needed, so I held off on that front.

I shrugged. “I don’t have any money, so probably not much.”

Eastwood snapped his fingers. “Right, you don’t get a share of the loot. I forgot about that.”

The Whitebeard Pirate emblem on my back was probably messing with him. It certainly messed with everyone else.

Sinbad frowned. “I could cover what you want. You don’t need to pay me back unless it’s *really* expensive.”

“Thank you, Sinbad,” I said, bowing just a bit. “I’ll try looking around.”

I ended up buying a number of small paintbrushes. Nothing like the ones that Fossa’s division used, which were more for the ship-suitable paint that went toward re-varnishing the *Moby Dick*, but instead my choices were delicate. The thinnest one was best-suited for particularly finicky watercolors, while the thickest of them would work for fūinjutsu as long as I carefully maintained it.

I immediately snatched the case up as soon as Sinbad bought them for me, tucking them carefully into my borrowed jacket’s inner pocket. I poked and prodded at the packet, almost giddy with excitement at having found *something* I could use for fūinjutsu even this far out into the middle of nowhere.

Of course, my traveling companions noticed. After the second time Sinbad caught me fidgeting and taking the brushes out to marvel at them, he said, “...Um, you seem kinda attached to those.”

I felt my cheekbones start to color a bit, and coughed. “It’s been *ages* since I’ve had my own brushes. I, um, I do calligraphy sometimes.”

“...Okay,” was all he said, even as he edged away from me.

“If I can find some paper, maybe I could write a poem or something for Thatch,” I mused aloud,
or maybe copy one down. Maybe a thank-you letter? For when he wakes up.”

“I don’t think Thatch is one for poetry, Kei,” said Eastwood.

...Crap. Maybe a painting? I wasn’t a particularly good artist after a lifetime of mostly not practicing, but I could probably come up with something. Oh, and I could even sign it with a tracking seal. I’d definitely find the *Moby Dick* again if I could get one of them to work.

“Ask Vista,” Eastwood suggested.

I didn’t actually get a chance to, because someone in the Fifth Division gave a shout and drew all of our attention back to the bay. As one, all of the Whitebeards rushed out of the town and toward the landing boats.

Marco, in full phoenix form, landed neatly just on the edge of the docks and perched on a post. In a burst of blue flame, he reverted his head, torso, and legs to human form and turned to Vista, saying something before taking off again.

The message, when Vista turned to all of us, turned out to be, “Thatch is awake.”

Before I knew it, two weeks passed.

I painted a grayscale landscape scene, of the Hokage Mountain and the four somewhat silly-looking heads carved into it. Instead of depicting any of the buildings resting in its shadow, I did my best to portray a placid lake that, really, looked more like something out of the Valley of the End before Rin and I battled Sasori in it. The lake certainly didn’t look like that *now*.

The Whitebeards mostly didn’t know what to make of it—Jozu mentioned that it didn’t quite look real—but they hung it up in the galley for Thatch to see when he finally returned to the kitchen. I wrote a little get-well note on the edge of the bastardized sumi-e painting, and hid a tracking seal underneath the canvas. Then it was just time to wait for Thatch to see it.

And man, were the Whitebeards eager to have him back.

While Thatch was effectively banned from the kitchen because of his injuries, I had been helping the Fourth Division volunteers in the kitchen for the most part. The results...well, they spoke for themselves. Even Ace balked at eating some of the things we’d come up with.

Sitting in the medical bay with Thatch—who was getting one last checkup for the sake of his spleen—and Ace let me know that quite clearly. Especially during lunch.

Ace set down a spoon still laden with food. It had an unappetizing pudding-like consistency and similar looks. I was mostly sure that part was not my fault. I’d been working on slicing meat, so tapioca had not featured anywhere on my workstation. If it had, I would have been very confused.

“If I didn’t have actual proof that someone wanted me dead...” Thatch trailed off in a warning tone, looking at the food like it would rear up and try to kill him.

“You’re not allowed to joke about that,” Ace said flatly.

“I’m the one who almost died. I can make all the jokes I want,” Thatch argued. He said to me, “Kei, are you sure the guys in the kitchen actually want me to live?”

“Everyone else does,” I deadpanned, picking up the spoon and twirling it in the...yeah, that was
probably gravy. It was thankfully inert. “You should hear them complain.”

“Well, then. Let me out of here and I can fix that right up!” Though mollified by the thought, Thatch was still a bit faded-looking. While people on this ship seemed to heal much faster than normal, the medics around here were taking no chances. They kept yanking him out of normal duty rotation.

“Do it before your side heals and I’ll kill you myself!” yelled Janey from across the room, and Thatch wilted immediately.

Case in point.

Ace and I exchanged looks while Thatch moped on the cot with his poor pompadour drooping down over his face. He was the saddest seven-foot puppy I’d ever seen.

On the other hand, I’d long since learned to never argue with medics of any stripe.

“I look forward to eating your food again soon,” I said to Thatch, before slipping off the side of his bed.

Ace was well ahead of me, and the last thing I heard from Janey was, “Hey, didn’t you get smacked around by that—GET BACK HERE!”

Hell no.

Neither of us stopped running until we reached the deck, and immediately hid behind Jozu and Vista to avoid any scalpel-laden reprisal.

“Did you two do something?” Jozu asked, lifting his arm to get a look at Ace using him like a human shield.

“Not me,” Ace refuted cheerfully.

“It’s more about what I didn’t do. Which was visit them after Thatch got hurt. Janey just remembered,” I said from my vantage point behind Vista. After we sorted ourselves out and pretended that the last five seconds hadn’t happened, and I said, “By the way, where do you get your swords?”

“Hm? On the next island over, actually.” Vista scratched the base of his second-only-to-Whitebeard mustache. “We never did get those replacement swords. If we do, do you plan on sparring with us?”

I held up my hands. “Hey, no, I’m just trying to get all my ducks in a row. I need supplies if I’m gonna be able to complete my mission.”

“You’re still leaving?” Ace asked, and I got another punch in the heart.

Why were grown pirates so good at guilt-tripping me just by making sad faces at me? I was a total sucker, wasn’t I?

“You barely know anything about sailing, though,” Ace insisted. “You said it yourself. If you head out to sea unprepared, you’ll die!”

I scowled. “I can handle things myself, one way or another.” I still wouldn’t tell this secret, but it was rather an important one. *Does my inexperience really matter when you’re navigating using all*
“How about this, then?” Vista suggested, before Ace could spontaneously combust again. He drew one of his swords and said, “If we can find you a sword and you can prove you can make it out there on your own, then we might let you go.”

I stepped back to eye Vista’s slightly oversized…well, it was a sword, but the finish on it was more “cutlass” than “katana.” The blade part looked like the razor’s edge of a katana, but the hilt was too short to be of use, and I didn’t like the hand guard in the slightest.

“Only if I get something that is a bit less…gilded,” I said at last, still skeptical.

Vista was too dignified of a man to develop an eye tic. Or so he thought. “What’s wrong with my swords?”

“They’re not what I use,” I explained, but perhaps not very well. If I stayed on the Moby Dick any longer, I’d become the world champion of sticking my foot in my mouth. Hm. “My preferred sword is a katana with no ornamentation. I sometimes use the sheath too, but for the most part I fight two-handed with one blade.”

Vista twisted the ends of his mustache in thought. “I could find you one of those easily enough. But don’t they break in your hands?”

I’d have a lot fewer intact tendons if that was the case. “I’ve only gotten my blades broken by other people. Doesn’t really slow me down too much.” I paused as an idea struck me. Maybe I’d have a chance to get off the ship if I played this right… “Would it be possible for me to spar with someone, to prove I can take care of myself?”

“Oh, I could take you on. I’ve been getting bored around here,” Ace said, raising his hand, which got a raised eyebrow from me. Cocky firebug.

Perfect.

“Ace, I could drown you in four seconds,” I said flatly.

There was a collective “oooooooh” from the nearby pirates. Really, they wouldn’t be pirates if they weren’t easily amused by the silly things happening in their vicinity, and already money was changing hands.

Ace’s hackles rose right on cue. “I’d like to see you try!”

“Wait until Vista finds me a sword, and then I’ll show off.” I crossed my arms. “Not before then.”

Funny how when I was being mild-mannered and not confrontational, I couldn’t get anything done or find any supplies for what I really needed. When I challenged a Whitebeard commander, though, the game was quite different. The sword I wanted appeared within two days, and there was none of the “Oh, Haruta broke everything” runaround going on.

It was a conspiracy. And I was done being jerked around.

I attached my sword to my hip thanks to a fashionable belt, but already was making plans to include enough pockets for any incarnation of Batman I’d ever heard of. Once I managed to fill in the gaps
in my arsenal—via reconstructing every storage seal I had ever needed—I would be the world’s most terrifying user of a really basic technique.

Then again, I was the only ninja around. That made me the most terrifying by default.

“You’re still sure you want to do this?” Haruta asked as our boat landed on the shore.

Haruta wasn’t a Devil Fruit user, so he and I and the rest of the pirates on this particular rowboat could have probably swam to shore. Apparently, though, everyone wanted to look their best for this particular mess. Even Captain Whitebeard was on the little deserted island where Ace and I would be beating each other silly, sitting next to Thatch so the nurses could fuss over both of them at the same time.

I hoped it would be a bit shorter than all that. Most fights didn’t last long enough to justify rowing half the crew out to spectate.

“Commander Haruta, I said I need to leave because I have things to do,” I reminded him in an even tone. “If this gets me off the ship without having to swan dive off a railing in the middle of the night, I’ll take it.”

“You wouldn’t actually do that, would you?” asked Sinbad, who had also been in the boat.

My eyes narrowed. “I might be tempted.”

But really, I wasn’t trying that hard. If I had been determined to escape, I would have taken off immediately after the medics said Thatch would live. Or else disappeared before then and…missed the moment when Teach betrayed them, and Thatch would’ve died.

I tried not to think about how close that had been.

“Liar,” said Haruta. “You know you love us.”

I shrugged and moved on past Haruta, stalking toward the fateful stretch of beach where Ace was already waiting. Well, time to play.

The new battlefield was, if I was being honest, actually perfect. A gray, sandy beach that Ace would probably turn into glass on one side, and beautiful blue ocean on the other with so few large waves that I’d be able to have the run of the place. Aside from errant seabirds that were going to have to learn how to get the hell out of Dodge before being roasted, it was free of any occupants other than Ace and—after I took a few more steps—me.

Once I arrived, the assembled pirates started chattering again. I heard a few more bets being thrown around, with the men of Ace’s division most totally behind their commander’s victory. There were a few people holding out to make a killing when or if I scraped a win, but they were in the clear minority.

I had no intention whatsoever of making this a fair fight. Given that everyone around me was a pirate, I had to assume that Ace wouldn’t either—the question was merely if he believed he could win without fighting dirty due to sheer power.

**We could make it even more imbalanced if I were to join in.**

*Don’t think I’ll need it,* I thought, even as I placed my right hand on the hilt of my borrowed sword. *But hey, if I lose you can say “I told you so.”*
You say that as if I needed your permission for doing so.

I sighed internally. Point.

“We fight until one of us can’t anymore. Sound good?” Ace suggested though from about ten meters off. We were both fast enough that a starting gap didn’t make much of a difference, but there was such a thing as social niceties to observe.

“Sounds pretty normal to me,” I said neutrally, glancing toward Whitebeard. He wasn’t actually officiating our match, but Marco, who was, stood right next to him and would listen to his captain’s ruling. Unofficial or not.

Whitebeard looked…nostalgic? How many times had members of his crew fought weird upstarts, anyway?

“Begin when ready,” Marco said, sounding about as interested as he ever looked. Which was…not. Ever.

Then it was time to give Ace my full attention before he turned all the local wildlife into barbecue.

Fire crawled along Ace’s shoulders as I made the Ox hand sign and then raised my left arm skyward, fingers of both hands forming the Seal of Confrontation.

The nearby ocean hissed, and then I blanketed the entire area in mist thicker than pea soup. Hidden Mist technique, detection style.

I couldn’t navigate using my chakra sense when no one else had any, but I could swamp the entire area in mine and figure out where Ace was based on the dead zone he kept boiling away. So I crept around the battlefield unseen as my fog made the world very, very gray. Channeling chakra through my feet, I passed unseen toward the edge of the marked battlefield without even leaving any footprints.

“What the hell?” demanded what sounded like Janey’s voice. “We can’t see anything like this!”

Ace laughed aloud, his fire burning off another chunk of the mist. “You’re seriously hiding from me?”

Like I’d dignify that with a response.

“Heat Haze!” And then Ace was blasting the mist apart in the direction he thought I was with a stream of fire. Which, thanks to the power of both weather anomalies and my shinobi sneaking skills, ended up actually being in the broad direction of the audience before the flames curved up and away.

…Had no one ever taught him not to call out what attack he was using? Sure, it didn’t matter since I didn’t know what he could really do, but that was a very bad habit.

I dropped a Water Clone in the midst of the mist even as I pumped still more of it into the air. Unless Ace managed to evaporate the ocean, I could maintain the mist with minimal chakra cost pretty much until I didn’t want to anymore. While I was not Zabuza and therefore specialized in silent killing, I had enough chakra in my coils to put him to shame by far.

Hm. Technically speaking, if Ace set the entire battlefield on fire, none of that would matter. He only wasn’t because there were so many flammable people around.
“Hiding isn’t gonna win this fight for you,” Ace said, while I sent my Water Clone ghosting past his shoulder as the mist swamped everything again.

“Isn’t it, though?” my clone asked cheerfully, ducking under the reflexive punch Ace sent its way. The clone wouldn’t touch him, not when he could boil it to death in a second, but it could distract the hell out of him pretty easily.

My clone wove around and sidestepped every unpowered strike, by a hair’s breadth at most because while Ace was a brawler he was **good** at it. He just didn’t use nearly as much technique as the fighters I’d been dealing with recently, including my own students.

…Well, I also happened to be the kind of person who preferred dodging by practically nothing. And my clone was going to move like me even if it was working off one-tenth of my strength at most.

“How,”—punch— “the”—and a miss! — “hell”—another miss—

My clone whirled on the spot and launched a roundhouse kick at Ace’s head, but Ace’s blocking arm and shoulder hissed away into fire. The retaliatory strike (“Cross Fire!”) boiled the clone’s top half away in an instant.

Oops.

“What the hell, seriously?” Ace shouted as the clone’s remaining volume splattered across the sand. “You’re not even fighting me yourself!”

I shot out of the deeper section of mist and sliced Ace’s arm from his body.

The total lack of chakra in the strike meant my sword mostly just made Ace’s bicep tattoo look somewhat uneven as the fire sorted it out. He looked over his shoulder, grin widening, and then he dissolved entirely into a man-shaped blaze.

I swapped places with the second Water Clone I had made and felt it **pop** into an inert puddle, and then immediately created two more from the mist right in front of Ace. They were close enough to jump him, and did so.

And as I got my feet under me again, I sent Water chakra streaming down the length of my katana to form a place for a supercavitation bubble to form. I spun the blade once in my hands, testing for air resistance and, thanks to the mist gathered all around us, picking up more water to use as I went.

I dropped the Hidden Mist technique for just a second, collapsing its mass into a single extended wall of water that led directly from me to Ace. He was already whirling around to face me, right fist aflame, when I got the attack off.

**Water Release: Displacement Wave Sword.**

More of a passing fancy than anything real, I’d wondered once upon a time what would happen if I used the Curve of the Moon kenjutsu technique underwater.

This wasn’t that. This was me basically forcing a shockwave through the water as hard as possible to see what would happen. Theory into practice, and frankly I didn’t expect much of the result.

What happened was Ace ducking as the still-sharp slash kept traveling even as it emerged from the other end of the water wall, tearing through a sand dune on the far side and then splitting three palm trees in half in sequence. The attack pattern made no sense to me—I hadn’t been using Wind
chakra at all—but clearly the pirates knew what was happening.

“Oh, an air blade! Looks a bit like the Tempest Kick, but not as polished…” said someone. Probably Vista. “Hey, Ace, still feeling like this is gonna be easy?”

…Not what I meant to do. At all. I could have killed him if the hit connected because of the chakra behind it.

Ace just tipped his hat forward, then his hands started glowing green as he held them out in front of him. It almost looked like the opening stance of the Kamehameha. “Firefly!”

*Hidden Mist!* The mist swirled in and around us, but this time it was punctuated by little green orbs of lights that flowed out of Ace’s hands. Frowning, I sent a Water Clone to investigate one and slowly retreated to the waves.

The clone ran right into one of the little glowing things, and then a three-meter fireball was where an innocent-looking green orb used to be. My clone exploded into water droplets, briefly disturbing the mist before it flowed back over the site and the scorched beach sand.

I couldn’t maneuver with those things around. But I was also pretty sure that out of the two of us, I was the only one who could tell where everyone was without having to blow the mist apart.

“How old did he think I was? *Five*?

Still, I needed his fireballs off the field.

One of them randomly exploded due to hitting one of its counterparts, which at least proved that they were not stable. It didn’t mean Ace couldn’t control them, but the slightest touch could set them off.

While I knelt offshore, using the mist like a sort of spider web, Ace apparently decided that patience was for other people and shouted, “*Fiery Doll!*”

The green fireballs all started to burn their way through the mist, homing in on a clone I’d left standing around doing nothing other than being a convenient target. It wasn’t even a solid, but seeing its silhouette in the mist near him must’ve given him enough of a heading to work from.

I let him destroy the plain clone in front of him with a massive blast of fire reminiscent of Obito’s if Uchiha fire was brilliant, eye-searing green. It saved me the effort of launching explosive rocks all over the place to clear it out the hard way if he detonated everything on the battlefield himself. Circling slowly around the perimeter of the battlefield, I closed my eyes and left him to it.

Once again, my mist swallowed the fire the instant Ace stopped using the little fireballs as cluster bombs, effortlessly calling up more water from the ocean. Sure, the mist smelled like burned seaweed and old fish, but it was still obscuring Ace’s vision.

“Do you want me to take this seriously?” Ace demanded, while another clone once again darted into the mist. This one was solid, again, but I couldn’t keep wasting energy on that kind of thing and not attacking.

…Well, I could, but not if I wanted to win.

*Almost there…*
“Should I?” asked my clone, slightly to the left, and Ace immediately swung and blasted the entire immediate section of beach into glass. My clone boiled and flashed away into nothing but steam, but once again the mist flooded back in to fill the gap.

...Not heading over there, then.

I could assist you if—

_I’m not trying to kill him, Isobu._

Still, Ace was in the near-center of the battlefield, and he still needed to be dealt with. I directed the last clone to expend its chakra a little differently, then tightened the mist into a thickening ring around myself even as more rushed in to hide the movement from Ace.

“Screw the mind games. _Fire Fist!_” Ace roared, and then the air itself was on fire and heading rapidly in my actual direction.

The first layer of my mist shield flashed away into uncontrolled water vapor, but the rest joined a rising wall of water that met and deflected the leading edge of Ace’s flame. Behind it, I had my fingers locked in the Tiger seal and continued to blast torrents of water outward from my mouth to maintain it. It probably sounded a little like a waterfall in miniature.

_Water Release: Water Wall._

It met the expanding burst of flame in a steam explosion that caused people around the fight to start screaming. I didn’t know if they were hurt or if they were just freaking out, but I didn’t have time to wonder.

And then I Replaced myself with my remaining Water Clone.

I blinked back into reality under a foot of beach sand and water, with heat still seeping down from overhead. Holding my breath, I reestablished the mist the second Ace’s fire stopped being quite so prominent—perhaps as he stopped to pant or wonder where I was—and then I yanked all of the water within my range.

The mist froze in place, the waves stilled, and then I tore the water up out of the sand and snapped those metaphorical jaws shut around Ace.

There were a hundred voices screaming at once, audible even under the sand.

“What the hell? Is that water?” asked someone who sounded like Eastwood, though there was still some sand in my ears.

I popped out of the sand a second later, feeling like the world’s least fortunate groundhog, and surveyed my work once I gave myself an impromptu rinse via the remaining uncondensed mist. Of which there was maybe a handful left.

My arm was embedded up to the elbow in my Water Prison, and Ace…was completely failing to float in my watery fishbowl of a technique. While his eyes were still moving, he was unable to so much as lift a finger in my direction.

Just as planned.

Seawater stuck my hair to my head and dripped off the end of my nose as the remaining loose threads of the technique splashed the sand off of me. I probably looked like a total mess. But I had
accomplished my goal.

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” demanded two hundred voices at once.

I flexed my hand and the Water Prison deformed slightly. Inside of the technique’s depths, Ace’s hat drifted off his head and a stream of bubbles escaped his mouth. He didn’t move one bit, though I had specifically relaxed the physical bindings of the technique. Devil Fruit users really couldn’t swim, could they?

“The match is over,” Whitebeard said, his voice carrying easily across the suddenly silent crowd.

I glanced up, surveying the mostly-stunned pirates, then jerked my hand out of the Water Prison.

The bubble collapsed instantly, leaving a stunned and coughing Ace lying on the sand with no idea what the hell had happened.

After a second’s consideration, I made the Tiger hand seal and the remaining water clinging to both of us streamed away into silvery ropes in midair. After a little longer, I sent all of it splashing back into the sea proper, shrugging to myself and sticking one hand out to Ace to help him up.

Ace coughed as he sat up, spitting up more water, then brushed the back of his hand across his mouth. While his eyes were a bit reddened, all he did was dry out his hat with a burst of flame before looking up at me again. “Four seconds, huh?”

“Five minutes with no banter, really. I was pissing you off on purpose,” I admitted, as he took my hand and I yanked him back to his feet. “I know how to fight angry fire-users, so once I knew I’d need to fight I was kinda hoping you’d volunteer.”

“And I fell for it completely,” Ace said wryly, shaking his head. He shifted his legs into fire and then back, after which he was entirely dry. “Not bad for someone who still doesn’t know anything about anything.”

“I guessed your abilities pretty well, I think,” I countered in a teasing tone. In a firmer voice, I said, “I can take care of myself.”

Or we can do so together, as usual.

Of course.

In the end, Whitebeard allowed me to go. A deal was a deal, even if I’d ninja’d my way into the easiest fight I could manage to find and then cheated like hell. After all, pirates were contractually obliged to be scoundrels on some level, and they didn’t tend to protest that same process going in reverse.

Much.

I took the little boat they gave me, some supplies, a transponder snail number (after refusing a snail for the animal’s sake), and a dozen tearful goodbyes even though I was really just getting back to work. Without the pirates running around all over the place, I could commune with Isobu and finally see what the other jinchūriki were up to—and hopefully they’d actually be in the mind-skype to answer. I would be able to get home.

I still cried a bit when I left.
I only flew the Whitebeard flag until I passed out of the *Moby Dick’s* (and Marco’s) sight around the curve of an island. Then I carefully retrieved it, folded it up, and stored it in the waterproof travel chest in the bottom of the boat. While I was grateful to the Whitebeards, I didn’t want to get them in trouble with anyone or anything if my path crossed into unfriendly territory.

And so, the second I was sure no one was watching, Isobu lurched up from underneath my little boat and swallowed that entire section of sea.

The inside of Isobu’s belly was…weird. Now, I’d heard that Tailed Beasts didn’t have organs and to be perfectly honest I had assumed it was mainly because chakra constructs—or personifications—didn’t have any need for them. Why bother, right?

But the thing was, the Gold and Silver Brothers got their weird cheek marks by messing with Kurama’s innards after he ate them. So there clearly was some kind of weird shit going on.

Isobu’s belly contained a terrifying range of spiked edges reminiscent of a chasm in Konoha that not even Gai would use for training, shell-like shapes so Isobu’s insides matched his outside, and an eerie red-orange light. And, where ordinarily I expected acid from biological beings, Isobu’s stomach was strangely dry aside from the water I’d brought in with me.

No, instead it was populated by *miniature Isobu clones*.

“Uh, hi everyone,” was about the only thing I could think to say when my little boat and its cushion of seawater finally arrived on the…shore. I called it a shore solely because I’d used up my seagoing vocabulary earlier, and now I was in metaphor land. It looked like a shore, okay?

The hundreds of little Isobu clones all cocked their spiky heads in the exact same way. Each one was about the size of a cat, with three perfectly formed tails and bulky shells and blunt-fingered hands. They were more grayish than their biggest counterpart, but in my opinion they were all rather cute. The bigger ones in the back, with sizes ranging from “bear” to “elephant” to “small whale,” cocked their heads in the opposite direction as my voice reached them.

*Isobu, did you know you have a lot of little-yous in your belly? Was there something you wanted to tell me?* I asked him nervously.

**In exactly what universe would I have the slightest reason to understand the mechanics by which my stomach works?**

*In this one?*

I let my mind wander a bit while all of the little Isobu clones looked at me. The main question that came to mind went thus: “Are they carnivorous?”

Then, all at once, the Isobu-clones bowed just before I dragged my boat onto the nearest bit of flat “ground” I could find.

“That’s nice to know. I dragged the boat up and, with some help from a few of the tiny Isobu clones and a rope, secured it. I was pretty sure the word was “mooring,” but it wasn’t like there was a convenient pirate around for me to ask. *Do they mind if I spend some time meditating in here?*

*I do not mind, and therefore neither do they.*
...Reasonable point. I sat back down in the boat and crossed my legs one over the other. I held out my hands, clapped them together, and started my controlled breathing exercises.

Or I tried. When I felt a tug on my pants, I looked down and spotted one of the smaller Isobu clones sitting in the boat, trying to climb up my leg without using its tails for leverage.

“Aw, you’re so little,” I cooed, holding out a hand so it could climb up onto the bench with me.

It latched on with its little hands, encircling my entire wrist, then coiled its tails too so it got a good grip. I helped it balance with my other hand, then pulled it up and onto my lap. While its spiky chin was not comfortable against my leg, the little beastie made such a cute noise in response that I was okay with that.

You have strange tastes in companions. I know enough about humans to know that the typical response to my appearance, no matter how small, is not the one you are having now.

I rubbed my knuckle against the soft spot in the joint between the little Isobu’s head and neck. Societal expectations of cuteness can take a hike.

Isobu’s entire body trembled as he laughed. Inside of him, I had to glue myself to my seat with chakra to keep myself in place. The little Isobu just wrapped its tails more firmly around my arm and hung on to avoid being unseated.

Say, I thought once things settled down again, if I needed to throw someone down here, like for a quick escape, could you avoid tearing them to shreds?

Possibly. The little Isobu in my lap looked up at me and I got the oddest feeling it was mirroring Isobu’s body language. I do not know who you expect to need to rescue at this stage, however.

Maybe another jinchūriki? I thought that over, grimacing. Only, no, they probably would have one of your siblings with them. I hope they’re sticking together...

We could check to be certain. The mini-Isobu twitched all three tails at once. I will let you get back to trying to contact the others.

You don’t want to join in?

I will once I find a safe section of seabed. There are too many creatures here so far.

I nodded, then sat with the tiny Isobu in my lap and tried to reach down through my mind for the first hint of—

A voice saying, NOT THIS WAY.

—PAIN, ow, ow! I shook my hand out as the phantom pain of getting it slammed in a door ripped through my brain.

Kei?

Pain radiated up my right arm, then shot across my head like a live wire being dragged through my brain. I clutched my hand and then pressed my temple into my knee, swearing furiously under my breath.

The little Isobu’s spikes dug into my stomach and chest, but none of them punched through. In fact, I used the discomfort to force down my reaction to the psychic feedback. As soon as I could
manage it, I coughed to clear my throat and stopped crushing the Isobu clone.

*So, that’s not gonna work,* I concluded grimly. Without the range of the Tailed Beast mind-skype, I was back to using just my sensing range and hoping I hit pay dirt. In an entire ocean. This was going to be such a *fun* adventure. *Looks like we’re doing this the old-fashioned way.*

Isobu and his clone both stilled for a long moment. Then the walls around me rumbled as he growled. *Then we had better get started.*
Diver

Chapter Summary

Kei: Feel the penny drop.

Chapter Notes

I think this song was like the eighth *Naruto Shippuden* opening.

Searching for up to eighteen needles in a haystack the size of the entire ocean led to exactly no leads.

It wasn’t Isobu’s fault. He was a champ, constantly ferrying me and my little boat around the various island chains that made up the world. When we found a new set of islands that seemed safe, and I needed supplies, he’d spit my boat out somewhere no one could see, and then I would fumble my way through sailing skills I faked having (via subtle use of ninjutsu) until I got to shore. On a couple of occasions, I literally walked the miserable little rowboat to shore on a rope like I was pulling a recalcitrant donkey.

Once finally on solid ground again, I…admit that I cheated quite a lot to avoid causing any kind of ruckus. While I didn’t have any iconography from the Whitebeards on any of the clothes I’d brought with me, I still had less than no interest in accidentally getting into trouble that could be traced back to them. I barely had any interest in starting and dealing with my own trouble. To that end, every new island met a new version of me—or rather, the Transformation Jutsu cover version. If I had to wander around town in the form of a cat, a dog, or as a young man who looked a bit like Kabuto, then I would.

“Here you go,” said the bartender in the fifteenth roughneck island I’d run into, setting my drink order down in front of me.

“Thanks,” I said in a voice that wasn’t anywhere near mine. I sounded more like Mr. Pack-a-Day Yamaguchi-sensei than anyone.

Looking more like a mix of Jiraiya and Genma had given me enough distance from my usual appearance that I didn’t worry about being recognized even by Whitebeard’s crew. Even if I added in my personal twist—Isobu-gold eyes—I doubted my best friends would have picked me out of a crowd.

Sure, they would have picked the idiot using the Transformation technique out of a crowd easily enough, but they wouldn’t have *instantly* been able to tell it was me.

…and the frilly-as-fuck tropical drink might’ve been another hint, but I had never liked straight sake even if getting drunk was something I was willing to risk. As for the million other combinations of perfectly acceptable beverages and rotgut? Pass.
I believe alcohol counts as a kind of poison for the purposes of your resistance to it. Or have you been affected and I have simply not noticed?

That’s still a solid no. That was the other consideration, particularly in this world where the exact rules were so different. So why not get something that didn’t taste like gasoline?

I downed the bluish concoction in one shot, not even feeling the burn.

For all that I’d been hanging out in some pretty sketchy areas, whether visible as myself or not, I hadn’t heard any of the rumors I really cared about. Oh, I heard plenty about new bounties—and memorized the posters when the mail-birds brought news—and various excursions the Marines and World Government made against pirates. For example, whispers spoke of Admiral Akainu, the ultimate attack dog, taking on someone or other and melting everyone involved. I even saw a report of a few proper as opposed to summary executions, and learned that the World Government paid thirty percent less money for dead pirates than live ones.

But no one talked about giant monsters other than Sea Kings, which meant I had to move on and keep looking.

I’d been looking for two months. In an ocean, which Isobu could effortlessly traverse twenty-four hours a day, Sea Kings or not.

I did not have the patience of a saint at the best of times, but this was a new threshold of bullshit. My chakra sense’s range being only fifty kilometers had never bothered me before, but the free-roaming sea was so big that it rendered that hard-earned perception worthless. If there was more land—or more people with chakra—I might’ve been able to get some leads and stopped aimlessly wandering. But between that and the mind-skype being unavailable, I felt a lot like my boat must’ve felt being steered by a landlubber like me. If I’d cut the rudder off.

Two months and I wasn’t any closer to going home.

I slapped some beri notes—and man had I been confused when I found out what the currency was called—down on the counter before moving on. Still in my vague-aged-dude disguise, I shoved away and out the door before anyone could view me as anything other than a weird drunk. Really, most of these towns were so full of weird drunks that it didn’t make the slightest bit of difference.

I sauntered back to the docks, since this town was an apparent bust. After paying the harbormaster, I’d been allowed to moor my little boat for a few days, but it was really time to get going.

Though I sighed internally as I checked my wallet again. I’d need to start trawling the ocean for sunken treasure again soon enough.

While taking advantage of my newfound immunity to crushing water pressure made it easier for Isobu and I to ensure that wrecks were picked clean, it was still a pain in the ass. But since my other idea involved becoming a bounty hunter and inevitably smacking into the hypocrisy of hunting pirates when the ones responsible for my little startup venture were pirates, picking over wrecks it was. In hindsight, I probably should have asked for a list of people the Whitebeards would be okay with me attacking, but that was too little, too late.

As I strode down the docks, still looking like a remarkably buff old guy, I spotted something slightly amiss. Specifically, there were two ships flying Whitebeard’s flag at the end.

One of them was mine, and damned if I knew how the flag I’d been given was flying proudly now, since I’d locked it away. My little boat was tooth-marked thanks to the mini-Isobu clones and
rather tiny, but it was mine as long as one of the Whitebeards didn’t want it back for some reason. No one should have been messing with it.

The other boat, though? Striker.

…and this was going to go so well.

Thankfully, this confrontation got to happen at what was probably three in the morning, when even the local drunks had already long since stumbled home.

Anyway, I stepped closer and spotted a bowed head with the owner’s iconic hat solemnly removed, sitting in my boat and eating every single scrap of food I’d managed to acquire.

“So,” the figure said, with Whitebeard’s mark emblazoned across his back and his mouth sounding rather full, “are you the guy who owns this boat?”

“Kind of a stupid question,” I replied, two emotions warring within me. On one hand, Ace was probably going to set everything on fire in a second as he took his “revenge” on me. On the other… well, I was tempted to mess with him. Badly.

I hadn’t really laughed in quite a while, not after being met with frustration over and over again ever since I’d left the Whitebeards. The second urge won out.

There was a swallowing noise. “So you did take it.”

And Ace lunged, knocking me over and almost into the bay. While I caught his wrist on reflex, it didn’t change the fact that all the fingers of that hand were on fire, and that his other hand was gripping my collar. Or that he was sitting on my chest with clear murderous intent.

Must you do this?

In hindsight, this was not my best plan.

“What did you do to the woman who owned this boat?” Ace demanded, dragging my face up until we were nearly nose to nose. As cliché as it sounded, his eyes literally blazed with rage. “What happened to her?!”

“Seriously? I’m right here.” I canceled the Transformation technique in a massive puff of smoke, shedding my disguise. In no time at all I was back to…well, what passed as normal. As bizarrely endearing as Ace’s worry was, this had gone far enough. I liked my innards uncooked.

Dropping the disguise still left me pinned under the Whitebeards’ Second Division commander, but hey, it was my joke and I could pay for it. “Yo.”

“…Kei?” Ace stared, lowering his raised fist and letting his fingers be fingers again. He sat back a bit, putting his weight mostly off my lungs and stomach, and then decided to roll off me and help me back to my feet.

“In the flesh.” I didn’t quite smile, but I gave it my best shot. What exactly was I supposed to say to a guy who’d almost turned me into a charcoal briquette out of misplaced anger? Even if that bit was my fault.

…I was a terrible prankster. Why did I even bother anymore?

Ace took the opportunity to indulge in the by-now-common reaction people around here had to
unexpected news.

“YOU’RE ALIVE?!”

To wit, *screaming their heads off.*

I clapped my hands over my ears slightly too late. “Ow, dammit!”

“Sorry, I just—how are you alive?” Ace asked, fighting down a grin that totally ruined whatever apology he was trying to communicate.

“Try screaming a little less and I’ll tell you,” I responded somewhat grumpily, digging my pinky finger into my left ear. Fucking *ow.*

“Oh, it’s definitely you,” Ace muttered under his breath. Still, he poked my shoulder like he didn’t really expect his finger to stop when he touched me. “But how?”

“I think I need to know why you’d think I was dead, first,” I said, “because the sea has a lot of ways of doing that.”

Ace considered it. “Not here,” he said after he’d thought it over. “Somewhere less exposed. I’ll tie your ship to mine and we can talk where it’s safer.”

“I was perfectly safe until you ruined my disguise,” I said flatly. By, for example, putting up the Whitebeard flag.

“In this town?” Ace scoffed.

I sighed. Okay, so maybe he probably knew more about the area than I did. The town was a shithole anyway. “Fine. I’ll get the dinghy out. But I’m putting the flag back where I had it.”

“It’s our flag, though,” Ace protested. “If you kept it, why aren’t you using it? Everyone knows Whitebeard protects anyone who flies our symbol for real.”

“That…is a question I will answer once we get going,” I said, tossing him the mooring line to my boat so he could tie it to *Striker’s* stern.

I mean, I couldn’t guarantee that my boat wouldn’t be completely swamped in seconds by *Striker’s* wake, but hey. A plan was a plan.

Ace thankfully remembered that burying me in *Striker’s* rooster-tail would have probably been bad form, so our two linked boats sailed peacefully across the bay and toward the totally deserted end of the island. I had a theory about that, involving Sea Kings and giant crabs, but Isobu had called my idea “foolhardy” and I hadn’t been able to protest at the time due to a haze of sheer fatigue.

That had been a bad night. This was looking to be a long one.

Once we got to the correct spot, I dragged my nameless boat’s nose up onto the sand directly, while Ace did the same for *Striker.* Afterward, I gathered wood for a campfire before he just lit the entire stock ablaze in one shot, since the sun was rising soon.

Then the two of us sat down on driftwood logs and didn’t talk for a while.

The crackling fire prevented a total silence from descending, but I wasn’t really sure what to say.

“I apologize for not being dead?” Isobu suggested.
Uh, no. “Hey, Ace?”

“Yeah?” He looked up from where he’d been staring into the fire, apparently about as tired at three in the morning as I was. Even if he had just eaten all of my food as a “midnight” snack.

Well, since there wasn’t really a way for me to be circumspect… “Why’d you think I was dead?”

Ace’s expression went blank for a worryingly long time. Then, “…You were eaten by a Sea King. Namur saw it happen.”

I winced inwardly. So much for keeping Isobu a secret.

“We didn’t believe it at first, but then we remembered that a big one was sitting on the ocean when those Marine ships attacked. Do you remember that?” he asked, looking back down at the fire again.

“Kinda hard not to,” I replied. That had been an eye-opening afternoon. I’d seen two other Logias in action since—including some jackass whose power involved creating sludge—but the first one stuck out.

“Near as we were able to tell, it was the same one.” Ace sighed. “But it’s been two months, and then we kept hearing about one of our boats showing up at random islands all over the New World. No flag, but we knew. We have people everywhere, and there are ways to tell those things apart.”

I dropped my face into my hands. Double crap.

“Only there was always a different description of the owner, so it must’ve changed hands a lot,” Ace continued. “And unless we were dealing with a ghost skiff, then someone must’ve recovered the thing and sold it on—but we didn’t know if you’d made it. And if your boat did, why wouldn’t you?”

“But I kept changing appearances and throwing you off,” I mumbled. So much for trying to keep a low profile. “Sorry about that.”

Ace at least appeared to hear my apology, but anything past that I couldn’t determine. Still, he changed the topic slightly with, “Why were you doing that, anyway? And how?”

“I was trying to keep a low profile so if I did need to do something underhanded, no one would come after the Whitebeards for it,” I explained, though my reasoning seemed a bit inadequate now. “Only I guess I should have actually sold the boat and gotten a new one to make that work…” I dismissed that line of thought with a wave of my hand. No point worrying about it now.

Ace snorted. “You—you were trying to protect us?” He choked down a laugh, but not very successfully. “Y-you wanted to protect one of the Four Emperors? From who?”

“It sounded better in my head,” I grumbled. Lots of things did. Like half of my jokes. “And I don’t know, maybe someone who doesn’t even exist. I was being cautious.”

Really, I wanted to keep them from being associated with me. In general, jinchūriki tended not to attract positive attention.

I had no idea what my adventure would lead me to do, but there were some crimes I was still willing to commit that would sully even Whitebeard’s reputation. I wouldn’t be happy about it, but I was a shinobi and a designated weapon. The whole reason I existed the way I did was because one man wanted to utterly destroy millions of people for being happy when he wasn’t. Compared
to the Whitebeard Pirates, I just…had a lot more depth to sink to, if I so chose.

“Hey, no, none of that,” Ace interrupted, before my thoughts could get too dark. It was probably a bad sign for my self-control if my mindset was so obvious to someone I had only known for a few weeks a month ago. “Tell me how you keep changing”—a sweep of his hand encompassing the entirety of me—“everything.”

“It’s just a surface-level disguise. It’s the same power that lets me control water,” I explained with some forced cheer, “but I learned when I was eight instead of thirteen. It’s really a basic skill where I come from.”

“Oh, is that all?” Pause. “Wait. That doesn’t explain anything!”

I said somewhat teasingly, “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.” I sat back, glancing up at the lightening sky and watching the stars start to slowly disappear.

“So the funny hand motions you make before that? That’s not sign language,” Ace pressed. I focused on him again, noting his serious expression—or at least what I could see of it from below the brim of his hat.

“It’s a hometown secret, Ace. Even if I was allowed to explain, you couldn’t do it,” I said, leaning forward to rest my head on my hands again. “Believe me, I’ve been checking every single person I meet. No one does these things the way I do.”

And wasn’t that a kick in the pants.

“So that’s what you’re looking for.” Ace frowned thoughtfully, then pointed offhandedly at me. “Other people like you are out here, aren’t they?”

My eyebrows did not rise. Ace had made the right logical leap, but he was clever when I wasn’t deliberately making him too impatient to make the best judgments. “Yeah. They’re out here somewhere, but I don’t know if I’m even in the right region. The world’s just”—I shrugged helplessly—“too big. But I have to find them before I can go home.”

Not for the first time, my chest ached as I thought about my goal. Two months of fruitless searching wouldn’t have done great things for my optimism even if the reservoir hadn’t already been low. Even with Isobu as my constant companion, homesickness dogged my heels every time we went to a new island and found nothing.

“…You’re not the only one who has something to do before going home,” Ace said, lifting the brim of his hat. His free hand burst into flames, just for a second, and the fire in front of us got a hell of a lot bigger for a little longer than that. If I’d been sitting much closer, I wouldn’t have bangs anymore.

I’d seen Ace that angry once. “You’re going after Teach.” And for all I knew, Teach had eaten the Devil Fruit and had some strange new powers that no one had ever seen. “Does Whitebeard know?”

“It’s better to ask forgiveness than permission,” Ace replied, defiant.

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t even know how old you are, but you’re still too old to be using ‘running away from home’ as a solution to anything.”

“I’m twenty,” Ace said, clearly not willing to consider that argument. “And as an adult, I can make my own decisions.”
While essentially the second mate of his crew? No. He was supposed to be listening to his captain and reinforcing those orders unless things had gone to hell. “I get that he was one of your men—”

“You really don’t. Not if you finish that sentence,” Ace growled. Taken aback, I fell silent. “You don’t know what it means when—our crew is our family. Teach was more our brother than anyone we have by blood, and he spat on it because he wanted that Devil Fruit.”

I… I tried to imagine it, but my brain defaulted to Tobi and I didn’t want to think about that at all. It was a bad mental space.

Ace got to his feet, shoulders already aflame, and paced as he talked. He gestured rather emphatically, too. “He almost killed Thatch over something he could’ve just asked for, and no one hurts one of ours and gets away with it.”

I pressed my lips together and looked away.

“Even if he hadn’t attacked you and Thatch,” Ace said in a quieter voice, with the flames dying down, “he’s been tearing up towns in Paradise. He’s our mess—my mess—and needs to be stopped. Not killing him then makes him my responsibility now.”

There was no precise, direct equivalent to Ace’s situation. For most of the village’s history, there had only been two iconic traitors to whom all later candidates were compared. Everyone else we could find was hunted down and destroyed with extreme prejudice, but it created a sort of evolutionary pressure among scumbags. The only ones that lived long enough to be infamous were the ones too strong to kill.

I could cite Madara—who had fucked over negotiations with Iwa so badly that Konoha was still paying for it—but Ace wouldn’t know what I was talking about. Madara had specifically done his best to ruin my life and those of all my friends in one last-ditch attempt to ensure his legacy as an unmitigated monster, but he had never been my friend. In fact, I would go so far as to say that he was probably the longest-running single enemy I had ever faced. If he’d had his way, his plots would have continued long after he got me to kill my own family.

And there was Orochimaru who, like Madara, bore me no particular grudge at first but corrupted everything he touched. As far as I knew, the only people who even marginally cared about his continued existence were Tsunade, Jiraiya, and the Third Hokage. As for everyone else who didn’t share a childhood with him? My friends and I had enough grudges to keep the entire Uchiha clan in the black. Orochimaru had murdered the Chinatsugumi and made my students orphans, nearly killed me, had been the motive for Sasori ambushing my brother, Anko, and Jiraiya, and torn Yamato’s peers to genetically scrambled pieces just to recreate Wood Release.

And in both cases, no one loyal to Konoha would do less than kill them if given half the opportunity to do so. I’d personally ripped Orochimaru limb from limb more than once after what he did to Sorayama. Did it bring anyone back? No. But keeping him away from survivors, even if it killed me, mattered too much to me then for me to stop before I collapsed.

If I was being honest, could I blame Ace for wanting to exact justice?

I’d be one hell of a hypocrite if I did. “Okay.”

“Okay what?” Ace asked, having not been privy to the history lesson inside my head. Still, he seemed mollified that I’d stopped arguing with him.

“I’ll come with you to hunt Teach down,” I said, meeting Ace’s eyes patiently.
That brought him up short. Hands on his hips in a sort of defensive suspicion, he asked, “Didn’t you just say you had a different mission?”

“You say that like I was getting anywhere,” I muttered, though I hated to have to think about that. Still, I had a pirate to convince. “Ahem. I can still do that on our off hours. They say two heads are better than one. And I…” —specifically Isobu— “well, there’s someone you need to meet who wants his pound of flesh from Teach, too.”

“He can get in line,” Ace said flatly. “Nothing’s gonna stop me from giving that traitorous son of a bitch exactly what he deserves.”

“…I think you’ll understand why I think it matters once you meet him,” I said after a bit of a pause. “Also, I can’t navigate worth crap and I need help.”

I can navigate perfectly well.

Yeah, but I think hitting islands randomly isn’t really working out for us, even if you can always find land.

…You could be right about that. Isobu sent me an image of the beach, bonfire, and both Ace and me, and said, So, you want me to introduce myself.

It would be nice. He’d find out sooner or later if we follow this plan, and there’s still enough darkness that the rest of the island shouldn’t spot you.

Isobu made a vague rumbling noise, but subsided with bad grace. People tended not to react well to Isobu, for all that he was probably one of the shyest of the Tailed Beasts and mostly just wanted to be left alone.

…I wasn’t sure if it said more about him, my influence on him, or what, that such a statement was probably not the case anymore.

“Hello? New World to Kei. I’m still here, you know,” Ace said, waving his hand in front of my face.

I tried slapping his hand aside irritably, and nearly set my sleeve on fire when he automatically transformed. Luck was on my side, though. I had a segue. “I was just talking to my travel buddy. He wants to meet you.”

That did not seem to make Ace any more assured of my good judgment. “…What?”

I did not say that.

Too frickin’ bad. I stood up, faced the sea, and waved my arms overhead. I knew where Isobu was, big mass of chakra and all, and looked right at him. “Isobu, it’s time to say hi!”

Ace tried putting his hand on my shoulder to stop me, but I shrugged him off. “Who the hell are— WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Seeing Isobu for the first time was never a sanguine experience for people not in the know. And sometimes even for people who were. This time, he chose to lever himself into our firelight with all the subtlety of a tectonic plate shifting, his golden eye glowing like a lamp as he slowly moved closer and closer to shore. His body dragged over the seabed because he was too big for it not to. All three of his tails hung in midair as water poured off him in a seemingly endless cascade, and it hadn’t finished by the time I kicked sand over the fire to make it a bit smaller.
“Get back,” Ace insisted, hand on my upper arm. He’d clearly been holding back when we fought, because his grip was like iron as he tried to pull me back and away from Isobu’s gigantic jaws. “That’s—”

“The thing that ate my boat?” And if I was grinning like an idiot, so what? “Only because I asked.”

“It—” Ace said, then paused for a second to try and get his thoughts in order. “That’s a Sea King. You can talk to Sea Kings?”

I was already shaking my head by the time he was halfway through that statement. There was some kind of cultural baggage there that sat heavy in his tone, but I would ask him about that later. “No. Isobu is a Tailed Beast.”

Isobu’s huge golden eye moved slowly from me to Ace, pupil narrowing on exposure to the remaining firelight.

“If he talks, he’ll probably hurt your ears and won’t really be able to hear you unless you yell back,” I said while Ace continued to stare. “Lucky you’re a Logia, right?”

“I—uh, I guess so?” Ace cleared his throat and removed his hat. So he bounced back to being polite when no better options presented themselves. Better than meek. “Portgas D. Ace, at your service!”

I covered my ears and preemptively winced. Through them, I still heard Isobu say in one of his quieter voices, “You nearly drowned in front of me two months ago.”

“I…might’ve done that,” Ace said somewhat sheepishly, though he was clearly still uncomfortable addressing something that much bigger than he was (that wasn’t hostile). His ears flared orange for a second as the damage to his eardrums came and went.

“You already know my name,” Isobu said, still in his softest tone, “and as far as I am concerned, there is no line. Whichever of us finds that traitor first will be the one to kill him.”

Everything went silent for a second, including the waves, as the universe processed that statement. I smacked my hand into my face. Oh no.

“He is mine,” Ace argued instantly. With a giant turtle monster.

Oh, he was definitely one of a kind.

“No one strikes my partner and lives,” Isobu growled, making all of the nearby water start to bounce.

How many responses were there to something like that?

Ace glanced at me. When I just shrugged, he said, “So…we’re good? I fought Kei the last time we met.”

“Neither of you were fighting to the greatest extent of your power. Give me some credit for measuring hostile intent.” Isobu rolled his eye. Then, looking down at me, he asked, “Can we continue our search now? We have places to be.”

I planted one foot against the bow of my boat and pushed it into the water, toward Isobu’s mouth. He scooped it up and swallowed the entire craft without any trouble, as usual, then returned to looking down at Ace and I as though we were errant children.
“Okay, no. If it’s all the same to you, I’m sticking with Striker.” Ace picked up his rucksack and tossed it into his raft, not interested in the Isobu Express. He’d learn, probably. “Isobu can follow me, right?”

“I can answer for myself. And yes,” Isobu responded.

“Great,” Ace replied in a tone that said he wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic or not.

“And where are you going?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“…To the next island?” Ace said blankly.

“Well, I’m not. You ate all my food, you jerk.”

“…Oops.” Ace rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry?”

“‘Sorry’ doesn’t keep me from starving to death,” I reminded him. “I’m gonna head back to town and buy food and then we can leave.”

Isobu snorted and started lurching his way out to sea again, clearly done with the whole landlubber business. I had no idea how much of the seabed he was turning into piles of pulverized sand, but I probably didn’t want to know. Call on me when you are going to do anything important.

I waved as he left, and Ace seemed to copy me mostly because he didn’t know what else to do.

“So,” he said once Isobu had gone, “any other life-changing secrets you wanna tell me?”

“We can talk without needing to use our mouths or meet face-to-face,” I said instantly, since I was on a roll. “He’s half the reason I space out.”

“And the other half?”

I shrugged. “Genuinely not paying attention.”

“Well, this is the start of a beautiful friendship,” Ace muttered, and that was definitely sarcastic. In a louder tone actually meant to carry, he said, “Hop on Striker and I’ll get you back to town.”

This time, I rode sidesaddle while Ace stood up for the entire trip over. Definitely better than weighing the mast down.

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I feel as though you should have seen this particular twist coming.

You’re not helping.

“Ace, you’re a fucking cheapskate,” I growled under my breath.

The evidence of my traveling companion’s crime manifested in the form of stacks and stacks of plates that had been scraped utterly clean, their contents having been long since disappeared into Ace’s black hole of a gullet. There were easily enough plates there for ten men his size, or maybe one Akimichi, and Ace had nonetheless managed to run the hell away. That left the poor restaurant owners and workers with no money to show for all their efforts. The culprit was long gone.

I unslung my bag and from my shoulder, loosening the drawstring once I set it on the table. The sobbing waiter looked up, eyes bright red and puffy, as I said, “I’m not sure I have enough beri notes for this, but could you tell me how much that guy just cost you?”
The waiter quoted a number that sent my eyebrows shooting upward, but I could still pay it. It would just take a large chunk of my weapons fund.

“Okay, then this should cover it,” I said, dropping a large stack of moderate-denomination bills. “Have a good day, all right? Or at least a better one than this.”

Then I skedaddled before the waiter could ask why I was paying for a dine-and-dashing pirate.

About ten minutes later, I met up with Ace outside of the nearest weapons shop, having once again failed to locate anyone who could make kunai from the description alone. He sat casually on the fence that blocked the forge of the nearby smithy, totally unaffected by either the heat of the building or the swirling snow at the street. Even if he wore a trench coat against the cold.

“No luck?” Ace asked, since I once again had returned empty-handed.

“I can’t exactly commission twenty replacements when I don’t have a design or a sample.” I glanced up at the sun, then shook my head. The Drum Kingdom wasn’t exactly a place where weaponry of my favored type was popular. Since Teach had rolled through, flattened the army, and scared the king out of the country, chances had only dwindled.

Hearing that Teach had originally showed up because he needed medical help had been heartening, but ultimately it felt mostly like this particular venture had been a waste of time.

“Did you finish what you had to?” I asked Ace, after watching my breath fog in the cold.

Ace tipped his hat against the wind. “Yeah. With any luck, my brother will be at our next stop.”

“I wondered why you wanted to spend ten days in Alabasta.” I admitted, already thinking of how much money I would need to spend to compensate for Ace’s eating habits. “What’s Alabasta like, anyway?”

“It’s a desert country, but it’s a lot bigger than Drum. You might be able to find what you’re looking for here.”

Deserts. I hadn’t liked deserts since long before I’d visited the Land of Wind for their Chūnin Exam. The lack of water forced me to use larger amounts of chakra to be combat effective, I hated the extreme temperature swings, and the way sand got everywhere really chafed. Still, we didn’t have any more leads on Teach to chase down, so we didn’t have better options.

Going by the widening grin on Ace’s face, my lack of enthusiasm was showing on mine.

I schooled my expression into something more neutral, then tightened the strings on my thick winter coat and said, “I’m hoping I can at least find the right kind of paper there.”

“You never did tell me why you need that much, or why cartography paper wouldn’t work,” Ace remarked as he hopped off the fence. His boots crunched deeply into the snow, and if he hadn’t been a walking, talking, impending pyrotechnics display, I probably would have fussed at him for not wearing long pants in snow.

As it was, I ignored it. “Ace, I don’t tell you a lot of things,” I pointed out. Still, as we headed back toward the Drum Island harbor and to Striker, I thought that over again. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to relax my policy on secrets a bit. “Once I have the right paper and ink, I’ll be almost back to full strength. It’ll make the rest of this much easier.”

Sure, I could still turn everyday objects into grenades without ink or paper supplies, but some
problems needed a bit more finesse. I might have been of the opinion that a sufficiently large explosion covered most combat situations—typically by obliterating them—but an explosion couldn’t store drinkable water or food in a 2D space. Nor could I shut down opposing jinchūriki from a cold start, because most of my counterparts were annoyingly durable. I definitely needed proper sealing supplies for flexibility’s sake.

Now, if only places other than World Government hubs stocked any.

“I still don’t get how it’s so important to you,” Ace said, “but Alabasta’s a trading hub. And if nothing else, ten days should be enough to make the weapons.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged and dismissed the entire issue as a problem for at least a little longer. Until we got there and got sunburned, any plans were conjecture at best.

Soon enough, the two of us were tearing across the waves on Striker once again, with Isobu silently coasting underneath the waves in our wake.

Just before we left Drum Island behind, I thought I felt a flicker of chakra on the edge of my sensing range.

Isobu? Did you have any luck contacting your siblings earlier?

No, why?

...No reason.

I wasn’t sure if it was the faint feeling of another chakra signature somewhere out in the vast sea that put me in a somewhat better mood that day or what, but I woke up on the fourth morning on Sandy Island with the feeling that things were going to go my way.

It ended up being a bit of a mixed bag.

“No, this isn’t going to work,” I said with a deep sigh, letting go of the paper sample I’d been given. “Thank you for letting me look through these, but I’m afraid none of the samples have been suitable.”

The shopkeeper woman made a face like she’d swallowed a lemon, and I didn’t blame her. In my search for the perfect paper for my fūinjutsu, I had poked, prodded, and felt a sample of every single paper made of every kind of tree that she stocked. And not one of them was suitable. Either the gauge was wrong, or the texture, or it wouldn’t hold the type of ink-and-blood mixture I needed to use in the right way, and that put me back at square one.

Dammit, was it too much to ask for one thing to go right without having to commit some kind of crime?

“We do have one last option,” said the shopkeeper’s assistant, who was carrying a massive roll of what had felt like butcher paper back toward the storeroom like it was nothing. “Remember that one shipment from Wano, from years ago?”

“No one will ever buy that,” said the shopkeeper. “It’s too fragile to last on a ship.”

But perhaps it would survive in a storage seal. “Can I see it?”

Both the shopkeeper and her assistant looked askance at me, then the former waved her hand, “As
long as it gets you out of here.”

Several minutes later, the assistant returned carrying a small box with half a dozen postage marks on it. I recognized the old symbol of Wano from the books I’d read on the *Moby Dick*, and took the box reverently from the worker.

He cut the ropes binding it shut with a pocket knife, then popped the lid.

It took me a bit to recognize what was in front of me, but after that? I knew I’d found the fucking Holy Grail.

“Is this—it’s kozogami.” Of all the places to find the perfect paper, a desert country wasn’t one I’d expected at all. Especially not after Wano had been taken over by Kaido. And its isolationist policy before then meant that very few products ever left its shores, at least outside of pirate hands. “It’s the best for what I need, oh my goodness. How much?”

And as usual, the quoted price made me want to track Ace down and strangle him with his necklace for the food bills he kept racking up, but it was still affordable. Broadly. I’d just have to dig up another shipwreck and waste two *more* days selling off everything I could to a local pawn shop to get back up to par.

“Rip-off artists, I swear,” I muttered to myself, but paid the price-gouging pair what they asked. I needed the paper too much to blow the deal by haggling or screwing around.

Thankfully, I’d already found the high-quality ink elsewhere. It had taken ditching Ace for a few hours (via judicious use of genjutsu and a scarecrow) and sneaking into a Marine base to find anything near suitable. In the end, I stole the Vice Admiral’s inkwell—and all his spare ones, after leaving an anonymous apology note—but I got what I needed.

All I had to do was get back to Isobu without anything being destroyed, and I was set for at least a little while. As long as I made sure all of my non-explosive seals were literally handcrafted.

I thought about sealing the box into the storage seal that sat empty on the bottom of my foot, then belatedly remembered why I hadn’t done that with my original island survival gear—sheer inflexibility in reusable seals. It was only designed to accept that one particular kunai back, and that weapon could have been at the bottom of the sea for all I knew.

So I ended up lugging my precious cargo around town on my hip as I went in search of Ace. Stepping out into the bright sunshine, I thought to myself that it looked just like any other day. No trouble lay on the horizon.

In hindsight, I’d doomed myself about four times over within an hour. That statement was just the last straw.

“Okay, if I was a bottomless pit of a pirate, where would I go?” I wondered quietly, chin in my free hand and the other pinning the box of paper to my side. Then I replayed what I’d just said and sighed. “And I just answered my own question.”

**Who are you talking to?**

*Myself, for once.*

Sooner or later we’d be coming up on the end of Ace’s time limit for his brother. Just a little longer before the hunt for Teach was on again—or as he’d been calling himself lately, “Blackbeard.” Originally, I hadn’t been able to tell if he was trying to coast on the association with Whitebeard’s
moniker or not, but then he’d gone and proven his asshole credentials by running roughshod over any towns or islands too isolated to get help from anyone in power.

I was of the opinion that he’d fit the role better after Ace set his hair on fire, but that was just me and my otherworldly knowledge talking. With that cheery thought in mind, I turned one corner or another and continued to follow the smell of roasting meat and spices wafting around town. Sooner or later, the largest concentrations of food would attract Ace like a moth to a…well.

Shaking my head at my own lame almost-joke, I walked along the city streets without any real fear. Mainly because I’d bought desert-gray robes and didn’t look a whole lot like myself—and without using the Transformation jutsu this time. While I wasn’t making a habit of wasting chakra on now-useless stealth procedures, some things stuck. With my face-splitting scar, I stood out too much as myself to feel entirely comfortable that way, and the extra layers provided a way of getting around that.

I took pride in small victories.

I didn’t really know much about Nanohana as a city, but it reminded me a bit of Sunagakure with far more colorful buildings. Many of the local roofs were domed, gilded, brightly painted, or all of the above, as opposed to Suna’s love of architecture that practically melted into the sandstone surrounding their village. There also weren’t any uniformed people around other than the local guards, but desert chic dominated where Suna’s fashion varied wildly between that and the same kinds of clothes favored by Konoha—mainly T-shirts, pants, and sandals. At least most people here still wore sandals.

There were also a lot of mustaches, but I honestly wasn’t sure if that was a thing in this world or just this particular Summer Island. I’d seen more mustaches in four months than I had in the twenty-whatever years before that.

My nose eventually led me to a new…well, I wouldn’t call it a plaza because that would have implied there was formal city planning involved. No, there was just a large blank dirt patch in the city that could easily be used for a market or a parade but currently wasn’t, and my destination happened to be cozily stationed on one side of it.

The Spice Bean smelled encouragingly of curry, garlic, and other fragrant things that I knew would draw Ace in like nothing else. Still, I wasn’t sure if I had nearly enough money to pay for his inevitable bottomless pit impression, and so I hesitated.

I hesitated long enough for someone in a Navy coat to stalk past me like the restaurant had done something to offend him. Whether I had to be on the lookout for a follow-up death squad or not I wasn’t sure.

God damn they grew people big here. The guy had to be at least seven feet tall like Thatch was, prematurely gray, built like a brick shithouse, and also allergic to shirts. Though seriously, smoking two cigars at once with two bandoliers of more cigars? Rin would have materialized out of nothing and slapped him in the mouth if he was one of her patients.

“Excuse me?” I asked someone who happened to be passing by.

“Oh, hello. Can I help you?” she responded reflexively. If not for the katana on her hip that had a white-and-gold Marine finish instead of my sword’s deliberately generic one, and the fact that she had “MARINE” literally emblazoned across the back of her shirt, I would have written her off as a tourist. There was something about her that was kinda spacey.
“Who was that?” I asked, pointing at the retreating back of the…the guy. The only other person who really stuck out like a sore thumb around here, besides this woman.

She adjusted her glasses, squinting, then said, “That would be Captain Smoker. I wonder where he’s going? Is he hungry?”

I did not have an honest answer for that question without involving Ace. Because there was no way a Marine looking like he was plotting murder would be heading for just any random restaurant in Alabasta. No way in hell was I that lucky—or anyone else that unlucky.

I was going to be well out of immediate range when the delicate balance of a peaceful afternoon ended in explosions.

“Maybe I’ll have to get lunch there sometime,” I said neutrally, deliberately missing the point. Assuming it’s still standing. “Well, thanks anyway.”

“No problem! I’m Officer Tashigi, by the way,” she said cheerfully. “If you see anyone suspicious, be sure to report them to the Marines right away!”

I smiled in a somewhat fixed way, already turning away. “Of course.” I’ll do it right after I send Teach a fruit basket.

**Your new explosive notes would be a better gift. While activated. Or perhaps my teeth…**

I walked away before Tashigi could notice me standing around arguing with thin air about excessive use of force. Not that I was sure she’d be paying attention to me at all. Especially after I slipped into an alleyway, checked for witnesses, and transformed into a rough mix between Anko and Rin’s appearances. Doing so cut a hand’s span of height off me and removed both my scar and visible pupils, but I considered it a basic precaution at this point.

Then I went to go poke my head into the Spice Bean and keep up with whatever chaos was going to happen next.

Looking in through the front window, I got a great view of a whole lot of stunned patrons staring as Smoker stood dead in the middle of the room, smoking (hah!) like a chimney even though he was indoors. Ace sat with his back to yet another massive pile of accumulated plates, one leg crossed casually over the other like he wasn’t obviously going to get in a fight in a few seconds.

And I didn’t have enough money to pay for that. Not now.

While the crowd behind me gathered—since we were all trying to get a look at the impending fight like a bunch of high school students—Smoker and Ace kept talking. While I wasn’t sure quite what they were saying through glass, I heard snippets that went basically “Justice” and “pirate” and “take you in,” which gave me enough of the gist to guess the rest. And the widening smirk on Ace’s face promised exactly one thing.

I stepped away from the glass just as Smoker’s entire left arm evaporated away into a thick cloud of grayish smoke. Not because I was afraid of them, but flying glass in my eyes didn’t appeal. At the back of the group, I was much less likely to be collateral damage.

“Gum-Gum…”

…Eh? Why did that sound kind of—

“ROCKET!”
And then *that* was the least of my worries as a red-and-blue blur shot right through the open restaurant door. I darted to the door a moment later, blinking at the sudden rubble dust, and then found myself struck dumb by the sight.

Ace and Smoker were both gone, with a hole smashed through the back of the Spice Bean—and several walls behind it—to show for their absence. In their approximate place, one seat to the left of where Ace had been (since there was a new gap in the counter) was a kid in a red vest, cut-off shorts, and a big straw hat with a red band. And he was eating away like he hadn’t just punted two grown men through several buildings.

What did they *feed* people around here?

…Why was I asking that question when the answer was literally right in front of me?

As I watched with a kind of morbid fascination, the kid continued eating even as Ace finally recovered from being knocked through entirely too many walls. I heard him grumbling to himself as he finally made it back through the first hole, saying things like, “What kind of idiot would do something this crazy?”

Then he spotted the kid. He opened his mouth, smiling entirely genuinely, saying, “Lu—Hey, Lu —”

And then Ace was face-planting into rubble for a *second* time, because Smoker was really about as patient as the last guy I’d met who didn’t have eyebrows. Zabuza being the way he was, I kinda expected the kid to be choking to death on smoke in a few more seconds.

“Straw Hat!” Smoker snarled.

Yes. Yes, the kid did have a straw hat. So did *tons of other people*. What was Smoker doing moonlighting as the fashion police?

Even so, the kid was still stuffing his face like a chipmunk, oblivious to the danger. Maybe it was time for me to get out of the doorway…

With that thought in mind, I scooted out of the way and decided instead to skitter around to the other side of the building. It was, overall, probably safer being behind Smoker than in front of him. I still needed to grab Ace and shake him awake to make any kind of clean getaway that counted. No man left behind and all that.

I reached Ace just as Smoker took off in pursuit of the straw hat kid, yelling “Halt!”

Coincidentally, that was when Ace recovered, shot to his feet, and took off while yelling, “Wait, Luffy, it’s me!” He was already out the door and running. “Hey, wait up! Luffy!”

I sat back on my heels there for a second, face in my hands and rubble under my feet, and said to myself, “I am an idiot.”

**I thought his brother’s name was supposed to be “Lucy.”**

*Exactly.* In my defense, I’d been named after my dad’s uncle and had a boy’s name. Everyone around here seemed to use a mélange of different cultures, so why couldn’t a boy have a girl’s name?

Straw Hat Luffy. Luffy—*Monkey D. Luffy.*
As though on cue, I heard a distinctly unmusical voice shouting through my head.

*YO! ya-yo, ya-yo*

*Dreamin’, don’t give it up Luffy*

*Dreamin’, don’t give it up Zolo*

*Dreamin’, don’t give it up Nami*

*Dreamin’, don’t give it give it up give it up give it up NO!*

Hell and damnation. I wasn’t just in any random pirate universe where the local physics were a fucking mess. Oh no. That would have been far too kind for my brand of luck.

I was in *One Piece*.

“Fuck my life,” I groaned under my breath.

With that cheerful thought in mind, I ran the hell away while the restaurant owner and patrons were still gaping at all the damage. I would pay for most of Ace’s random bullshit, but at this point I had to throw my hands up in despair and just accept that “innocence by Act of Luffy” was now a phrase I might actually have to use.

I didn’t stop until I had a high vantage point, which was on a fourth-story rooftop overlooking the bay. I sat on my box and stayed out of the way, but could still tell where the tides of the action were moving.

As Luffy ran around town like a…like a man on the run, really, he gathered an impressive list of pursuers. In addition to Smoker and Ace—following in that order—Tashigi and the rest of the marines joined in. While I haunted a couple of nearby rooftops just to keep an eye on things, I didn’t want to get involved no matter whose face I wore at the moment. Especially after I saw Ace and Smoker’s respective powers mixing together to create an explosion hundreds of feet in the air.

*Besides,* I thought as I watched everyone still on the ground run around like they were in a *Scooby Doo* cartoon, *Ace has this handled.*

*...Are we talking about the same human? Because I somewhat doubt that.*

*It’d be rude of me to interrupt the brothers’ reunion,* I told Isobu, as though he hadn’t said anything. I patted the box of rare paper I had picked up like it was my newest pet. *I have other things to worry about.*

*I hope you have a more effective plan with which to save that box, because I cannot surface.*

*Eh? Why not?*

*There are hundreds of ships in the nearest harbor. And outside of it, a small fleet is moving into position to attack stragglers. While I could destroy them, your policy on stealth...*

I sighed. Not for the first time, my desire not to get involved in unnecessary fights or expose Isobu was getting in the way of the fastest solution. *I get your point. Plan B, then. I’ll meet up with Ace and his brother and we’ll get out of populated zones so I can actually drop this off.*
Isobu didn’t directly respond, but I felt his chakra move off and out of the mouth of Nanohana’s bay. We’d meet up later and hopefully he wouldn’t have eaten anyone by then.

As he did so, I froze in place as I detected a second flicker of chakra that wasn’t mine. It was maybe ten or fifteen kilometers away, in the desert proper, and probably in view of the city. I automatically oriented myself in its direction, noting its speed and course—toward Nanohana—before biting my lip in thought.

I had a hunch about that chakra signature—the sound of wind howling through stone—and carefully directed my own outward. Searching…

There, farther into the desert than I would have willingly walked, was Shukaku. I couldn’t see him, but I could feel his strength even this far away, and knew that the other chakra signature had to be Gaara. I didn’t know what he was doing here, but I wished fiercely that he was perceptive enough for me to send some kind of message without needing to dive into meditation.

I’d found one.

*There we are.* Isobu sighed in relief. Joy trickled into his mental voice as he said, *I can hear him now.*

**Good.**

Then I bit down on my excitement, recognizing that even if Gaara was there, I needed to check in. The mission’s parameters hadn’t changed *that* much.

**Body Flicker.** And I was gone, darting invisibly through the city rooftops on speed alone.

Several minutes later, I found them.

“But Ace, what are you doing in this country?” Luffy’s voice drifted up from an alleyway, so I slowed to a silent stop and looked down over the edge of the rooftop. Going by the footprint scorched into the slats, Ace had done the same not long ago.

Ace sounded rather confused as he said, “Huh? You mean you didn’t get the message I left in Drum?”

No, Ace. Of course he didn’t. That would have been too easy.

“Drum?” Bingo.

“Yeah. It’s no big deal or anything, though. I’m just in these waters on some minor business, so I thought I might look you up.” That had definitely not been the sales pitch Ace had given me. Guess he didn’t want his brother involved. I could certainly empathize.

While Ace downed half of his canteen in one go, Luffy repeated, “Minor business?”

*Get this kid a piece of eight and call him Polly already,* I grumbled silently.

While the brothers continued to talk—and Luffy instantly shut down Ace’s recruitment offer—I leaned on the edge of the roof and glanced around. While neither of the boys below seemed to notice, there were people peeking out of hidey-holes all over the place. As they walked off, a number of the onlookers crept out of their hiding places and over the rooftops, following them.

I Body Flickered to the nearest one and concussed him with my box of paper, leaving his body to
droop down onto the roof in utter silence.

The one after that I choked unconscious using his own bow as a garrote. Then the next crook I clubbed into submission, whacking him with the butt of his rifle. And so on and so forth. My personal favorite method was the archer, because after that it got monotonous pretty quick. Even if Ace was probably the next best thing to bulletproof, I could take some basic precautions with regard to his brother’s safety.

Perhaps because I still wasn’t taking things seriously enough, there were still some left by the time the gang finally decided to confront the two pirates.

“Fire Fist Ace! Your head is mine!” said the biggest, most Teach-like of the thugs. Sure, he was about half as large as the guy Isobu wanted to rip limb from limb, but he was still the biggest member of the gang. “Prepare yourself!”

The rest of them were armed with single-shot flintlock pistols, flintlock rifles, and the occasional sword.

Overall, a gang of thirty random thugs versus Ace and his brother? Not even a contest.

I canceled my Transformation technique and slipped out of the alleyway where I’d been surreptitiously choking out another member of the group. Once I was sure Ace could see me past the ringleader, I leaned casually against the nearest wall and waved.

Ace gave a miniscule nod to show that he’d seen me.

The ringleader went on for a bit longer after one of his men recognized Luffy, but ultimately both brothers just strode past him as though he wasn’t there.

“We’re gonna go find Luffy’s ship,” Ace said to me, not once looking back. “Right, Luffy?”

“Yeah!” Luffy agreed brightly. Then he blinked. “Oh, Ace, is this one of your crewmates?”

I was about to answer, but at that point the gang leader shouted, “Get them!”

Cue fight scene!

I’d put my box down ahead of time in the alleyway, because of course everything ended in a fight, and did my best Kakashi impression once the gang realized I was there. Dodging without really noticing was a breeze, and whacking people in the face with their own weapons was probably one of the easier self-imposed challenges I’d ever set for myself. Gai would have been ashamed of me.

Ace and Luffy? Even if either of them had managed to get in a jam, the other would have leapt into the other’s part of the fight and staged a valiant rescue. Or else caught fire. It was really a toss-up. Either way, the gangsters didn’t stand a chance.

And then.

And fucking then.

One of the gang members picked up my box, innocently out of the way until then, and threw it at Ace. Of course Ace turned his head into flames as always, and of course my box caught fire.

I might’ve punched a gangster in the face hard enough to invert it.

“Excuse me,” I said in a voice full of forced calm. I stripped off my outer layer of robes, then
methodically beat the flames out before the fire ate through it.

“Luffy, you might wanna get going,” I heard Ace tell his brother. “This is going to be messy.”

“Hey, don’t just ignore—”

I didn’t even look to see who I was attacking before I’d already kicked him fifteen meters back up the street. With my leg still extended, I addressed Ace without looking at him, “Go on ahead, Ace. I have business here.”

Ace gave my statement his due consideration. Then he tilted the brim of his hat downward, hiding his eyes, and grinned. “Sorry, that’s a no-can-do.”

Well, then. I lowered my leg and shifted to the Strong Fist stance. With Luffy and Ace preventing the other gang members from escaping even if they could move (via beating on them, mainly), while I was broadcasting the will to turn other people into corpses like a morbid radio station, it was not even a contest.

And my box got away with some char-marks on the outside, but it didn’t burn.

In the end, Luffy chose to rocket off to his ship directly via his ridiculous stretching powers. Ace and I went to find Striker before the gang—the Baroque Works Billions, apparently—could recover from the beating. Since the Straw Hats’ ship was the only one with a flag and a sail with the iconic hat on it, it didn’t take long to careen across the water and continue Ace’s family reunion.

“So, did you find what you needed?” Ace asked as we cut through the waves. “That’s what the box is, right?”

“Yep!” After having made sure that my paper was safe and given the Billions a beatdown, I was in a much better mood. “Once I can get a few free hours and a steady surface, I should be able to make all the seals I want.”

And you found one of my brothers.

I suppressed a sheepish grin. I’m not sure how to break that to Ace, yet…

But Gaara’s chakra was still heading our way, if somewhat stealthily. Shukaku’s shied away from the ocean for obvious reasons, but was still keeping pace. We’d meet them properly soon, and then blow the lid off this secret.

“The steadiest thing you’re going to find around here is either my brother’s ship or your turtle’s stomach,” Ace commented, before cutting the fire input to Striker’s engine. We were going to coast the rest of the way to the…whatever the Straw Hats’ ship was called. Hopefully it had something to do with sheep, given the figurehead. “And I still don’t get how paper equals power for you. Are you sure you haven’t eaten a Devil Fruit?”

“You saw me swimming yesterday,” I reminded him in a dry voice. “Also, it’d be a good idea not to tell the Straw Hats about Isobu. He’s following us, but it’d be great if he could keep hiding from pretty much the entire World Government.”

“Worried?” Ace asked as we were drawing about even with Luffy’s ship.

“Not about Isobu,” I muttered. But I was trying not to kill people, and from what I’d seen of the
Marines and everything else to do with the World Government, they wouldn’t give Isobu any choice. “But it’s more attention than I want right now.”

Because Mr. Shirtless Scene had the Whitebeard Pirates’ symbol across his back and was about as subtle as a sledgehammer, he said, “And you’re still traveling with me.”

“I’m babysitting you,” I corrected primly. Then I put on my best ‘mom voice’ to be annoying. “By the way, did you check in with Captain Whitebeard while we were in Nanohana? I know you have his snail number.”

The fact that you can say “snail number” with a straight face worries me.

I talk to you and the other Tailed Beasts through a mindscape we call the mind-skype. We have no room whatsoever to talk.

Ace just laughed it off, then grabbed his vessel’s line and leapt up onto the other ship.

“Punk,” I griped to myself.

I checked the knots on Striker’s lead and then followed Ace onto the railing, landing in a handstand before flipping nearly in place until I was sitting neatly on the painted wood as casually as if I had always been there. I even had my desert robes in perfect shape, if I pretended the burns didn’t exist.

“And this is Kei,” Ace said without missing a beat.

I waved. “Hello, everyone.”

We didn’t quite get to the introductions part before the swordsman—Zolo or Zoro?—of Luffy’s crew noticed what I’d been able to see past him for entirely too long. The blue-haired woman in the belly-dancer outfit noticed second, and then it was on.

“Those are Baroque Works Billions ships!” cried the bluenette. I felt like I ought to ask, but it would be rude to interrupt.

The Billions might or might not have been yelling at us, but Isobu certainly said, Do you want me to take care of them? I thought the latter was more important.

“Those guys again?” Luffy wondered aloud, peering out across the waves. Maybe some of the guys we’d beaten up had lasted long enough to call reinforcements?

The ships were already out there. Again, I can handle this problem with a minimum of fuss.

“Luffy, let me deal with them,” Ace said, still perched on the railing next to me like a half-naked gargoyle. For the next half-second—he dropped his bag on the deck and immediately jumped ship toward Striker with a yell that might’ve been a war cry.

“What’s he going to do?” Nami wondered aloud, as the Straw Hats rushed over to watch Ace take off.

“Probably set them all on—” Ace was already unhooked from the big sheep-faced ship and shooting off toward the Billions’ ships by the time I shrieked, “My box—ACE, GET BACK HERE!”

But no. Striker was so damned loud there was no way he would be able to hear me. Not after
holding conversations with Isobu.

“I’m going to choke him to death with his hat,” I said flatly.

With mounting sensations of mingled rage and horror, I watched with the Straw Hats as Ace did all the things. It probably looked like pure badass in action to the rookie crew, but all I could think of was my poor paper. Sparing a thought for the undisputed king of drowning didn’t really factor in.

Massive leap over the masts of all of the ships that knocked Striker below the waves from the recoil alone? Check.

Rocketing through the air like a fiery mermaid or something just to get on the opposite side of all the attacking ships and thus give us a better view of the impending carnage? Also check.

Fire-punching five ships to death in a row and leaving only loose timber and ashes behind? Of course.

He was holding a fucking pose when the Straw Hats’ ship went over to pick Striker up. Like he hadn’t just put the box of paper strapped to the raft’s mast in mortal danger and wasted four months of my life.

The Straw Hats were in awe by the time Ace hopped back onto the ship. I was…not. I was darting past him the second he was safely on the ship and wouldn’t risk plummeting into the sea.

I landed down on Striker’s nose and immediately retrieved my box.

My poor box was sodden, soaked in seawater, and perhaps a bit scorched all over again thanks to Ace’s powers. Rather than punting Ace off the ship like a small, angry part of me insisted, I clambered back up onto the ship and set my box on the railing. And mourned.

“Ah…oops,” I heard Ace mutter. “Sorry about that.”

I was caught up enough in that, to the general bafflement of the pirates around me (and sheepish laughter from Ace), to not notice the sand-surfing twelve-year-old until he landed practically on top of my head.

Fortunately, the kid knew manners better than that. To the background sound of sand scraping along wood, he sidled over and peered at me. “You’re…Keisuke?”

The penny dropped. I kept one hand on my box, but I knelt down and turned all off my attention to the raccoon-eyed kid in front of me. “Gaara!”

“Keisuke!” said Gaara, in about the most excited tone his raspy voice could manage without cracking. While I didn’t get a hug for being the first jinchūriki pen pal Gaara had picked up, he smiled at me. I couldn’t imagine how homesick or lonely Gaara must have felt to smile at me without reservations.

It was like winning the Big Sister Olympics.

“Gaara’s back!” shouted Luffy, looping two rubbery arms around the second redhead on his team and hugging him without having to actually get close.

Since Gaara didn’t immediately drop Luffy into a Sand Binding Coffin—not that I was sure how crushing force would interact with a kid made of rubber—I figured they had to be friends. Alternatively, this would be about karmic for Gaara given his propensity for violently crushing
Either way, it made me let go of my urge to kill my travel buddy, so things worked out.

And then it was question and answer time.

“How do you know Gaara?”

“Who is the man with the hat?”

“Your full name is Keisuke?”

But all at once was probably a bad place to start. In order to sort everything out, we needed time to do it. Therefore, Luffy’s cook—the swirly-brow blond guy named Sanji—rolled up his sleeves and got to work creating enough food to feed an army. Or two black holes like Ace and Luffy, really. While he did that, the rest of us rolled out the utensils and things and generally tried to avoid being in the way.

Well, except for the miniature reindeer Chopper, Usopp (the only other human on the ship who was Luffy’s age), and Luffy. Apparently they were jinxes in the kitchen.

“Is Gaara one of the people you were looking for?” Ace asked, sitting on a barrel with a mug of some alcohol or other in his hand.

“Yep,” I said, though admittedly I was only half paying attention.

After getting the box of paper back from Ace and plunking it down on a stray mass of Gaara’s sand, the redhead and I were slowly drying the contents of the box so I might be able to still use it. Kozogami was relatively water-resistant, but only for paper. Ace’s stay of execution lasted until I got a death certificate on my purchases. If the paper died, so did he.

Not that I told him that. After traveling together for three weeks, he could just tell.

“Keisuke first visited my village when I was…I want to say two years old. We’ve talked some since then, but not recently,” Gaara said, glancing at me for confirmation as his sand continued to work its way through the paper. “She introduced me to Shukaku, my partner.”

And the reason Gaara and I hadn’t been talking recently basically came down to “Chūnin Exams” and my residual twitchiness regarding his jōnin-sensei. I felt like a complete heel for that, now, but there wasn’t anything to do for it now.

“I didn’t really do much,” I said modestly. “Isobu did all the work.” And scared the shit out of every human nearby in the process, but Isobu and Shukaku were well past caring about humans for the most part.

Ace’s eyebrows climbed until they vanished under the brim of his hat. “So Shukaku is…?”

“Isobu’s brother, yes. They don’t look…anything alike, really.” How far down the evolutionary tree did you need to wander before “tanuki” and “everything in the ocean with a shell” shared a common ancestor, anyway? As I wobbled a hand in midair, I added, “It kinda-sorta makes Gaara and me family, in a way.”

Assuming that Gaara didn’t mind gaining a weird aunt.

“More or less.” It seemed that he did not.
“Gaara, how did you meet these pirates?” I asked, “subtly” indicating that neither of us were quite in that category. Or so I thought.

“Gaara’s our sentry!” Luffy said brightly, before Gaara could answer. “Did you know he never, ever falls asleep on watch? And that he can control sand like that Crocodile bastard? It’s so cool!”

“We met him in Loguetown,” Nami put in. “He helped us get away from Smoker.”

“*That* Smoker?” Ace asked, jabbing a finger back over his shoulder and toward the port we’d just ditched.

“He’s persistent,” said Gaara. He picked up one of the loose sheets of sealing paper, resting it on top of his hand and a fine layer of sand. “Keisuke, I think this may be dry enough to use.”

“Can I see it?” I asked, and he obligingly sent it drifting over to me. I rubbed my fingers together with the paper sample caught between them, then nodded to myself. “Then Ace gets to live.”

“Oh come *on*,” Ace complained. “Were you really going to kill me over that?”

“No, but I can’t exactly go to Wano and buy it directly,” I replied, annoyed.

“…You actually can.” Ace frowned, clearly having no idea exactly how ignorant I was. “I went to Wano like a year ago and learned how to make hats. Oars Jr. was happy to get one that actually fit him.”

This fucking *planet*, I swear. To the sound of Luffy’s cackling laughter, I growled, “And how was I supposed to know that, exactly?”

“Ask?” Which would be hells of hypocritical given *my* policy on pretty much everything about myself. So, no. When I didn’t respond, Ace changed the subject. “So, your actual name is ‘Keisuke’?”

That topic was not any better.

Luckily, the rest of the topic died when Sanji finally arrived with food. Reminded that I hadn’t eaten since breakfast because of all the chaos recently, I joined in the food-swiping fray. Luffy was the main culprit, which unfortunately made total sense given what else I knew about him, but I didn’t expect to see how the others had adapted. While Nami and Vivi (the bluenette) avoided Luffy’s food-stealing rubbery hands, Gaara’s sand secured his claim at the “table,” on pain of broken fingers for anyone who tried to steal his sautéed chicken gizzards.

Actually, Gaara’s secondary role might as well have been “food guard.” His sand effectively gave him as much extra reach as he needed to stop Luffy dead.

Yet somehow, Luffy still had enough food to himself to make almost pitch-perfect “om-nom-nom” noises. While Ace engulfed food just as quickly—if less messily—that particular bonus was new.

“At least no one’s called me a tanuki since Gaara joined,” Chopper muttered, grabbing a bowl of what was probably pudding, but looked so much better than the Whitebeards’ non-Thatch attempts that I hesitated to put them in the same category. “But only if they see him first.”

“A tanuki,” I repeated, staring at Chopper. He had *antlers*. And a pink hat. And clothes. “Really?”

“I thought that’s what he was at first,” said basically everyone else. Including Ace, but not including Gaara, who knew better.
Gaara closed his eyes as though trying to forget the last ten seconds had happened.

“Say, Gaara, do you have one of these?” I asked, holding out my right wrist. When I pulled back the end of my sleeve, I turned my arm until he could easily see the kanji for “three” written in plain not-ink, and the surrounding black band.

Gaara frowned, having already automatically mirrored my gesture with his right hand. His wrist was blank.

“Not on top of your sand,” I corrected, because I knew when the kid was using chakra to hide something that made him uncomfortable.

Gaara’s skin seemed to crack, making a sound nearly identical to fracturing porcelain, before the sand finally returned to its normal light brown color and flaked away. Underneath it, a nearly identical black band circled Gaara’s wrist—the main difference was that the kanji for “one” was located almost directly in line with his thumb. Based on the sizes of the symbols, there was enough space for a full nine kanji to run around both of our wrists.

_Dammit._

“Do you know what this is?” Gaara asked, while the rest of the Straw Hats pretended (badly) to be focusing on food. Except for Luffy, anyway.

“I have a guess. Did Shukaku…wait, no, you don’t sleep and Isobu didn’t notice when I got mine…” I trailed off, then slowly pinched the bridge of my nose. “Can I see your hand? Maybe yours is different from…”

Gaara allowed me to take his hand in both of mine, but the second that our right hands touched, blinding purplish light erupted from both symbols. Behind everyone’s shouts of surprise, I heard both Isobu and Shukaku’s mingled roars, but I couldn’t tell if they were just in my head or real.

YOU HAVE FOUND THE FIRST.

ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

And when the hell-glow on my arm and not-voice in my head finally abated, Gaara’s band and mine matched. I had a “one” on my wrist and he had a “three” on his.

What happened? What changed? Isobu demanded, at the same time that Gaara put his other hand to the side of his head and seemed to be listening to Shukaku.

And I could feel Isobu’s chakra inside my body again, without the sensation of impending pain. While Gaara’s sand armor twisted off his body and started to form a rather familiar tanuki-like tail before dissipating, I summoned the first scrap of Isobu’s chakra I’d been able to channel in months and grinned as my eyes itched in that familiar way.

_I…think I know what’s gonna happen every time we meet up with a jinchūriki, now._ And it was an eyesore. If this didn’t kill my stealth rating, I would be amazed.

Oh, now _that_ is interesting. This next stretch of our quest should far easier—for you.

_Shut up._

“Any idea what _that_ was?” Ace asked, but was immediately pushed to the side by his brother before he could get an answer or I could come up with one. “Wait, your eyes…”
I cut myself off, letting the power fade. Across from me, so did Gaara.

Where could we even begin with explaining what we were?

“Hey, what is it?” Luffy demanded, sticking his head into our conversation on a very extendable neck. He turned his face toward Gaara, and said, “Remember? I said one crewmate’s burden is all of ours. So spill it already!”

Gaara frowned deeper, considering the words that Luffy must have told him in the past. I didn’t know exactly how Gaara had come to join the Straw Hats, but unlike the Whitebeards and me, it seemed that he actually had. As opposed to using them as a ferry service while befriending the various members and then…whatever the hell I’d done.

I glanced at Ace, rather than trusting my own judgement as far as that went.

“Once we’re out of sight of Nanohana, it might be a good idea,” was what he said.

“Eh? You know what’s going on?” Usopp asked, gaping. “But no one ever gets anything out of Gaara!”

“Luffy did,” said Zoro.

“Luffy doesn’t know how to take ‘no’ for an answer,” griped Sanji, puffing away on the cigarette Ace had lit for him.

If Luffy was nearly as charismatic and frightfully stubborn as Naruto, I didn’t doubt it. I just didn’t know if he could keep a secret worth a shit.

Ace knew him better than I did. “It’ll be fine.”

“I trust him, Keisuke,” Gaara added, meeting my eyes squarely. “I trust all of them.”

What kinds of adventures must this kid have gone on with the Straw Hats to see those walls come down?

I was clearly outvoted. To the crew at large, I said, “Fine, then. As soon as we get where we’re going—”

“Erumalu,” said Vivi helpfully.

“—thank you, then we can discuss this properly,” I concluded.

And I hoped to high hell that it would work out.
After lunch was over, the crew dispersed. I saw Nami and Vivi head into the cabins belowdecks, while Chopper lounged on the stairs and tried not to fry, given that he was a reindeer near a Summer Island. Luffy and Usopp had joined Sanji and Ace in the kitchen, while Gaara and I were still out on the deck and enjoying the sea breeze. Zoro, meanwhile, took up his training regimen—which apparently involved swinging a dumbbell the size of a small horse and likely four times as heavy.

I’d been slacking since arriving in this ocean. Gai would have been so disappointed.

“What is it?” Gaara asked, following my zoned-out stare to the Straw Hats’ resident swordsman. “Are you bored?”

I sighed. “Maybe a little. I was just thinking that I haven’t been keeping up with my training since meeting the Whitebeards.”

Zoro stopped mid-swing. As he carefully set the giant piece of exercise equipment down to rest against the deck, he said, “I noticed you had a sword. Do you know how to use it?”

A bit miffed, I replied, “Well, yes.” What kind of idiot carried around a weapon they couldn’t use? That kind of behavior amounted only to adding dead weight, unless they were helping a friend move or something.

“Then spar with me,” said Zoro, who appeared to have something of a one-track mind.

I looked at Gaara for permission first.

“What?” Gaara asked. He blinked as a thought occurred to him, then said, “Zoro is the one who wants to spar with you. He says his dream is to be the World’s Greatest Swordsman.”

Didn’t need the bio, kid, but that’ll do. I supposed it was probably allowed, as long as I mostly kept my chakra to myself. To Zoro, I said, “Is the deck big enough?”

Gaara looked down, then made the Snake hand sign. Sand cascaded out of the gourd on his back and coated the deck, leaving a protective layer between both of us and anything we could hurt. He’d even surrounded the mast and fenced Chopper off from the barely-large-enough deck.

Apparently, Gaara wanted to see us practice. “...Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

Even if we barely had enough space for a kendo match, it’d have to do.

Setting my katana down on the sand for a moment, I tested my desert over-robe for air resistance,
winced, and then pulled the entire thing over my head. Dropping the cloth into Gaara’s waiting sand, I grabbed the katana again and stuck it into my belt loop.

Across from me, Zoro had a katana in each hand and…a third one held in his teeth. Well, if local physics allowed it, and he didn’t have cavities, I supposed it made about as much sense as Killer B’s seven-sword style. Actually, it probably made more sense. At least he used his hands.

“Let’s see how a Whitebeard Pirate does things without a Devil Fruit,” Zoro said...perfectly audibly. Despite the sword in his teeth.

I placed my right hand on the hilt of my sword. “I’m not a Whitebeard, Zoro.”

Though hell only knew if they’d ever acknowledge that little detail. I’d gotten more questions about my eating habits and health from the Whitebeards on snail calls than I had from anyone who wasn’t dead back home. They were like a massive network of snooping relatives. Ace’s refusal to talk to them about his (definitely self-appointed) mission just made them more determined to pull details out of me instead, especially Thatch and Marco.

“You’re not?” asked Chopper, sitting up behind a wall of sand. Gaara seemed to be using his sand like a child gate to keep other people out of the sparring arena, as tiny as it was. I could barely see Chopper’s face over the lip. “But you’re traveling with Ace, right?”

“Ace is hunting a guy who—besides trying to kill a crewmate—punched me off the *Moby Dick,*” I said, flexing my fingers and popping each knuckle in turn. “And I’m helping him with that.”

“You just don’t wanna admit you’re friends with us,” Ace piped up out of apparently nowhere. Wait, no, there he was right behind Chopper, who just looked up with an expression of open curiosity on his face.

“Are we going to spar or not?” Zoro wanted to know, so I finally turned my attention back to him after rolling my eyes at Ace.

“Sure thing,” I replied, sliding into a ready stance even on the sand. It probably wasn’t unfair to use chakra to keep my footing under control, so I tried it out experimentally. Noticing no anomalies, I settled into the low starting stance for *Uesugi-Gekkō iaijutsu.*

Head forward, right arm raised, katana angled on my left hip for a nasty upward swing. Deep breath to center myself.

“I won’t hold back,” Zoro said, still somehow perfectly understandable. He needed to give elocution lessons, but merely raised both arms so his swords draped nearly across the blade of the one in his mouth.

I had every intention of holding back as much as I could. Or just losing. Either way.

“*Oni Giri!*” Three simultaneous sword slashes, lining up…


I probably should have been more careful with my cheap-as-shit sword, but the idea of blocking three swords at once appealed to my sense of style. Insofar as I had one.

All four blades met with a resounding CLANG of metal, with my blade holding off Zoro’s three. My sword, which I suddenly recalled was far less well-crafted than even what I was used to, rattled ominously against the pins in its tang. The noise might not have been audible to anyone else, but I
could feel the unsettling movement right down to my bones.

“Whoa, she stopped Zoro?” Chopper gaped openly, though I had to imagine that there were some people who could do that, right?

Both of us leapt back, though I gave my katana a few experimental swings. It rattled again, and I winced. “Sorry, Zoro. I think this thing won’t handle another clash.”

“I thought Vista had a better eye for swords than that,” Ace commented, clearly already thinking of a way to needle his fellow commander.

“Wado Ichimoji, Yubashiri, and Kitetsu III are all legendary swords,” Zoro said, as he started sheathing them. “Yours isn’t. It’s that simple.”

“Fair enough.” Though I did sort of wonder if my mother’s katana or my normal one would hold up in that kind of clash. Or… “Zoro, let’s try one more attack. I want to see if I can’t get anything out of it.”

This time, when I sheathed my sword in preparation for my next run at the Hunting Tiger Strike technique, I gathered chakra like I was supposed to.

“I get the weirdest feeling you were holding out on me, Kei,” Ace said, still on the opposite side of the sandy child-gate.

I smiled.

“...You’re terrible,” Ace informed me. He glanced down into the depths of the ship, then shouted, “Hey, Kei’s sparring with Zoro! Anyone gonna watch?”

“I already am,” said Chopper, to spur them onward.

I sighed to myself and then focused on Zoro again. Audiences bothered me to some degree, still, but if the pirates wanted a show I wouldn’t walk off in protest or anything. Last time I’d saved myself the trouble of dealing with any of the jeering or shouts by just making the fight fiendishly difficult to see, but here it’d be cheating.

Well, probably cheating. Zoro and I hadn’t actually agreed on any rules, and he did have three swords.

Still, the Straw Hats sort of ended up gathering on the deck. Gaara continued to protect the Merry from any possible damage, while also providing bleacher-like seating for the Straw Hats who wanted to view what would ultimately probably only be one more strike.

Sanji was the last one to make the trip.

And then two things happened very quickly.

One, Zoro blocked a kick aimed straight at his head with the flat of all three blades. The kick, of course, being launched by the ship’s blond cook, who was already shouting about a “idiot mosshead” who could only be Zoro. “That’s no way to treat a woman!”

Two, Sanji swooned over to me and said, “Don’t worry about a thing, Kei! I’ll be your white prince —”

Later, I would swear that the Replacement I used was just reflex and that I hadn’t meant to hurt
Sanji’s feelings. Or to reveal one of my favorite basic techniques. But in that exact moment, I just reacted and only afterward realized that I’d just opted out of that particular interaction faster than any ordinary person would have.

Rather than taking my hand, Sanji was left holding my discarded desert robe as it and I switched places. From a somewhat safer distance and behind Gaara’s sand, I asked everyone, “Did you think I was a guy before?”

There was a collective “Uh…” from the Straw Hats who actually cared about that.

“Ah! You’re a girl!” said Luffy, pointing accusingly at my much smaller-than-average bust. Shopping for bras in this friggin’ ocean was difficult for more reasons than just an inability to find stores on the high seas—apparently I was the local equivalent of flat as a board. Even worse than at home. Which, y’know, fine, but I couldn’t help but curse my dad’s prophetic naming scheme all the same.

Ace, of course, was cackling. No help at all.

I just sighed. While Gaara dissolved the sand arena into just plain sand again, sweeping it up into his gourd, I walked over and poked Ace in the shoulder. “You have no room to talk.”

Ace stopped laughing as his memory caught up with the situation. “Oh, right.”

Zoro finally huffed and said, “We’ll continue this later, without this shitty cook interfering.”

“The hell you will!” Sanji snarled at him, just so happening to fling my desert gear in my direction. And then Zoro and Sanji were brawling in the middle of the deck, giving me enough time to grab my stuff and flee.

“Is, uh, is this normal?” I asked Nami and Vivi, since I figured they’d know best.

“Yeah, it is. Sanji’s hopeless around women,” Nami said, bringing a hand to her forehead. “He can’t fight women either, even if they’re trying to kill him.”

I scratched my head, automatically thinking of all the kunoichi I’d fought in my life who could make someone like Sanji pay for holding back. Certainly pirates would have no qualms taking advantage of that weakness, right? “That…sounds like a problem.”

“It is,” Nami grumbled. Then she perked up as a thought occurred to her. “You know, you’re the first woman I’ve met who ran away instead of just, say, punching him like I do.”

“Or taking advantage of it and making him carry all the baggage,” Vivi piped up, smiling.

“Nearly everyone I’ve ever met thinks I’m just a pretty guy at first,” I explained, still a little surprised that I needed to elaborate at all. I pointed at my face and added, “I think the scar’s part of it.”

“Could be,” Nami allowed. It was a rather large scar, so I assumed it acted as a distraction.

“Yeah, well, people tend to think I’m more intimidating than ‘cute’ for the most part,” I said, mentally adding that the Konoha uniform’s unisex design probably didn’t help. Nor did my reputation. “And Sanji’s…overbearing. I’m not used to that kind of attention.”

“It’s okay. I’ll distract Sanji, if you give me a second,” Nami volunteered instantly, getting to her feet. While I watched in a sort of horrified fascination, she purred, “Oh San-jiiii~?”
I’d seen enough. I yanked the robe back over my head, I packed up my stabbing equipment, and left to contemplate something a little less likely to be interrupted by roaming Straw Hats, like free diving.

With one exception.

Gaara climbed up onto the crow’s with me, sitting down at my side. “They’re a bit excitable, aren’t they?”

“That’s putting it lightly,” I admitted, though really, I should have been used to the idea.

Everyone around here seemed to lack the affected coldness or polite façade that our home countries favored. No one here had ever been taught “a shinobi must never show their tears,” and it made many of them honest in a way that I hadn’t seen in a very long time. While I didn’t doubt they had secrets of their own—given how either accepting or unaware they seemed of Gaara’s—it didn’t seem to matter.

Ace had told me months ago that it wasn’t like the Whitebeards could call me on keeping secrets when everyone had a few. How widespread was that attitude?

Would anyone I didn’t know back home have cried if I got eaten by a sea monster, like they did here?

“I was thinking of telling them,” Gaara said quietly, drawing my attention back to him and out of my thoughts.

My eyes widened slightly. “About what we are? Or about Shukaku?”

“Both. I want them to meet him,” Gaara said, crossing his arms and letting his head droop toward his chest. After a second or so to think, he sank into my side like he’d been aiming for turning me into a pillow all along. “Maybe you could help Usopp make it into a story to keep from scaring Chopper. Only I guess Usopp would be scared, too…”

“If they do get scared, I could tell them one of my stories instead,” I suggested, hesitating for just a second before looking my right arm around Gaara’s shoulders. He could get out of my grasp whenever he wanted, what with his sand, but he just sighed. “I’ve got old war stories and stuff from before you were born. It’d take their minds off anything you wanna tell them, though some of the details might scare them worse.”

“You didn’t tell Ace much, I know that. Even if I don’t know why,” Gaara looked up. “But you’d be willing to do that for me?”

“Without a second thought,” I said firmly. “If you need me to help when you talk to your crew, I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Usopp got the stuffing kicked out of him by small turtle-shelled creatures half his size within two minutes of us arriving back on land for real. Then Luffy waded into the fray, beat up all of the little dugongs, and then suddenly the Straw Hats had an army. Of Kung Fu Dugongs. He ordered them all to guard our ship while we wandered into the desert and probably got horribly lost, and that was that.

“Does this happen a lot?” I asked Gaara. I wasn’t sure which part of the situation I was referring to when I said that.
“You have no idea,” Gaara muttered. I wasn’t sure what part he was referring to, either.

I watched the Straw Hats unload onto the beachhead, my thoughts drifting back to Princess Vivi’s...giant duck. Really, I had no right to complain about oversized birds, given Tsuruya, but the thing was built with the proportions of a squeaky toy. While Tsuruya was basically a small airplane on stilts with perfectly over-scaled dimensions, Carue’s proportions were all off.

Nonetheless, the duck could move overland at a respectable clip. It took him only a few seconds to leave a massive dust trail that eventually disappeared two bluffs away.

“He just ran over Shukaku’s head,” Gaara had said, as Carue vanished.

“It didn’t bother him, did it?” I had asked, more out of reflex than anything.

Gaara had given me a flat stare that answered my question rather succinctly. This was Shukaku we were talking about. Hell, Isobu had repeatedly blasted his head off the first time I met him.

**If you are finished staring into space, I would like to see my brother now.**

*Just a second. I wanna check in with Gaara.*

I briefly checked the two Tailed Beasts’ respective positions. Isobu was as close to the shore as he could manage without exposing his topmost spikes to surface-going passersby (and scaring anything that was a bit more aquatic), while Shukaku basically was the dune over the next one. If someone had happened to be standing there, they might’ve been able to make out some of the swirled Curse Seals that covered his body even when he was pretending to be an innocent topographical feature.

Putting off the meeting probably wasn’t going to be productive. I looked to Gaara, who had his eyes closed as he nodded.

Time to get back to work, I supposed.

“Hey, what’s keeping you two?” Nami called up to us from the bank.

By way of answering, Gaara swept both of us onto a magic flying carpet made of sand, then deposited us on the beach like it was nothing. Given his Magnet Release capabilities, it really wasn’t.

“That works,” said Nami, before she went back to making sure everyone else was packed for the desert trek.

Still wasn’t looking forward to that.

I busied myself shaking sand out of my robes for a second, though it was pointless, because I didn’t really want to start another scene. I felt everyone’s eyes on us, though realistically speaking that probably didn’t happen. I mean, it wasn’t like completely inexplicable things, from the pirates’ perspective, happened nearly every time I turned around.

Isobu took the decision out of my hands, rising from the deep like a brand new island, and started muscling himself up onto the shore as soon as his belly slammed into the first patch of underwater sand. After that, there was nowhere to go but up.

“A SEA KING?!”
Cue everyone screaming their heads off—except for Gaara, Ace, and me. Zoro, Luffy, and Sanji weren’t so much afraid as surprised, but damn could the Straw Hats put their lungs to use.

And behind us, the sand dune that had been Shukaku collapsed, reformed, and emerged from the desert as the world record holder for “largest tanuki.”

“ANOTHER MONSTER?!”

Aaaaand there went part two. Was it even worth trying to save my hearing at this point?

“Damn, caught between two giant beasts,” Zoro growled, reaching for his swords.

“There you are, Isobu!” Shukaku called, and everyone paused for a second to process that, yes, the giant sand-tanuki was definitely talking. He even had a bit of a drawl, and wasn’t actually shouting by his standards. “How long has it been, big brother?”

“Since when do you ever to call me by that title?” Isobu asked, totally ignoring the little squishy humans below.

“BROTHERS?” Usopp. Had to be. Then, “I-IT T-T-T-T-T-TALKS!”

“There really isn’t a family resemblance,” Ace said, with just a touch of awe. He lifted the brim of his hat so it sat back on his head. He took in the sight of a giant sand monster talking to a giant ocean monster, then said in a sage tone, “Also, that is a tanuki.”

“Told you,” I said.

“So cool!” Luffy piped up. He literally bounced over to us, landing in front of Gaara. “Gaara, Gaara, is that your friend? Is he your mama? Is your mama a tanuki?”

How much had Gaara told him?

“No,” Gaara said, his expression astonishingly even as he dealt with Luffy’s curiosity. Maybe he was hiding his real expression under the sand armor again.

Luffy deflated. “Aw, that’s not as fun.”

“And these humans are…?” Isobu said as he turned to us. Seawater and debris still sloughed off him, and Shukaku sat back on his haunches to look across the sand dunes at us. “There you are. Hello, humans.”


I held my hand up and waved, since there was no way in hell the Tailed Beasts would be able to hear us from here. You two should come over now.

“Sounds like fun!” Shukaku said in reply to something I didn’t hear Gaara say. He started to walk over to us, and while his waddling steps looked rather hilarious for a creature his size, he was crossing dozens of meters with every stride. “Hey, humans!”

“W-We’re not all humans,” Chopper said nervously, poking the tips of his hooves together.

“I really don’t think they’ll care, Chopper,” said Sanji, lighting another cigarette.

…Okay, no. Luffy and Zoro and Sanji did not need to gear up for fighting literal forces of nature. It
would not end well.

“Fight them and you will die,” Gaara told the crew at large with a total lack of sympathy for their fear. And, well, he had grown up constantly exposed to Tailed Beast shenanigans of one form or another. His standards were twice as fucked up as mine were. Then he said, in a somewhat more patient tone, “They’re friends of ours.”

“FRIENDS OF OURS?” Usopp, Nami, Chopper, and Vivi all demanded.

“Friends,” Gaara confirmed solemnly.

Zoro blinked. “Oh, is that all?”

“I’m going to need to set out two extra places at the table, aren’t I?” Sanji asked.

“Thankfully, no,” I replied. Isobu, you might have to…uh, rein him in.

**Asking me to control my siblings’ impulsive actions has never once worked.**

And that was about when Shukaku finally arrived within shouting distance—for us, not him. He was even bigger up close, bent double with his chin practically on the ground and his disproportionately long arms bracing his massive bulk. But really, he didn’t even need that. He could have materialized out of the desert like the Cave of frickin’ Wonders and still held a perfectly understandable conversation as a giant head alone.

Somewhat behind him and to one side, Isobu was scaring the Kung Fu Dugongs silly and not taking any notice.

“So, you’re the humans my little Gaara has become friends with,” Shukaku said, in a booming voice that spoke of no idea of what volume control even was. While everyone got laid out flat and the Going Merry bobbed dangerously in the wind, he went on, “You now meet my esteemed self, the great Shukaku!”

Luffy’s hand shot up, though Gaara’s sand encircled his wrist almost instantly and tried to yank it back down. Luffy just put his other hand in the air like he was in class. “Hey, hey, Shumai! Do you poop?”

“SHUT UP, LUFFY!” screamed the rest of his crew except for Gaara, who just sighed instead. While burying Luffy up to his straw-hatted head in sand.

“Is this normal?” I asked Ace in an aside. He hadn’t shouted either.

“For Luffy? Oh, definitely.” Ace grinned. “If Gaara wasn’t doing that, I’d’ve probably punched him.”

“It’s ‘the great Shukaku, you brat!’” Shukaku bellowed. Given his Wind affinity, that was nearly literal, and us tiny humans smacked against the sand wall Gaara had hastily erected for our safety.

“You say that like this one will remember that,” Isobu said, speaking up for the first time to a general audience.

“Shooting Star!” Luffy suggested cheerfully, not missing a beat though Gaara was pretty much strangling him.
“The great Shukaku!”

“Shyamalan!”

Oh, Luffy was definitely Ace’s brother. Both of them apparently considered shouting at an already-annoyed Tailed Beast an appropriate response to any argument.

“Shut up, both of you,” Isobu interrupted, but this time he punctuated his statement by wrapping his left tail around Shukaku’s and physically hauling him out of arguing range. Then he dragged himself forward, cutting Shukaku off from a repeat performance with his considerable bulk. “Kei, try explaining the situation without us for just a moment. I need to speak to my brother.”

Isobu, unlike Shukaku, did not have power over wind and also knew what eardrums were for. Thus, he took it a bit easier on us squishy little mortals. And he got into a tail-wrestling contest with his brother, which did not require words.

While the two titanic creatures argued in relative silence apart from the exploding sand dunes, the Straw Hats gathered their collective wits, and Gaara finally let Luffy out of his sandy prison.

“Shumai is our friend, right Gaara?” Luffy asked instantly, as though he hadn’t been briefly entombed. “Because he’s your friend and any friend of yours is our friend, too!”

I felt kinda bad for Gaara. Had he known what he was getting into by joining the Straw Hats?

“H-He’s too big to join our crew, Luffy,” Nami said, her eye developing a bit of a tic as she spoke. “We can’t fit him on the Merry.”

“Shukaku doesn’t need a ship to follow us. He was in Loguetown when we met, too,” Gaara said, bursting her bubble. “He’s been following us.”

Given Shukaku’s nature as a giant sand tanuki, I had to imagine his travel method made his sand manipulation incredibly difficult. Water increased the weight of his sand so much that if Shukaku hadn’t been, essentially, a god of the desert and fully capable of turning himself into individual grains and otherwise manipulating his form, there was no way that would fly.

But he was, and so it did.

Actually, Shukaku told me that he just leaves a large proportion of his chakra with Gaara’s sand gourd, Isobu said, while I was pondering the logistics of a sand monster moving around an oceanic world. Because he is always aware of the location of his components, he can simply reform himself out of loose sand the moment the Straw Hats find land again.

...That sounds a lot like an even more silly version of how your Isobu-clones work.

Possibly. He says he could not do it before arriving here, so perhaps it was an adaptation.

The Straw Hats did not seem to find these facts as fascinating as I did. “That’s not helping!”

I thought it was helping rather a lot. Watching the tension leave Gaara’s shoulders made the Tailed Beast sideshow all worth it. He hadn’t even needed to grab my sleeve to reassure himself or anything. No, he was standing on his own two feet and making his case.

He’d be okay here.

“Shumai isn’t joining the crew,” Luffy protested, in the fact of his crew’s nearly collective
disapproval. “He’s been on the crew with Gaara. So we just had a hidden friend we didn’t know about!”

Gaara nodded.

“Then that’s settled!” Luffy cheered, pumping both fists in the air. “We have a crewmate to celebrate! Sanji, Sanji—”

“We are not drinking the second we get into a desert.”

“Stingy!”

I cleared my throat. “Speaking of what we’re doing next…” How to put this…? “Luffy, Gaara and I have a mission to explain to you. I already told your brother some of it, but I think you should all hear this.”

“That sounds boring,” said Luffy.

“It’s…kind of like a goal?” I tried, spotting Gaara nodding encouragingly out of the corner of my eye. “Or a…dream?”

“Oh, then that’s okay then!” And just like that, Luffy was sitting with his legs crossed on top of one of the supply bags, hands on his ankles as he bobbed back and forth. “Gaara, I wanna hear your dream!”

“This is something Keisuke needs to explain,” Gaara said, throwing me under the bus with a serene expression on his face.

“This I wanna hear, too,” Ace said, and I bit back the urge to sigh. “What? It’s not like you’ve told me much about the totally-not-Sea-Kings who’re talking over there right now.”

“Then gather ’round,” I suggested to the Straw Hats (and Ace). It wasn’t like we were heading for Yuba with Shukaku and Isobu still taking up the way there with their bodies.

Chopper and Luffy sat eagerly, with Luffy practically bouncing in place. Usopp was still busy eying the Tailed Beasts’ “hushed” discussion with trepidation, while Zoro and Sanji mostly pretended to not be listening at all. Vivi and Nami were probably paying attention, but Shukaku’s rumbling laughter drew their attention back to him every once in a while.

“It starts with a fairy tale,” I began, because it seemed like the simplest place to start. “A very long time ago, a princess ate the fruit of a sacred tree for power. She wanted to stop all war, and with her new strength she succeeded, but…”

“Going mad with power” was such a lame way to put it, but no one knew enough about Princess Kaguya to be sure what the hell had really happened.

“Well, it didn’t work out to say the least,” I said, before I could get caught up in that rabbit hole of a historical debate. “But her sons, who inherited her power, decided that it was too much for anyone to keep the powers of a god under control. So when the older one died, he split his power into nine parts. Two of them are over there, arguing.”

Everyone’s gazes were inexorably drawn to Isobu and Shukaku.

“Is that what Shukaku really is?” Gaara asked, his eyes a bit wider than usual. “Everyone at home seemed to think he was an old priest who was sealed into a teapot…”
“I think that was Shukaku’s last partner before you,” I said, while Gaara frowned thoughtfully. “But he lived for so long that everyone forgot that Shukaku wasn’t him, even after they crammed him into a teapot. You should try asking Shukaku about him sometime.”

It helped that I was pretty sure Gaara would get an answer. Shukaku seemed fond of the old man last I’d heard. And he’d had a hand in raising Gaara this time, so things ought to work out.

“I will,” Gaara vowed.

“Anyway, Gaara and I are the chosen partners of Shukaku and Isobu,” I said, before the pirates could recover and ask too many questions about what I was glossing over. “And when two of us human counterparts touch, we unlock these wrist...cuff things, I think.” I still didn’t quite know what they were. “And the more we unlock, the more of their powers we can use. We already have our own spiritual and physical energy, but obviously drawing on Shukaku or Isobu makes us a lot stronger.”

“Which one’s stronger?” Zoro asked, sizing the Tailed Beasts up at range.

“Out of Shukaku and Isobu, Isobu is. He has the highest number of tails here. But the real maximum is nine,” I answered, but like hell I was going to admit to what had happened with Kurama.

Gaara knew that both Naruto and Kushina were jinchūriki—hard not to, given the mind-skype view when it was working—but I couldn’t risk that information getting out before I was sure Naruto would be safe. Hell, Kushina wasn’t a public jinchūriki either. I’d let that information slip when I fucking died.

Zoro frowned for a second. “Is that a hard limit?”

“...Yes and no,” I said, thinking it over. Zoro was probably taking a training perspective on the whole thing. “While the Tailed Beasts generally get outmatched by the next tail ranking up, their partners don’t work on the same scale.”

I was stronger than Fū or Gaara or Naruto at the moment, but it wouldn’t always be that way. There was no way Naruto in particular wouldn’t outpace me eventually.

Old age and cunning trumped youth and vigor in the meantime.

“Anyway, if we find a way to get rid of all the black marks on this thing,” I said, holding up my wrist again, “I guess we might get to go home. That’s about the long and short of it.”

Though I did make a point not to exactly explain what a jinchūriki was generally created for, or that we were both snugly in that category. That we’d always been weapons. It just…it didn’t feel right.

“So,” Luffy said with the air of someone doing some pretty difficult thinking, “your dream is really to go home?”

“My dream is to meet all the others,” Gaara corrected, looking at me.

Ow, my heart.

“...That would be cool, but I’m pretty sure I’ve specifically pissed some of them off,” I admitted few seconds afterward.

“Including Naruto and his mother?” Gaara asked, whipping his head around.
So much for keeping *that* a secret.

I held up my hands, proclaiming my innocence. “Not them, but some others. I guess I just need to be careful.”

I was fairly certain that Rōshi and Han from Iwa would not be happy to see me. I didn’t know about Yugito, but Killer B probably wouldn’t take me seriously. As for Fū and Utakata? Fū was an unknown, kept under wraps by Takigakure, but I was sure Utakata would not greet me like a long-lost friend even if Isobu had spent a good chunk of time in his village.

But it’d been great to see Gaara again, and I missed Kushina and Naruto enough that my chest ached. Where had they gone?

“That’s kind of a sad dream,” Vivi remarked in a gentle tone. “It’s almost like what we’re doing right now, but we’ve already made it to Alabasta. I don’t know how long it would take you to find seven other people who might be anywhere across the world.”

*Eight,* I corrected mentally. And their partners, assuming that some of them even stuck together.

“And Gaara was the second-youngest jinchūriki in existence. My protective instinct might’ve been misplaced, but I still didn’t want him to get into more trouble than he could handle.

…Which was why I was encouraging him to stick with a pirate crew that would definitely get into a fight with a Warlord. Specifically, the one who was a sand Logia and had the same power domain as Gaara and Shukaku. Logic at its finest.

“Hm,” said Luffy, crossing his arms and lowering his head as he thought.

“Here we go again,” muttered his crew.

“Hey, you should join my crew!” Luffy said, oblivious to his friends’ resignation. And the fact that he’d gotten my name wrong. “Even if you’re not a musician, we’re going to have a lot of fun adventures, and Gaara won’t be lonely anymore!”

“Luffy—” Gaara tried to interrupt.

“I can’t join your crew,” I said.

“You still let him ask,” Ace told me cheerfully. “And now he’s going to keep asking.”

“Luffy, I already said I wouldn’t join the Whitebeard Pirates,” I tried to explain. “I may be working with Ace now, but only because we’re hunting down the same person—while I look for other people like Gaara and me. When we take down Blackbeard—”

“After we take down Blackbeard, I’m still going to help you navigate around the Grand Line, because you’re hopeless at it,” Ace broke in, and grinned when I gave him a flat look. “Oh, come on, you didn’t really think we would give up entirely, did you?”

While I did sigh again, I had to suppress a smile. Clingy, weren’t they?

**I believe that would be what you call “an understatement.”**

“But if you joined—”
“No, Luffy,” I said more firmly.

“Hey!” Shukaku hollered over to us, though he was still on the opposite side of Isobu from us. “Hey, humans! My brother says you need to cross the desert. Is that true?’’

Vivi’s eyes widened. “Yes, yes it is. Can you help us?’’

“What was that?’’ Shukaku asked, and I honestly wasn’t sure if he was squinting at her or not because his eyes had that signature black band right over them. He cocked his head to one side, lifting one of his triangular ears, and said, “Speak up so my magnificent self can hear you!’’

“You could try using the wind to carry their voices to you,’’ was Isobu’s witheringly dry suggestion. Ironic, given who he was using it on.

“Oh, right.’’ Shukaku opened his nearly circular maw and the wind around us picked up—but not as much as it had before, when he was just shouting at Luffy. “Speak up!’’

“Please help us cross the desert! We need to reach the next cities as soon as we can!’’ Vivi shouted, putting her entire voice into it with enough force that it cracked.

I’d heard only snippets of the Straw Hats’ mission to stop a civil war, with Princess Vivi’s peace efforts leading the way. If they were going to be able to stop both sides, they needed to put on some speed. Walking through the desert wouldn’t get them where they needed to go nearly fast enough, and they also didn’t have a squad of supersonic ducks to help.

…The fact that I just thought “supersonic duck” without any problems spoke volumes about how off the wall this place was.

“Is that all? That’s nothing!’’ Shukaku puffed his somewhat concave chest outward, his massive tail curling in the air. “Traveling the desert is nothing for my illustrious self! I can carry all of you without even noticing!’’

Isobu muttered, in a voice perfectly audible to everyone, “Including not noticing if they fall off.’’ His golden eye focused on Gaara as he added, “Therefore, it will be your responsibility, child.’’

Gaara nodded.

“I’m perfectly responsible!’’

“No, you are not.’’

“I take it Isobu’s not coming with us?’’ Ace asked, eyeing the arguing Tailed Beasts as the Straw Hats watched them like a tennis match.

It would make more sense for me to scout waterways or guard an escape route. Though I am mobile on land, after a fashion, Shukaku is far more powerful here and will never run out of either stamina or ammunition.

I repeated Isobu’s words for Ace’s benefit, to which he nodded. “Should make it easier to get to Yuba and back. There was a rumor that Teach was spotted there.’’

“He could easily be gone by now,’’ I warned him quietly. I prodded Ace’s shoulder, making him idly brush me off. “So, is this about Teach or you wanting to spend time with your brother?’’
“Can you blame me?” Ace asked, rather than answering directly. So it wasn’t about Teach. Shukaku really was saving us days of desert travel if Ace was willing to ease off about the hunt. “Luffy’s independent and all, but I haven’t seen him in three years.”

I blinked. I couldn’t imagine willingly going that long without seeing Hayate. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s a big brother’s job to worry about idiot younger brothers.” Ace raised one eyebrow and a smile pulled at his lips. “Besides, you’ve been homesick forever. You want to see Gaara, and Isobu missed his brother, too. We can take a couple more days.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“All ABOARD, HUMANS!” Shukaku roared. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

Erumalu was the first destination we found. It didn’t ultimately matter that much for the purposes of our travel itinerary, since Shukaku was being our moving magic carpet and could travel fast enough that Gaara needed to manufacture miniature windshields out of sand to keep us stable, but seeing a completely abandoned town remained depressing no matter how many times it happened. That had been true long before I’d been swept up in this pirate adventure, starting with a former fortress town I’d visited once to get the butterfly summon contract.

Erumalu was a dried-up wreck, losing its moniker of the “Green City” to Baroque Works, but given Shukaku’s impatience we didn’t stick around there long enough for it to sink in. Actually, Shukaku had wanted to tear all the excess sand out of the place until it looked less like a total ruin, but Vivi made him promise to do that on the return trip instead, since no humans could live in the barren city anyway. Yet.

First, the Straw Hats needed to utterly destroy Baroque Works and Crocodile. Then the rain would come back.

(Though I kind of hoped I’d be able to get my hands on some of the Dance Powder they’d used to frame King Cobra for water theft. Just to figure out how it worked, even if it was hells of illegal to actually use it to steal rain. Or produce it. Or get caught with it.)

But first, we got to camp out in the desert. Specifically, we camped out when the temperature plunged in a way that probably would have been perfectly tolerable for Rin’s scorpions, but mostly just made our traveling group miserable.

I still wasn’t a fan of it.

“What happened? It was so hot all day and now it’s freezing!” Nami whimpered from beside the fire, huddled up against Vivi.

“I know it sounds strange, but it’s all because of the lack of cloud cover,” Vivi explained, but knowing the details of planetary thermal regulation didn’t appear to make her feel any warmer.

Sure, with Shukaku blocking the wind it was a lot easier to keep our body heat where it needed to be, but it still sucked. Gaara could cheat by using his sand as insulation, Ace was basically made of fire, and I could circulate my chakra to maintain my body temperature, the rest of the crew needed to improvise. The desert air had such low humidity that whatever warmth the rest of our group had was down to body heat or huddling next to the bonfire.

Still, we made the best of it. While Zoro, Chopper, Usopp and Luffy huddled together, Sanji maintained the fire, and Vivi chatted with Ace about something, I got back to work on seals.
Shukaku had even courteously created a sand table for me so I could try creating seals in the firelight, since our travel method made it way too unpleasant to try during the day.

“What kind of seal is that?” Gaara asked, sitting beside me.

With his sand armor and long desert robe that made him look like the tiniest Kazekage on record, he looked completely at home in this environment. Sunagakure and the desert around it, after all, were probably worse.

“I was thinking storage seals for extreme weather gear and blankets,” I replied, finishing off the latest design with a flourish. Sure, there wasn’t anything nearby in those categories to put in it, but I could certainly reduce the weight the others were carrying in the meantime. “Or backpacks.”

“They don’t look much like Elder Chiyo’s seals. How do I use them?” Gaara asked, accurately predicting that he’d be the only one able to activate the seals. They required chakra, after all.

“Just place your hand over it. My seals don’t need blood since it’s already in the ink,” I told him, “so all it needs is a bit of chakra.”

Given that Gaara still couldn’t wound himself on demand and probably wouldn’t ever figure out how, I didn’t have much of a choice. Still, since no one other than us and the Tailed Beasts had chakra to use, it probably made a pretty decent security precaution.

“You use blood to write with?!?” Usopp shrieked, scrambling to his feet with Chopper following suit a second later.

I looked blankly at them. I’d lost my squeamishness related to blood in ink around the time I’d started lessons with Sensei. “It’s my blood. I can do what I want with it.”

“That’s not really what they’re talking about,” said Zoro. “You’re just practicing calligraphy, right? Or is it something more morbid?”

“Fūinjutsu looks like calligraphy, but it’s not the same thing,” I said, more confused by their reactions than anything. Hadn’t Luffy told us a story today about how Zoro had nearly been cut in half by a swordsman a while ago? Also, they were pirates. “It’s more functional.”

“Oh, oh, show us!” said Luffy, grinning widely. “Come on!”

“Pah, I could show all of you real fūinjutsu without breaking a sweat!” Shukaku scoffed, but without blowing out our eardrums.

I looked up at him, though he was facing away from us with his tail forming our main buffer against the wind. “You are literally covered in Curse Seals and have no room to talk at all.”

Shukaku scoffed.

“Long story short: Fūinjutsu often takes the form of a bit of calligraphy, but can do a ton of different things,” I said, turning my attention back to the pirates. “Sometimes that means teleportation, preventing food from spoiling, storing supplies, or a hundred other things. I’m just making some storage ones so your baggage won’t be as heavy or bulky. You’ll just need Gaara to retrieve things for you after I leave.”

“It’s not like we’ve really been feeling the weight with Shukaku carrying us everywhere,” Nami said reasonably.
“I’m just trying to be considerate,” I muttered. “And Shukaku won’t be willing or able to carry all of you forever.”

“Ah, Kei-ki is being so thoughtful! Truly she’s generous and wonderful!” Sanji swooned, before snapping back to normal. He considered the storage option I was offering, looked askance at Luffy, and then said to Gaara, “You’re in charge of keeping him out of the pantry once these seal-thingies are done.”

I was never going to get used to the heart-eyed version of Sanji. Ever. Making my name sound like “cake” did not help.

“I can do that,” Gaara said.

“Jerk!” Luffy complained loudly.

“Just remember that only Gaara will be able to open them,” I reminded the Straw Hats, after suppressing my reflexive reaction to over-the-top flirting. Ergo, retreating. “If you’re all separated, you need food and water outside of seals to survive.” I finished three seals with a flourish, then handed them off to Gaara. “Anyway, did you want to see the cool stuff?”

“Does it mean using more of your ‘precious’ paper?” Ace asked pointedly.

“In fact, no.” I scooped up a chunk of sandstone with my right hand and held it up between my thumb and forefinger. “Hey, Gaara, get ready to throw.”

Gaara’s sand stretched out and gently looped around the rock, though not touching it.

I let a tendril of my chakra grasp the stone, then jet-black kanji streamed down from my fingers and around it. Really, the pattern was beautiful even if some people couldn’t read all of my phantom handwriting. “All right, Gaara. Aim for the next dune.”

Gaara nodded, then made the Bird hand seal and sent the little stone skipping across the desert.

“Was that all?” Usopp asked, peering out into the dark.

“That’s bor—” was about as far as Luffy got before the next dune exploded.

For the sake of spectacle, I’d created a seal that incorporated a bit more flash than normal. While there were true flashbangs and other fun goodies in my mental arsenal, my personal favorite explosions were really more like miniature nuclear bombs than anything. I liked combining concussive force, intense temperatures, and outright flame to get the correct effect to make everyone up to and including Orochimaru duck for cover.

I clapped one hand over my mouth to cover my snickering, but I didn’t need to bother.

“WHAAAAAAAT?!?”

These people had some kind of cultural bias toward collective reactions. Only Gaara didn’t react—he’d seen and probably weathered worse, if his mission record was anything to go by. Likewise, Shukaku only looked back in our direction with his expression pulled into a multi-story frown.

I have seen you do better, Isobu commented.

Then I just need to top myself another time.

“Explosives were the first thing I learned how to make,” I said, once everyone had stopped
shouting. “And I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t need paper or ink to use them. Comes in handy.”

Technically, I’d first accomplished that a few weeks before I’d turned fourteen, but no one really needed to know that. Or how far I’d gotten along in paper seals since then.

“That’s like Mr. 5’s power!” Vivi said, hand over her mouth. “But he ate the Bomu Bomu no Mi, so there’s no way you could have...”

“Kei’s weird that way,” Ace suggested, shrugging.

It was like my attitude toward nearly everything in the Grand Line thus far, but in reverse.

I raised my hand—my left one, since when my right moved the more cowardly Straw Hats all seemed to twitch. “Also, who the hell is Mr. 5?”

Yeah, somehow I hadn’t managed to pick up on how the Baroque Works agents were either assigned numbers or days for code names. So sue me.

Anyway, the night passed pretty quietly after story time with the Straw Hat Pirates, Usopp leading the way. I’d never been quite so excited to hear about a predatory Apatosaurus in my life—the Grand Line truly was grand if a prehistoric island like Little Garden could exist.

In the morning, Shukaku stopped a sandstorm dead before it could bury all of us like an airborne avalanche. Later in the afternoon, Luffy managed to run headlong into each and every one of the desert’s dangers about a second before Vivi remembered they existed. Including the giant purple lizards that might as well have been the native terrestrial versions of Sea Kings, while saving a sexist camel in the process.

We got a pretty good barbecue out of them. (But not the camel. Because we didn’t cook the camel.)

Except for the fact that the camel was totally superfluous after certain idiots remembered Shukaku was around and helping, it was a fairly productive morning. If there was some kind of guide to desert hazards, we could have used it as an amusing and worrying checklist. I would have made brand new entries for scorpion species for Rin’s sake.

The next day or so basically consisted of more riding around on Shukaku’s back, because Luffy got outvoted by his crew regarding new adventures at least for a little while. We mostly ended up watching Shukaku run roughshod over desert hazards like a jerk.

In the meantime, I whipped up more and more multipurpose seals, leaving explosions out of the equation because there was such a thing as tempting fate. I wouldn’t hand most of my bigger explosive seals off to other shinobi, and any safety protocols I had went double for random pirates who didn’t have the chakra resistance to survive a direct blast if something went wrong. But tracking seals, more storage seals, a half-dozen flashbangs, and a physical reinforcement seal (object edition) were probably safe enough to entrust to Gaara’s keeping.

We stopped on a rock formation (which was approximately number quintillion in this blasted desert) for a late breakfast on one of those stupidly long desert days. I would have written off the day as just another random one, if not for what happened during it.

Which was basically “All hail the Transformation Jutsu.”

Sanji really was a great chef to even be able to make anything edible out of the food we’d brought
with us, not to mention all the desert animals that practically lined up to be someone’s dinner (by virtue of attacking us). But his flirting mode never got any less annoying.

So after about the fifth flowery fawning incident in a row, I stepped back from him and the rest of the Straw Hats in general, grumbled under my breath, and used the Transformation technique.

When the smoke cleared, I’d turned into a perfect copy of my younger brother.

While Hayate was a little taller than me, he still wore the Konoha jōnin outfit like I did when I was at home. It was a major contributor to each of us being mistaken for the other on alternating weekdays or missions. Aside from his more prominent cheekbones, stronger jaw, lack of a scar, the usual build differences between men and women, and entirely different hair tone and texture, we looked more like than not. That, and he’d grown his hair out in his early teens where I hadn’t.

“Still gonna flirt with me when I look like this?” I asked in my brother’s lower, raspier voice. Okay, so maybe I was a bit mean-spirited, but when vanishing or telling him to stop didn’t work, I could be petty.

Sanji’s cigarette fell out of his open mouth. “B-b-bwuh?”

Ace, per usual, was already howling with laughter while the rest of the Straw Hats had a collective “WHAAAAAAAT?” moment.

Gaara looked between me and Sanji and said, “…Is this really that surprising? It’s just a Transformation.”

“What kind of technique turns a beautiful woman into a man?!” was Sanji’s entirely-too-loud response.

Gaara blinked. “I just told you. Here, let me show you.”

He made the Dog, Boar, and Ram hand seals in a row, and in a puff of smoke there was a second Sanji in the clearing, though without his desert gear. Gaara-as-Sanji took in his mirror image for a moment, then shoved his hands into his pockets, chewing on a totally-nonexistent cigarette. “Stupid mosshead!”

“So cool!” Luffy shouted, looping his arms around Gaara-as-Sanji thrice as he latched onto his waist. “Hey, hey, do me next!”

Gaara-as-Sanji looked down scornfully at Luffy, then poofed back into being just Gaara. Still trapped in Luffy’s rubbery arms, he just sighed and started trying to push his way free with his sand.

“Awww,” Luffy complained, while a hand made of sand tried shoving his face away. “But I wanna see you do another one!”

“It takes chakra to use it,” Gaara said, staring into Luffy’s puppy-dog expression with no visible sympathy. “So, no.”

Luffy pulled a terrible frown of utter disappointment. He looked like his birthday had been canceled. “Lazy!”

Ace, having sidled his way over to me, examined my transformation with a critical eye. “Is this someone you know?”
“My younger brother, Hayate,” I said, shrugging. “I’m not doing the cough, though the voice is mostly just a function of the technique.”

“You look a lot like him,” Vivi offered, since Gaara had already shut down the option of taking requests. She probably figured I wouldn’t either, and decided to be nice.

“Is he a swordsman?” asked Zoro, who seemed to have noticed the katana strapped across my form’s back.

I nodded. Then, before Zoro could press me for details, I poofed into a different shape.

“And who’s this one?” asked Nami. After the initial shock wore off, she was more curious than anything.

“My boyfriend,” I said, in Kakashi’s voice and form. I lifted a hand lazily, with the other occupied by a phantom book. “Yo.”

“This weirdo is your boyfriend?” was what Usopp asked, at the same time that Sanji burst out, “YOU HAVE A BOYFRIEND?!”

I made a show of looking up from my not-quite-existent romance novel, mimicking Kakashi’s mannerisms. “...Hm? Did you say something?”

“He’s so weird!” Luffy crowed, grinning. “Hey, Hei, can you turn into me next?”

I poofed back to normal. “No.”

“Stingy!”

Eventually, we did get around to finishing breakfast. Sanji looked kinda like he wanted to curl up in a ball and die for about ten seconds, at least until he snapped back into love mode, but this time aimed exclusively at Vivi and Nami. As was proper, since neither of them seemed to mind at all.

“So was that the boyfriend and brother you told Thatch about?” Ace asked, once we were digging into...what looked like paella. Not sure how Sanji managed to pull it off, but he had.

“Yep,” I replied, while Gaara picked around in his dish for any hint of chicken gizzards.

“Keisuke,” Gaara piped up, after having not found any buried treasure in his food, “your brother looks like someone who’s survived a puppeteer’s poison. Did something happen?”

Ah, right. That.

Er… “He did, but it was years ago,” I said, wondering how much Gaara knew. He was the Kazekage’s kid, so he’d have access to more information than most by default. “It’s why he coughs and why his voice sounds like that.”

And why you are never fully comfortable with Suna-nin.

It’s certainly a contributing factor...

Gaara leaned against me. “I’m sorry. It was my village, right?”

I shook my head. Sasori might’ve been born in Suna, but he’d been a deserter for years by the time my brother and his team smacked into him. “Nah, it was someone else. Don’t worry about it.”
Ace clearly spent a second or two debating how to break back into the conversation, but gave up instead of saying anything.

Gaara tugged my sleeve with his sand, so I looked down to find him staring up at me. “You’re leaving soon.”

“Yeah. Teach is still around, so we’ll hunt him down.” I closed my eyes briefly, then added, “You already have a mission to liberate Alabasta from ‘Sir’ Crocodile. Even if Striker could seat three people—and it can’t even really seat two—I can’t pull you off your mission and onto mine.”

“I don’t think you can give me orders at all.”

The kid did have a point. The only thing I had over him was Tailed Beast seniority. We weren’t even from the same village.

Gaara said, “Do you think I’ll find any of the others?”

Well, if Luffy had the main character ability to get into trouble the second the universe blinked… “Yeah. I think you might even have more luck than I will. They might even join your crew.”

“I hope so,” Gaara whispered.

Punch me in the heart why doncha? I rummaged around in my pockets until I found the correct paper seal, then handed it to him. “See this?”

“Yes,” he replied, stone-faced.

“This is a tracking seal.” I channeled my chakra into the last kanji-free spot on the paper—the back—and burned my name and my energy into it. Then I handed it to Gaara. “As long as you have this and channel chakra into it, you’ll be able to find me again, okay?”

His eyes widened minutely, then he tucked it away in his sand gourd with the other seals I’d given him. A second later, another one—this one unmarked—emerged from the sand and floated over to me. When it settled into my hand, Gaara’s chakra blazed its way into the seal and made it his.

“And now you can find me,” Gaara said seriously.

“Sounds good to me,” I said as I accepted the slip of paper and tucked it into my gear. “Sensor and all that. But until we get Tailed Beast Telepathy back, this is the best option.”

Gaara nodded solemnly. “We’ll see each other again. Maybe not soon, but we will.”

“So,” Ace broke in, having apparently found a better segue, “are you two going to hug or not?”

Gaara thought about it, while I didn’t move a muscle other than to breathe. Despite the sidelong hug we’d shared before, he was still the Kazekage’s son--

Gaara hugged me anyway. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” I mumbled, resting my cheek against the top of his head. “I’ll save any wanted posters of yours I get, okay? That way I’ll know what you’re getting up to.”

“That goes against everything we learn as shinobi,” Gaara said, twisting in my hold so he could pin me with a stare.

“With this crew, I don’t think you’re going to have much choice,” I replied, smiling a bit. “Just stay
Ace and I took off around sunset or so, the same day. Not before final goodbyes, of course, but I'd already said mine. If I was being honest, we probably could have left earlier, but I wasn’t going to insist on it while someone else was taking care of Ace’s eating habits for me. There may not have been a restaurant within miles, but my paranoia insisted.

Oh, and I liked the Straw Hats. Leaving sucked.

“Hey, Luffy, take this,” Ace said, tossing his brother a folded piece of paper.

Luffy held it up and unfolded it, but apparently nothing was written on it. “Huh? What’s this for?”

“It’ll let us meet again. Don’t you want it?” Ace asked, his voice taking on a teasing tone.

“No, I do.” Luffy tucked it into the band of his hat for safekeeping. “I’ll keep it.”

Ace grinned. “Good. Hey, the next time we see each other, we’re both going to be great pirates.”

“Yeah, the best!”

I held up a hand. “Wait, hang on one second.” Both D brothers—since it was the only initial they had in common—turned their heads toward me. I jabbed a finger at the paper still barely visible in Luffy’s hat, then said, “What the hell was that?”

Ace’s expression was too blank to be genuine. “It’s a vivre card.”

“What’s a vivre card?” asked Luffy. His blank expression was probably real.

The name alone told me exactly nothing past my knowledge of Latin roots, to which the term “rusty” applied perfectly. I could feel another headache coming on. “And what can it be used for?”

“It’ll help Luffy and me meet up again in the future,” Ace replied, definitely screwing with me at that point. When I glared at him, he went on, “It’s a type of New World paper. Instead of a Log Pose, Luffy can just follow it when he wants to find me. Since I only have the one, it’ll always lead back to me.”

“So it’s like the seal I gave Gaara,” I said flatly. And I’d gone to so much trouble to make tracking seals—and seals in general. I pinched the bridge of my nose against the new headache. “Is this some kind of payback for the paper thing?”

“Yep!”

Jackass. Couldn’t say I hadn’t asked for it, though.

“I’ll be sure to keep it safe,” Luffy called out as we turned to leave.

Ace gave his brother a thumbs-up as we walked off into the sunset. For about four seconds—there was something to be said for how fast both of us could move if we actually wanted to. There may have been a bit of ricocheting off of the sandstone formations nearby, just to have fun with it.

As Ace and I left the Straw Hats behind, I thought, Isobu? We’re done here.

Good. Having you out of sight for so long is…agitating. Do you want me to summon you back? Gotta love space-time manipulation.
Just a second. “Just so you know, that little stunt means war.”

Ace laughed. “Bring it!”

Now, we probably could have kept arguing for a while after that, talking our way around what exact kind of weird tracking device we’d given our younger counterparts. Or challenging each other to do something ill-advised. I hadn’t been able to talk freely even with Gaara, because I wasn’t sure how much we were supposed to be hiding from them about Teach. Self-imposed missions sucked like that.

And then Isobu got impatient.

**You two are taking too long.** I stopped smiling.

*You’ve been hanging out with Shukaku too long.* I said, but prepared for what was about to happen regardless of my particular sticking points. Given how the Reverse Summoning worked, I had to either be holding on to what I wanted to take with me, or it certainly wouldn’t come along. That included people. And as much as I was sure this was going to be a bit unpleasant, trekking the entire way back to the Straw Hats’ landing zone was a massive waste of time.

I grabbed Ace’s less-adorned wrist and said, “Hang on.”

The world inverted, spinning as we were hauled through space-time by Isobu’s chakra. I should have warned Ace to close his eyes because of how disorienting traveling like that could be, but I didn’t remember in time.

I landed approximately upright, one knee down on the rocks. Letting go of Ace’s arm, I shook myself practically down to my bones with a gentle chakra pulse to clear my senses. Presumably, the more often I got summoned the more used to it I would become, but I had even more respect for Tsuruya in that moment than I had before. Anyone willing to enter a summoning contract had to have a stomach of cast iron.

Speaking of strong stomachs, when I looked up Ace had gone slightly green. Sitting on the edge of the particular chunk of beach rock, just next to Isobu’s massive thumb, he had his hand over his mouth and his eyes squeezed shut.

Motion sickness or chakra-derived sickness? I couldn’t exactly use a diagnostic technique to check without potentially making things worse, so I dug through my pack and produced a jar of crystallized ginger I’d bought as a precaution. Pulling all of my chakra as far back into my skin as possible also seemed like a good idea.

“Ace, here,” I said as I nudged the container in his direction.

He snatched up the container without looking and upended it into his mouth. At least he remembered not to eat the lid, instead flinging it back into my hand.

Uh, okay then.

“Try not to choke?” It wasn’t like I got seasick, I supposed. Keeping my eyes open during general transit, even if I didn’t actually steer Striker or Isobu at all, generally helped.

Ace swallowed, and thankfully he didn’t react much to the late-start spicy component of the ginger. Rhizomes were tricky like that. Hand on his stomach, he looked up at me and grimaced. “Ugh. What just happened?”
“I did,” Isobu whispered, so as not to kill our ears.

“Well, at least someone is responsi—wait, when did we get back here?” Ace changed direction mid-sentence, looking first up at Isobu and then at the cohort of Kung Fu Dugongs who were giving us a collective funny look. The Going Merry sat under guard behind them and next to Isobu, and I swore the ship was mimicking the dugongs.

A little more annoyed this time, Isobu said, “What did I just say?”

Flame licked Ace’s ears as I clapped my hands over mine. Undeterred, my traveling buddy called up to Isobu, “That doesn’t explain the how.”

“It’s a thing Isobu and I can do.” I reached up and patted the lowest of Isobu’s chin spikes, though for all I knew he couldn’t feel it. “We call it summoning. This way, Isobu and I can never lose each other.”

“And you had to pull me along for the ride?” Ace asked, still looking a bit worse for wear.

He didn’t look so ill that he’d vomit, but I needed to limit the chakra usage around him. To avoid further contamination, maybe I needed to stick with Isobu for a while. My only sample of people directly affected by chakra attacks was Teach, and he’d run the fuck away before I could establish what the exact effects were. It wasn’t science until I had results to record.

“Well, it was that or leave you in the middle of Alabasta,” I said. “Sorry about the rough landing, though.”

“Pretty sure I’ve had worse,” Ace said, waving a hand. “Don’t worry that much about it.”

My eyebrows knit together. “...You’ve had worse than being bodily dragged through space-time by a giant turtle monster?”

“A giant crab-turtle monster with three tails, thank you very much.”

Ace side-eyed Isobu for making him shift his eardrums into fire for the third time in a single conversation, then shrugged. “Let me tell you about all the times I tried to kill Pops when I first joined up. That was a lot worse.”

Eh? “You tried to kill Captain Whitebeard?”

Yep. A hundred days, a hundred attempts, and a hundred losses.” Why did Ace look so proud of that?

...I supposed he could get points for persistence.

So Captain Whitebeard really was as tough as he’d seemed, and Ace was stubborn enough to give a bull second thoughts. It also answered my lingering question about whether or not the Whitebeards made a habit of recruiting weird people like me. It was like they’d taken the other world’s Naruto’s friend-making strategy and scaled it up a notch or twelve.

Still, I said, “It might be best if I stick to riding with Isobu for now. I’m almost convinced that the energy I use to do things—that we both use—is poisonous to you.”

“I’m not exactly made of glass,” Ace argued, probably more out of reflex than anything. “Isobu doesn’t use haki or produce sea prism stone. I’ll be fine.”
Just because Isobu and I weren’t known weaknesses of Devil Fruit users didn’t mean that we couldn’t hurt them anyway. Being a Logia may have given Ace blanket immunity to blunt or piercing force that didn’t utilize either of the two factors he’d named, but chakra didn’t behave like either one. I had a budding hypothesis that chakra would, in the bodies of unmodified humans, act more like radiation. Far more insidious.

Ace might’ve been the person most exposed to our energy short of Teach, but frankly I cared a lot more about his health than I did about getting the sea breeze in my face. With that in mind, I hauled myself up Isobu’s chin and into the fork between two of his spikes and prepared to put myself in time out. “Isobu and I will check in with you in a while.”

Ace crossed his arms. “There really is no arguing with you…”

Not with someone else’s welfare in mind, no. “See you in a bit.”

And I disappeared into Isobu’s mouth as we set out for the next leg of our journey.

Chapter End Notes

The song of this chapter is from Brother Bear.
I Burn

Chapter Summary

Kei: Get in another fight.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is named after Yang Xiao Long's character song, from RWBY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took maybe a day or two before I was satisfied with Ace’s claim that he was fine. I rode mostly on Isobu’s head during the long open-sea says when Ace zoomed up and down random waves on Striker, keeping a mostly superfluous lookout for (other) pirates and occasionally getting shouted history lessons from Ace when he came across yet another thing I didn’t know about.

He wasn’t any good at it, even after I was riding sidesaddle on Striker again and didn’t have waves whisking his voice away.

For one thing, he got distracted.

“Seriously, your family name is Gekkō? Man, if you’d seen the wanted posters for Moriah when they were around…”

“I think I’ll save myself the trauma,” I told him, shaking my head. “That kind of random coincidence is why I don’t use my whole name.”

“Gekkō Keisuke—okay, are you sure your old man didn’t look anything like—”

“Ace, I don’t want to know.” I also didn’t need to see his face to tell that he was grinning like a complete shithead about it.

“What about—”

“No.”

Even when he had information to share, enough of it was disturbing or horrifying or just plain worrying that I sometimes didn’t want to hear the rest.

Like, for example, learning that slavery had been illegal for three hundred years and then getting the clarification that those kinds of rules applied only to ordinary people. The Celestial Dragons—fishbowl-wearing bastards that they were—could do whatever they wanted and never face consequences. And that meant absolutely anything. The way Ace described it, they could kill whoever they wanted to and for any reason they cared to name, and the Marines would clap politely as they stood by.

The old anger in Ace’s tone and eyes kept me from asking for details. He didn’t have to say
anything to communicate that he’d lost someone to that kind of utter injustice.

Instead, I decided to reciprocate with a little information of my own. It ended up probably being about as comprehensible to Ace as his anecdotes were to me.

But first, we got distracted again.

“Actually, there’s another reason why I don’t introduce myself by my whole name,” I said, more or less after the previous conversation had a chance to sink in. “But it’s kind of a…cultural holdover.”

Ace made a neutral noise, probably not listening all that much. “How so?”

“Keeping in mind that these are from my history lessons, mostly,” I cautioned. “And it’s been almost twenty years since my last cram session.”

“You actually learned history?” Ace asked. When I made a noise that amounted to a nonverbal “duh,” he explained, “Basically no one out here does, not with the way the World Government keeps rewriting things.”

“I…well, that’s a bit depressing,” I replied, hesitant.

“I guess.” Ace shrugged. “Also, twenty years?”

There was something in his tone that made me think he was avoiding asking a certain question. Not like I cared, though. “I’m twenty-six, Ace.” Then I calculated how many months I’d spent in this ocean of mysteries and horrible, horrible things, and corrected myself, “Or maybe twenty-seven. It’s been almost five months by now, right?”

There was a pause. Then, “…We missed your birthday?”

I blinked. “Probably? I don’t know what day it is now, but my birthday’s the tenth of July.”

Ace groaned aloud. “Thatch is going to be frantic. He has lists of birthdays, favorite foods…”

Did Thatch even know how to make mochi? Well, I could—no, I needed to stay on topic. “I can tell Thatch about it the next time we find a snail. But can we get back on topic?”

“Do you promise you’ll be the one to tell him?” Ace demanded.

“Uh, yes,” I said, surprised by his vehemence.

“Good.” Then Ace let it go. “Okay, what were you saying?”

It was...going to be messy. If anything, it was probably for the best that I knew so little, relatively speaking. “Like I was saying before, most of the people I know don’t use their family names in casual conversation because of the Clan Wars. Actually, a lot of people only have them in paperwork and don’t use them at all.”

Like Tsunade. She could use her grandfather’s clan name if she so chose, but had apparently decided against it. Maybe she thought the Senju clan legacy would be better left to the village, not to any designated heir. I’d never asked, and I was still worried I’d never get the chance to do so.

“I take it the name pretty much explains what happened.” Ace looked back over his shoulder, his expression shadowed. Still, he remembered he was supposed to be steering Striker and corrected his course before we wandered too far into strange currents.
“Yeah. I mean,” I corrected myself automatically, “I wouldn’t know—no one in my family participated from what I remember—but if you shared your clan name with the wrong other clan, it meant certain death.” The Uesugi clan may have had some members old enough to remember the conflict, but the Gekkō family hadn’t participated except probably as money-laden targets. “Decades later, and it’s still hard to break the habit.”

“So, if, say, the Portgas clan pissed off the Gekkō clan or something…” Ace trailed off, more uncertain than I’d heard from him in ages.

“Assuming we were in the bad old days, it wouldn’t end well.” I sighed as I dredged up the most infamous example I could think of. “The big clans, like the Uchiha and the Senju, had a blood feud so bad they were killing each other’s kids.” I leaned against the mast, frowning. “The thing is, they were all mercenaries who changed employers all the time. I guess someone killed someone else on a job once, and after generations it got personal.”

“You don’t say,” was all Ace said in response.

I shifted my gaze to Ace’s back, chewing the inside of my lip as I thought. While I knew he was one of Whitebeard’s commanders—effectively second mate on a crew that large—I didn’t know all that much about him as far as his personal history went. Even when it came to the stories I told Thatch, I hadn’t elaborated on my personal history to anyone.

Looking out to sea, I’d just squandered a shot at a heart-to-heart moment without knowing it had even passed until too late.

I didn’t say I had more depths to sink to just because my self-esteem was low. Shinobi around my age and older were all weapons quenched in blood.

“What can you tell me about the next island?” I asked, changing the subject somewhat clumsily.

Ace was about to answer, but Isobu surfaced just to the left of us. In the roar of displaced air and waves brutally splattered by his immense mass, I doubt I could have heard any reply.

“Got something to say?!” Ace demanded of Isobu, nearly at the top of his lungs.

“In fact, I do.” Isobu surged forward until his head was nearly even with Striker, then continued, “The next island is where we will find Matatabi and her host.”

“That’s Nii Yugito,” I said, completing the thought. A gusty sigh ripped its way out of me. “Dammit.”

“Is this another clan thing?” Ace asked over his shoulder.

Oh, I wished. The only clan enemies I’d ever made were at least polite about disliking me. “No, this is a village thing. Yugito’s village and mine are really unfriendly.”

“Define ‘unfriendly’ for me real quick,” Ace suggested.

I grimaced. I could give two or three reasons, but the one that came to mind easiest was, “They tried to kidnap a three-year-old clan heiress with a diplomat acting as a spy. We’ve been glaring at each other’s borders ever since.”

And that didn’t even get into the “fun” parts of my history class, like when we’d covered how the Second Hokage got killed stalling out Kumo’s Kinkaku Force after they’d already murdered the Second Raikage in a coup. Or the fact that Sensei had fought both A and Killer B during the Third
Shinobi World War, repeatedly. Or that my father had been killed when I was eight by a combined border raid by Kumo and Iwa forces.

In hindsight, I’d had a lot of reasons to dislike Kumogakure before ever bringing the Hyūga incident into consideration.

And if I remember correctly, you are one of the people responsible for that diplomat being summarily executed for espionage.

Kakashi is the one who got him. I’d been busy trying and failing to recover from my hellish year of constant missions. But I’d at least remembered to forewarn Sensei about that diplomatic shitstorm before it happened.

“Only kidnap?” Ace craned his neck a bit to look back at me. “Because the look on your face says it was a hell of a lot more than that.”

To say the least. My frown deepened.

“Clans can have… special abilities passed down through bloodlines,” I admitted, still sickened all these years later. Even if I hadn’t met someone who’d been the victim of bloodline theft, Kumogakure’s plots had a theme going. So did Orochimaru’s. “And it’s not the first time someone’s tried to target that clan because of theirs.”

Ace paled under his tan. “That—that’s sick. And this new whoever-the-hell is from that village? What kind of hellhole world do you come from?”

My answering smile was as bleak as they came. “Exactly.”

Not that it couldn’t be worse. Or that it hadn’t been. The Clan Wars were the Bad Old Days even compared to this kind of thing.

“Fucking hell…” Ace shook his head slowly. “Celestial Dragons all over again…”

I made the decision then and there not to tell him about my experiences in the Third Shinobi World War. He didn’t need to hear it. Or about how old I’d been when it all went down. Even if Ace was a pirate, and a successful one, he didn’t need that kind of knowledge sinking into his brain like a slow knife.

I changed the subject as abruptly as I could manage. “Ace, what do we know about the island itself?”

“Oh, I was gonna say it’s a Spring Island,” Ace replied, somewhat distracted, and I didn’t know what that meant. Spring where? What was the date anyway? “It’s basically like Jaya, but without a Mock Town stuck on it.”

“I understood about half of those words without context,” I told him.

“Oh, and with a big spiky mountain that looks like a lightning rod,” Ace went on, without apparently hearing me. “And tornadoes.”

I dragged my hand over my face. “Stop talking.”

“Fighting there will be fun,” Ace said, cracking his knuckles.

“Ace, no. If it comes to a fight, you shouldn’t take Yugito or Matatabi on,” I said somewhat
“Might wanna give me a reason,” Ace said, with a dangerous edge to his voice. “You don’t look much like Pops.”

And this entire venture proved just how willing he was to listen even to Whitebeard if his pride got a say. For fuck’s sake, even if he was bored there were better targets than a jinchūriki who’d been in the game for as long as Yugito had. There was an entire ocean full of better targets.

“My sister is a massive two-tailed cat made of blue fire,” Isobu told him. “Your powers will be at the same disadvantage as those of any other human who has ever tried to use her greatest strength against her.”

“And Yugito’s been training to fight other humans since she was about six years old.” So had I, in fact, but it didn’t seem like something that I needed to mention. Instead, I said, “If you jump in, Matatabi might feel like she should intervene. And so far, my plan is to have Isobu keep her out of it.”

Besides that, Matatabi was the only other genjutsu-type Tailed Beast I was aware of. If she was anything like Isobu, and Ace was still as vulnerable to genjutsu manipulation as the scarecrow incident proved, then this entire situation was a clusterfuck waiting to happen if I couldn’t control who went where. If I could, then I was hoping Yugito’s reliance on Fire Release would get me as much of an advantage as I needed to eke out a win.

And, well, I didn’t want Ace to get hurt in what was probably just a grudge match between Yugito and little ol’ me. I was still a softie at heart.

“I can handle myself just fine,” Ace replied, totally undeterred.

…I was gonna have to cuff him to his boat to keep him out of a fight, wasn’t I? And that probably wouldn’t even work because I knew Ace had the strength to physically lift Striker and the kind of firepower that made him a bit too used to being able to blast seagoing opponents to pieces.

“Ace, this is my fight. I’m the one who has history with her.” Sort of. Yugito and I had never actually met, and I hadn’t directly fought Kumo-nin in ages. But I was scrambling for any kind of excuse to keep everyone else out of Yugito’s firing line.

But maybe I’d used that argument one too many times. “Are you gonna stay out of my fight with Teach?”

“That’s different,” I protested. Because I didn’t care if I poisoned or burned Teach to death a dozen times over. He’d damn well earned his fate for attacking Thatch.

“Not from where I’m standing,” Ace replied. He craned his neck a bit to look back at me again, and if that wasn’t a shit-eating grin I’d eat my paintbrush. God damn Whitebeard Pirate loyalty. “Did you really think I was just letting you come along on this trip because I wanted to play navigator? It sounds to me like this Yugito needs to learn a few lessons the hard way.”

“Yugito may or may not be guilty of a lot of things,” I argued, “but I can’t blame her for what her village does.” I could hardly believe what I was saying. “Politics is a reason to keep my guard up, not to attack her.”

Though she’d probably attack me. While the thought had occurred only belatedly, I was still pretty sure that my “kill on sight” order was active in Kumogakure. “Flee on sight” only applied to Iwa.
…I can accept your interference, for now,” Isobu told him, golden eye glowing against the waves. “But if Kei or I judge the situation as too dangerous, we will remove you.”

Ace, if he had been slightly less mature, might’ve decided to shake his fist at Isobu. As it was, I was fairly certain he just rolled his eyes, because Isobu certainly did.

I subsided with a grumble, somewhat secure in the knowledge that Isobu could stop Ace from doing something reckless.

Hopefully.

It took us a couple of days to reach the weather disaster known as Corkscrew Island. According to Ace, it was pretty much uninhabited, and I didn’t have to observe for long to see why. While the island’s central volcano-like structure rose high enough to stab the clouds, a very fat funnel cloud launched a reciprocal strike downward, and sucked up sand, water, and trees on the opposite end of the island. While Isobu bobbed in the sheltered bay, Ace and I rode Striker into what might as well have been meteorological hell.

“Well, at least she has enough sense to avoid the tornado,” I said when we landed. In fact, I could sense Yugito barely fifty meters straight ahead, somewhere in the forest that wasn’t being smacked around by thunderheads or their children.

“Not seeing a giant killer pussycat,” Ace said, holding his hat down in the face of the wind whipping across the island.

“Not yet you’re not,” I told him. Matatabi was roaming the side of the island with the murderous clouds. I hadn’t expected to find them that far apart, but I didn’t know that much about how they operated. “She’ll make her way over here when Yugito sees us.”

Ace made a vague noise of acknowledgement. Then, “What’s the strategy?”

“If Yugito decides to hit me in melee? Don’t be there.” Aside from Matatabi’s flames and Yugito’s general cat tendencies, I didn’t have that much information about how she fought. I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to learn that she grew claws like Naruto and Kushina did in initial jinchūriki mode, gained night vision, or had terrifyingly quick reflexes.

“Helpful,” Ace commented dryly. “What am I supposed to do if it turns out all she wants is a giant yarn ball?”

“Don’t say that to her face,” I said sharply. Sure, I was making assumptions that Yugito would want to kill me, but as far as I knew the only non-Konoha jinchūriki who wasn’t hostile toward me was the one we’d already met. Argh. “Ace, I don’t want you getting caught in the crossfire.”

“Let me worry about that.”

Ace didn’t have a grasp on my personality if that was his response.

I sighed mentally and waved Ace away. When he’d backed up enough that I was sure I wouldn’t catch him in the backwash, I drew Isobu’s chakra up through my coils and directed a concentrated burst in Yugito’s direction. There wasn’t much actual intent behind it—it was just that non-sensors couldn’t always tell when another shinobi wanted their attention.
Yugito started heading in our direction, drawing her entirely human chakra as though it was a bow and she had a shot lined up at my head. I tensed, but didn’t move.

**Matatabi is aware of our presence. I will go meet her.**

Well, hopefully they wouldn’t flatten the island. Isobu had a better relationship with the other Tailed Beasts than I did with most of my fellow jinchūriki, at least.

The woman who emerged from the tree line, at least at first, did not look anything like the Bingo Book picture I remembered.

The Yugito I generally expected was a very composed, put-together kunoichi who knew her power and was confident in both her strength and that of her comrades. As much as I had a problem with her village’s interactions with mine, it was tempered by the knowledge that she was basically a model soldier and couldn’t have logically had anything to do with most of Kumo’s more notorious operations until relatively recently. Hidan and Kakuzu and Akatsuki might’ve killed her in one world, but the Yugito of my timeline was alive and well.

The Yugito in front of me was more like a feral cat. I had enough time to take in her ragged Kumo uniform, loose, tangled hair, and faintly wild eyes before she rushed me.

I caught her opening roundhouse kick on the back of one arm, using the other to brace against the impact. We still skidded backward along the sand, but neither of us was hurt.

“So you’re the first human I see in months in his hellhole,” Yugito hissed, bouncing off me and landing in a crouch. She crossed her arms so that her hands hovered by her shoulders, fingertips gathering chakra.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said, resting my hand against the hilt of my katana. My chakra collected mainly in my right hand, ready to channel into my weapon at a moment’s notice.

“So great to be noticed,” Ace grumbled.

Yugito’s slanted eyes slid slowly sideways, taking note of Ace’s presence but otherwise dismissing him as a concern. When they focused on me, I wasn’t quite sure what sensation permeated her chakra most—rage or despair.

“If there’s one thing I can still do, it’s fight,” Yugito said, apparently mostly to herself. Still, I didn’t let my guard down, and she obliged my worse suspicions by extending her fingernails out to the length of a wakizashi. Each.

I slid my katana very slightly out of its sheath. If I could just get her to attack first… “How much saltwater have you been drinking?”

“That’s enough out of you, Tidal Blade!” And Yugito whirled into motion, displaying the kind of flexibility I’d last seen in Raidō and Genma’s cats.

Crap. **Here we go.**

The next few seconds were a blur. Though my kenjutsu would be effective against Yugito’s claws despite her jutsu’s reinforcing effect, I relied on drawing my sword directly from the sheath to put an end to fights of this level quickly. And she did not want me to get an attack off.

I ducked and dodged at maximum speed as Yugito’s strikes ripped up huge chunks of the beach with every missed blow. With every movement, I led us farther and farther into the island proper
and toward our Tailed Beast partners.

I drew my blade halfway out to block one of her slashes, catching her claws on chakra-reinforced steel, and drove my knee into her stomach hard enough to almost fold her in half. With no Tailed Beast chakra enhancing her stamina or recovery rate, Yugito doubled over coughing once she hit the ground.

“I’m starting to think I got lucky,” I muttered as I slid back into my starting stance, warily watching Yugito push herself back up onto her hands and knees as her claws retracted.

“How so?” Ace asked from his perch atop a nearby rock. When I glanced at him, he was, in fact, almost literally perched like a bird, and his hands were occupied by a fish on a stick. The fact that the fish was the size of an adult Bluefin tuna meant nothing, apparently.

Returning my gaze to Yugito, I said, “You Whitebeard Pirates picked me up after a day. Yugito’s been here for months, and I’d bet my bottom beri that Matatabi hates water too much to help her swim off this island.”

“So you think she’d be friendly if she didn’t get stuck here,” Ace said, gesturing with the fish—and how was half of it already gone?

“Maybe,” I muttered, returning my attention to Yugito. I didn’t know enough about Yugito’s actual personality to be sure. For all I knew, she’d just act on her village’s policy, and that’d be the end of that.

Are you besmirching my sister’s character?

I have no idea. Am I right?

Perhaps partly, Isobu allowed. Still, Matatabi is working on her partner.

I lifted my hands and cupped them around my mouth to imitate a megaphone. “Yugito, I just wanted to talk!”

“Oh that’s rich, coming from you,” Yugito wheezed, but she was up again and with her nails short, she could make hand seals. Crap. “Or am I talking to a different Gekkō Keisuke?”

This is why I say you make terrible first impressions.

“No, you’ve…you’ve got the right kunoichi,” I admitted, lowering my hands. “But I still don’t want to fight you.”

Yugito’s response was to exhale a fireball the size of a building right at me. Ace and I tore off across the beach in different directions, but my return shot would be a fair bit nastier as far as potential damage could go. Once I was sure Ace was behind me and well out of the way, I blurred through my hand seal sequence and let loose.

Water Release: Great Waterfall Technique. Drawing strength from both the nearby sea and the water in the clouds, a massive spiraling vortex—really more of a waterspout turned on its side—blasted across the beach and engulfed Yugito’s fireball with the power of elemental rock-paper-scissors.

I dropped my hands before the jutsu had fully worn itself out and threw myself into the current. Rocketing across the beach in a truly improvised chakra cloak, I slammed into Yugito at a force I could stand, but one her baseline self couldn’t.
Once again, Yugito hit the beach with a bone-shaking thud and rolled to recover. She finally came back to her feet when she hit the edge of the water, her chest heaving against the pain and the impact.

“Not so tough, is she?” Ace asked, from somewhere over my shoulder. I glanced at him, watching the flames lick over his forearms even as he continued to eat the giant fish.

“Not now, no,” I said quietly, as Yugito swayed on her feet. “She’s been out here alone for too long. She doesn’t have the chakra to keep this up.”

“…Is that anything like stamina? Because that’s what it sounds like.” Ace hoisted the giant fish over his shoulder, taking a brief break from eating.

“More or less.” And if Yugito kept this up, she could kill herself. Her chakra was so low that I was half-amazed she was still conscious.

“Do you think this is a joke?” Yugito snarled, once her eyes focused on me again. I squared my stance automatically at her tone, sword clear of my leg in case I needed to very quickly figure out how to break her nails with kenjutsu.

“No, of course I don’t—” And that was as far as I got.

“You are the Tidal Blade,” Yugito cut across me, heaving herself into an upright position. She was already starting to make hand signs. “The most monstrous sword-wielding freak to ever step foot out of that ridiculous village of yours. ‘Kill on sight’ in Kumo. ‘Flee on sight’ in Iwa! AND YOU SAY YOU WON’T FIGHT ME?!”

There was a brief pause, in which I could almost feel Ace edging away from me the more I failed to deny any of Yugito’s words.

“Are you sure you’re talking about this Kei?” Ace asked, though perhaps from a little farther away than before. “Because, well, she kinda reacted to a guy flirting with her by running away.”

Or not.

I smacked myself in the face with my free hand. “Not helping.”

At that point, Yugito had enough. She completed her hand seal sequence, taking a deep breath—I only needed one seal, and I formed the jutsu right around me like a shell. Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet.

I hit Yugito before her fireball got all the way out, punching through the heat and the flame to tackle her full-force. The two of us bounced across the sand until we hit the water, skipping across the initial wave before they closed over our heads.

Both of us surfaced a second later, sputtering.

“Cool your head yet?” I asked Yugito, since I recovered from saltwater faster than any human ought to. I shook my head rapidly, like a dog, and it stuck to my face in an epic mess I’d regret later. I did own a comb, after all.

Yugito, with her unbound blonde hair pasted flat to her face by seawater, scowled in my general direction.
I hastily hopped out of the water, sword still drawn. Yugito would have taken a swipe at me if she’d remembered to grow her claws out. Or had enough chakra for it.

As I waited for Yugito to decide whether or not she still had enough chakra left in her to kill me, I looked around.

While we’d made a wreck of the beach and probably reshaped part of the forest, it wasn’t anything the local weather patterns hadn’t already done. The rock Ace had been sitting on earlier was upside-down, but since nothing was on fire, I was going to assume that I hadn’t managed to kill him by accident. As Yugito stood on wobbling legs and I made it back to the sand that was left, I debated shouting Ace’s name even though the island’s winds would carry my voice away.

Glancing at Yugito again, I stepped back as she approached the beach once more, eyes locked on me.

I didn’t want to kill her. But she didn’t seem to want to give me a choice.

Thankfully, I was saved by “divine” intervention.

“Are you two finished already?” Isobu’s voice called out, and both of us automatically looked toward the water again as a rather interesting group rounded the curve in the bay, close to shore.

Isobu sat with all his tails submerged, seeming more amused than anything at the squabble between Yugito and me. On his head, Ace sat with yet another massive Bluefin-sized fish gnawed down to half its mass. And on his back with all four paws as far from the sea as physically possible, an arched back, and two tails nearly vertical, was Matatabi.

But not for long.

“Yugito dear, did you get into trouble with Isobu’s friend?” Matatabi asked, while she hopped over to the beach from Isobu’s back. She carefully avoided the sea as she moved, reaching Yugito and I in two graceful leaps. Steam hissed off the sand where she stepped.

Yugito raised a shaking hand, pointing her index claw right at my heart. “It’s the Tidal Blade, Matatabi! She can’t be trusted!”

“What do I care about your petty human squabbles?” Matatabi shot back, her paws coming to rest on either side of Yugito and knocking her partner back onto the sand. “My brother and I are not going to allow either of you to kill the other. You are both too important to waste your lives like this when there are no shinobi here.”

Ace made the long leap to the beach next by transforming into fire at the apex of the jump, landing next to me as though nothing had happened. With the fish.

“Or…perhaps not?” Matatabi tilted her huge head to one side. “Young human, was that a normal technique for your kind?”

“The name’s Portgas D. Ace,” he replied, bowing to the giant cat made of his preferred element. “At your service!”

“How polite! See, Yugito dear, you should be more like this young man,” Matatabi said in an approving tone.

“That is a bad piece of advice,” Isobu put in, finally reaching us. He’d moved slowly out of
deference to Matatabi’s water sensitivity, but I still relaxed even though he’d been close enough to help the entire time. “He is not nearly so polite when you know him.”

Ace rolled his eyes, though I wasn’t sure the Tailed Beasts could see the gesture. “To answer your question, turning into fire is something only I can do. It’s not common at all.”

And Logias as a category were already rare for Devil Fruits.

With Matatabi, Isobu, and Ace all involved in their conversation, I sidled over to Yugito. She appeared to be in shock, staring up at her partner’s total refusal to fight in disbelief.

“Cat got your tongue?” I teased, because there was never a time worse for puns that I couldn’t worsen.

Yugito swiped at me with her nails, but missed because she forgot to grow them out first. Upon realizing that she was out of chakra, she just growled, “Oh, shut up!”

“It’s okay, you know,” I said, as I finally relaxed enough to upend my katana’s sheath, shaking out the water trapped in it. “A lot of people try to kill me the second they recognize me.”

Yugito shook her hair fully out of her face, dislodging some of the salt and sand but not enough to appear graceful. With her gaze clearer than it had been before, she looked up at me with the perfect mix of exasperation and disbelief. “What the hell is going on?”

“It’s a whole new world out here. And the rules are a lot different than what we’re used to,” I admitted. I still offered Yugito a hand up as soon as I sheathed my katana. My right hand, specifically, with two fingers extended.

“You’re…still willing to help me,” Yugito said, still skeptical although she undoubtedly recognized the gesture. Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“There aren’t any Hidden Villages out here, so we’re on our own. And I don’t think we have to be enemies when we have so much in common,” I told her, powering down from using Isobu’s chakra. Not a subtle hint at all. “I’m Gekkō Keisuke, partner to Isobu and jōnin of Konohagakure.”

“Nii Yugito,” she replied, still regarding my hand a bit warily. “Jōnin of Kumogakure, and partner to Matatabi.”

“Well, it only says good things about you that she actually told you her name,” I commented. From what I knew of people, they tended not to ask about the giant monster’s name before trying to run or kill it. Even though Yugito had been a child at the time Matatabi had been sealed into her, I’d still worried.

“Oh?” And at that point Yugito took my hand to complete the Seal of Reconciliation, and our wrists lit up like I had come to expect. Going by Yugito’s surprised yelp, she had not.

YOU HAVE FOUND THE SECOND.

ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

When the light show was over, I added rather cheerily, “But if you’d tried to kill Ace, I probably would’ve kicked the hell out of you.”

“You mean the man who was with you. And who is currently occupying both of our partners.” Yugito blinked slowly, then scanned our battlefield. As she did so, her eyes turned from jet-black
like mine to an odd-eyed look that matched Matatabi’s.

Speaking of Matatabi, I remembered her reaction to seawater well. It just looked hilarious coming from such a large creature. Even now, she was sitting above the high tide line as she chatted with Ace, where Yugito had already pre-scorched the landscape.

I hid my mouth from their view with my hand and whispered to Yugito, “By the way, did anyone ever teach Matatabi how to walk on water?”

“Do you really think it would help?” Yugito whispered back, deeply sardonic.

Given Matatabi’s size, elemental affinity, and age…no. But all the same, I said, “It couldn’t hurt to try.”

Yugito sighed. Then she flexed her fingers experimentally, blinking as her nails extended again despite her exhaustion. “Matatabi’s chakra…?”

“Oh, right, you should be able to access that now,” I remembered belatedly. When Yugito gave me a deeply suspicious look, I asked, “Did you get a horrible dream that kept telling you to ‘assemble the nine’ like I did? And maybe another flash a second ago?”

Yugito frowned. “I did, but I assumed it was merely an implanted genjutsu command. If a stubborn one.”

“…That probably isn’t wrong. But if you do meet up with another jinchūriki, you should get bits of your power and bond with Matatabi back at a time,” I said, holding up my right wrist so Yugito could inspect the Wristband of Doom.

“You have three kanji,” Yugito said, and then held her hand out so we could compare. “I only have mine and now yours.”

…Dammit. “Well, that proves my theory wrong,” I muttered, annoyance alone trying to give me a pounding headache. Without waiting for a prompt from Yugito, I went on, “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to meet all the others in person to get power back, but I guess I do.”

“And that applies to all of us,” Yugito said flatly, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Damn.”

And at that point, we went to rejoin the conversation with the other three. It was better than just standing around awkwardly.

“So is the catfight over?” Ace asked, still eating the giant fish. He shut up for a second when he swallowed, but then the next thing he said was, “I missed half of it, but at least I have a snack.”

Yugito bristled. Even her soaking-wet hair seemed to try to stand up. “You—”

The mental arithmetic sorted itself out depressingly quickly. “Ace, you’re eating her food.”

Ace burst into flames as Yugito lunged through him, dropping the fish into the sand. She shook herself a bit, but landing in water mitigated the immediate effects of leaping through flames in the form of a man, and Matatabi’s chakra took care of the rest. Thus recovered, she spun on the spot and chased the serial dine-and-dasher up the beach without even apparently acknowledging the weirdness of a guy turning into fire.

Then again, she grew up with Matatabi.
Speaking of the giant fire-cat, she sat down directly in the middle of the long-wrecked beach and wrapped both of her tails around her feet. “**Yugito, do be careful.**”

“She is perfectly fine. **Ace is our human navigator.**” Isobu _didn’t_ say that Ace wouldn’t hurt her, but really, this reminded me of a scene set to “Yakety Sax” more than anything.

“Oh? Then he sounds quite useful to keep around. Tell me, do you think we will able to find all of our brothers and sister if we travel the sea?” Matatabi shuddered, her fiery coat fluffing up. “Because while I am not…comfortable with water, I am starting to see that traveling across it may be necessary.”

“We already found Shukaku despite **his** problems with water,” Isobu replied, his voice as dry as dust. “You need to start thinking of ways around this discomfort if we are to travel together, because I cannot carry you all across this ocean _and_ keep you dry.”

“I am sure we will muddle along somehow,” Matatabi suggested hopefully, while Isobu sighed.

_I guess that means we’re taking Yugito with us._ I continued to watch both Ace and Yugito set the beach on fire, with the only real difference being whether I could pick up chakra from a particular spot or not. A significant factor to be sure, but not one that really made a difference to what little wildlife could survive on this island. _My only question is how we’re going to get Matatabi out of here willingly._

_I also do not think that Yugito will fit on the small boat you have been using._

_Striker_ was only designed for a single rider—Ace, specifically—so just keeping me within earshot was already pushing its weight limits. It looked like we’d have to break out the rowboat again, and that thing didn’t—

**Speaking of that vessel, it is far too slow and small. Consider replacing it.**

_Sure, sure._ But in the meantime, I needed to stop Corkscrew Island from being turned into a giant ashtray. Once again, I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted, “Yugito, Ace, can you two stop trying to kill each other?”

“**Dear, I need you to come back over here so we can discuss what we will do next,**” Matatabi added, lifting one of her paws in a beckoning gesture. “**Come along, please.**”

The two of them paused: Ace holding off Yugito’s clawed hand with a firmly human hand while his other looked more like the opening to his nickname-earning attack, and her foot raised to stomp a hole in his stomach. After a second to check their relative positions, they sprang apart and pretended that they hadn’t just been caught being sillier than I was.

Isobu’s voice was as dry as dust. “**It may be helpful if you two travel at arm’s length.**”

_I’m fairly certain I’m worse at both people skills and at leadership than either of them, and somehow I’m still playing babysitter._

**It is not as though you do not have experience wrangling unruly children. Relatively recently, too.**

_Thank you so much for the reminder._
We ended up not backtracking to Alabasta, because for all we knew the Straw Hat Pirates had turned the whole place upside-down when no one was looking. Instead, we ended up heading further out into the Grand Line in search of Teach, because semi-recruiting Yugito exhausted that (flimsy) lead. Isobu and I filled Matatabi and Yugito in on the grudge we had against him, and the other jinchūriki pair agreed to stick with us at least until they found something more productive to do.

Though Matatabi still had a problem—several problems—with traveling across the ocean, Yugito learned about the Summoning trick I’d forgotten to tell Gaara about. That knowledge assuaged the big cat’s fears about being separated from her partner by the sea for a little while, but failed to deal with the root problem. I just kinda wished Matatabi had been a bit more of a tiger than a housecat.

Isobu dealt with it in his own way. “I **would be astonished if dipping your toe into the sea actually hurt you.**”

Matatabi had huffed indignantly. “**Just because I am capable of surviving underwater does not mean I have to enjoy it.**”

Aside from feeling like someone needed to give the Two-Tailed Cat a pair of water wings, our supply run went smoothly.

Sure, someone recognized Ace and there may have been a street brawl, and I had to pay off an angry head chef who realized he’d been cheated out of the net worth of a week’s meals. And Yugito didn’t find anything in local fashion that went with her white Kumogakure headband and didn’t seem to be cut to her sternum, for some reason. And Matatabi being summoned in the Autumn Island’s mountain chain set off a minor snowpack disaster when she shook out her flaming fur coat. And the boat I ended up buying ran off of some kind of weird seashell thing in the engine that, if it broke, would probably explode. The sail was there more as a backup than anything.

But hey, no one died.

That we knew of.

Sailing along the sea in a partially shell-powered sailboat, following Ace’s raft, didn’t give us that much to do on a minute to minute basis. Getting the local newspaper in town only provided a few minutes’ worth of distraction since neither of us knew the context for what was being reported, and Ace didn’t seem the type to bother with much other than bounty postings. Or possibly the funny pages.

Thus, things devolved.

“I spy with my little eye…”

**Really** devolved.

“Uh, something orange,” I finished weakly, not wanting to go for the lazy route of picking blue in the open ocean.

“It’s Ace’s hat, isn’t it?” Yugito asked without looking up from her section of the newspaper. She tried to be the mature adult. It was as though to make up for the silliness from the first time I’d met her.

I sagged even as I steered the boat further out of Ace’s wake. “Yep.”
Yugito turned a page, sighed, and then stood up carefully as our boat rocked as it hit wave after wave. Sticking her feet to the ground and otherwise relying on her prodigious feline balance, she strode to the cabin in the bow, opened the door, and slunk inside for an apparent nap.

“Wake me when we get there.” Yep, a catnap.

I sighed. Maybe I shouldn’t have made so many cat puns earlier.

**It cannot possibly be worse than the barrage of turtle puns.**

*Oh, I don’t know. Practice makes…purrfect.*

…Stop talking.

I snickered to myself, slowing the boat a bit when I noticed Ace’s raft seeming to get a little larger to my craft’s left. While *Striker* was certainly faster and didn’t have a fuel limitation as long as Ace ate enough for breakfast, the *Nautilus* (because of the “powered by a seashell” thing) was no slowpoke. And it was big enough to lug *Striker* around if Ace wanted to join us for lunch.

“Yo,” I said as the *Nautilus* drew up beside *Striker*. I called down to Ace, “Something change?”

“Just hungry.”

So, no. And I had a security seal in addition to the food storage seals so Ace didn’t have open access to the larder. Still, I mentally braced myself for yet another resupply run in the near future. If I understood the value of the beri and its purchasing power correctly, we had enough money for maybe two more grocery trips before I had to find a wreck and salvage it.

Ace tied *Striker*’s tow line to the *Nautilus*’s stern somewhere, letting the raft stay about fifty feet away from its new mama to avoid getting caught in her wake. Then he sat down on the deck, stomach growling like a Sea King as I popped half a dozen storage seals and set an Ace-sized lunch down in front of him.

“Just don’t wake Yugito,” I warned, before turning back to my steering.

Ace was kind enough to take his Log Pose off and let me use it to navigate, but admittedly I was only so great at following the little needle. I was still used to compasses, not *this* fickle thing. Worse, Ace had told me about a three-needle version that was supposedly standard issue in the New World. Since we were only in Paradise, his single-needle Log Pose would suffice for now.

New day, new Grand Line bullshit.

Speaking of, the bloody needle flipped around the second I took my eyes off it. I hastily corrected our course, then corrected again when the thing spun. The currents in this part of the world were just that evil. All the while, Ace continued devouring more food than Yugito or I did in an entire day in one sitting.

What the literal hell was his daily calorie requirement, anyway?

“So, Tidal Blade, I’m assuming Yugito calling you that wasn’t just for show,” Ace said once he was finished, wiping his mouth on his arm.

I shrugged as Ace slid into the…copilot’s seat? It was certainly toward the bow and the left and didn’t include a steering wheel. Did include a cracked Log Pose of its own, though. “It was nice not having to hear that kind of thing for a while.”
“I’m not hearing a ‘no,’” Ace mused aloud, probably mostly for effect.

“Wouldn’t be honest of me,” I said, like I didn’t lie by omission all the time.

Ace allowed me to navigate in my inept way for a little longer in silence. Sure, it forced me to stew in the awkward atmosphere too, but I refused to let it get to me.

“So, are you going to ask anything or just let me dig my own grave?” I asked blandly, following the Log Pose as it shifted yet again.

“I could hand you a shovel…” Ace said in a light tone, “but I think you’re fine on your own.” Still, he leaned back in his chair and decided to actually formulate an enquiry. “So, how’d you get your nickname?”

“I use a sword and control water,” I said. When Ace snorted, I added, “It’s not as though it’s that different from how you earned yours, I bet. Honestly, I was half-convinced that if I ever got one of those fancy nicknames, it’d be ‘Scarface’ because of this.” I gestured vaguely at the line bisecting my face, still visible even so long after the initial injury.

“Nice attempt at changing the topic, but not really what I meant,” Ace replied, and when I looked over he was staring at me with worrying levels of patience.

Drat. “Well, then what did you actually want to know?”

“I’m more asking about what your bounty poster would look like if you had one,” Ace told me, while I looked away. “Obviously, if you’d done anything here Pops would have heard of you, or someone would have, but what about back where Yugito and you are from?”

Oh. War stories. I dug one of my canines into the inside of my lip, trying to decide how much Ace ought to know.

“If it makes it any easier, I could say what parts I’ve guessed,” Ace suggested, though I could see perfectly well that it wasn’t a request. Maybe this kind of subtle command presence was partly why Whitebeard had made him a division commander.

“Give it your best shot,” I said anyway, because it wasn’t like Ace could guess much worse than what I’d actually done. Or what Yugito would be able to tell him if he asked.

“All right then.” Ace lowered his hat to cover his eyes. “Given how you talked about those clans the other day, your hometown’s probably still mercenary or at least has a big part of it that used to be. Only you probably saw a bunch of people bury the hatchet and settle down together, right?”

I favored him with my flattest expression. Strictly speaking, we were still mercenaries. We just had a large homeland and relatively new borders to build grudges over.

“Your brother and your boyfriend wear the same uniform, even if I don’t recognize it. And you’re used to giving orders and having them obeyed, even if you have to argue about it,” Ace went on. “And you wear your heart on your sleeve anyway, so you have a lot of people even in that organization who care about you and vice versa.”

“And you wonder why I’m homesick,” I muttered. Not a bad series of observations, really.

**I hope that under normal circumstances that you would not give so much information away.**

Yeah. Then again, I’m usually not trapped in a weird ocean for months on end with no missions
“The next thing,” Ace said, counting down on his fingers, “is that you’ve done a lot of work in subtle stuff. Sneaking into places and getting out with what you want. And you’re trying to read people all the time. Could be a thief, right?”

I bobbed my left hand in midair, still steering with my right. “Some of the skills overlap.” I’d broken into a Marine base with no trouble not too long ago, after all. Sure, Ace had not been happy to learn he’d been left out, but I didn’t want to risk his safety.

Also, I wasn’t that subtle once I got going. Subtle people did not carry nearly as many explosives as I did. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a pure stealth mission.

“You also fight mostly by tricking people into thinking you’re weaker than you are, until you can’t.” Ace grinned a bit sheepishly. “Which is why you opened with the mist when you fought me, and then didn’t bother at all with Yugito. You just hit her immediately after she decided to fight.”

“Well, you’re right and you’re wrong,” I said, once it seemed like he’d let his points rest for a bit to percolate in my brain. Nothing I hadn’t noticed before, really. “There’s one other reason I used mist first instead of just trying to kill you.”

“Is it because of my roguish charm?” Ace’s grin made the transition to “shit-eating” once again.

More like the fact that Yugito was a Kumo-nin and thus knew what a Kiri-nin could do. A little mist wouldn’t faze her. And past that, I liked the Whitebeard Pirates a lot more than I did Kumogakure. The former had never tried to kill me, except for Teach, and so Ace got the kid gloves while I tried to beat Yugito into the ground. The fact that Yugito was the first hostile chakra-using fighter I’d encountered here also accounted for part of the increased ferocity.

“You keep telling yourself that, Mr. Eye Candy,” I replied somewhat distractedly, eyes returning to the now-reversed Log Pose. I obligingly spun the wheel around to reorient us toward our destination. “Do you remember how I said Yugito had been trained since she was six to fight?”

Ace’s grin fell. “Same deal with you, huh? Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Sort of. I didn’t start combat missions until I was eleven, at least,” I explained, while a rogue wave tried to push us off-course. “But back to the actual topic. You might’ve noticed the giant animals following us around.”

“No, I totally missed that detail,” Ace snarked.

“Hah.” I rolled my eyes. Still, this did need to be explained. “Shukaku, Matatabi, and Isobu aren’t just our partners. And the way we get attached to them isn’t simple or kind. And each one of them, if they got serious, could blast an island back down to sea level.”

Ace went still. His gaze shot out to sea, in what happened to be about the opposite direction of the submerged Isobu.

“People back home figured that having them run around loose was a bad idea, and instead decided to use them as weapons.” Because of course we did. I went on, my voice still terribly calm, “They figured out that if they bound Isobu and the others to children, they could raise loyal soldiers and have one-person armies whenever they wanted. What the Tailed Beasts wanted never came into consideration, and none of us humans were asked for our consent either.” I met Ace’s gaze, all humor gone from my expression. “The word we use for it is ‘jinchūriki.’ In a word, ‘the power of
human sacrifice.’”

**In your case, it was very nearly literal,** Isobu said in a soft tone.

*I try not to think about it much.* Even years after the fact, I could still remember the ritual that had turned me into Isobu’s landlord. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been through worse since, but the helplessness I’d felt then never became *nothing* in my mind. Trying to slot “being turned into a human bomb” into some convenient mental category was an exercise in futility, even if I’d been defused quickly.

And even if I’d met Isobu then.

“So when Usopp said you could pull off some kind of evil ritual with blood…” Ace’s jaw worked. “People actually used them.”

“Mm-hm.” I elaborated in a slow, almost casual tone, “I know how Gaara and Yugito and most of the others ended up the way we are, but that’s their business, not mine. As for me, I was kidnapped when I was thirteen.”

Actually, Kushina had been kidnapped by Kumogakure when *she* was about that age, too. The difference between us was that I hadn’t had Isobu in my chakra coils to start with. Either way, Konoha could have lost *big* if not for the actions of the people around the two of us.

Ace almost looked like he regretted asking, but was continuing to listen out of sheer determination to see this through. “What happened next?”

“I nearly died, for one,” I replied, shrugging. The Log Pose directed us into a slow left turn, so I obliged. “I was being used in a plan to destroy my entire hometown. If I’d been anyone else or my friends were any less stubborn, everyone would’ve died. But they weren’t, so we didn’t.”

“That’s…worse than I thought it would be, actually.” Ace frowned, and once again I’d managed to drag up unpleasant memories for him. “A lot heavier. So, you’re saying you got that nickname because you’re stuck with Isobu?”

“Sort of. About four years after that, an enemy army hit a town in our territory because…well, a couple of reasons. Kidnapping children, killing me, hurting my hometown…” The scar on my chest started to ache again, but that was old news. I shook my head to clear it, then said grimly, “So I killed every single soldier I could get my hands, my sword, or Isobu’s teeth on. I’m pretty sure that’s what solidified it.”

Ace crossed his arms. “I guess I’m starting to see why you keep worrying about me. The only one I know who could destroy whole islands that fast is Pops, but he never would. World Government battleships, maybe…” His mouth formed a grim, narrow line. “Sorry for bringing it up.”

“You say that like I haven’t brought up sensitive points for you, too.” When Ace looked up, perhaps a bit surprised that I’d been able to read him at all, I just said, “It’s fine, Ace. It all happened years ago. Isobu and I get along fine now.”

**Mostly.**

*Hush, you.* “And you were right to say I was a soldier. But more specifically, I *am* a shinobi. Or a ninja,” I added belatedly, since in a pirate world it wasn’t like there would be a lot of exposure to my type of culture. Gaara had used the word before, but I didn’t know if Ace had understood it. “Yugito, too.”
“…Okay, I don’t think you get how silly that sounds,” Ace said after a pause.

*Oh, it definitely sounded dumb to me before I had to grow up as one.* “Enlighten me,” I suggested.

“I think I get what you mean, like spies and assassins, but the only people we have here who do that are the Cipher Pol units who do the World Government’s dirty work,” Ace said, and it seemed like he was fighting a grin. Sounded like ANBU to me, though. “‘Ninja’ is what I used to play with Luffy when we were kids and I needed him to stay quiet.”

Water off a duck’s back, really. “To be fair, I know I used to play at being a ninja when I was a kid, too.” I found myself smiling faintly. “Anyway, that’s pretty much it. Satisfied?”

Of course, that wasn’t everything. It didn’t cover how most humans viewed Tailed Beasts as nothing less than living natural disasters and nothing more than malicious monsters. How jinchūriki were shunned and feared for being more monster than human. How Gaara and one timeline’s Naruto had grown up. How people acted like jinchūriki didn’t deserve to exist when our entire lot in life was dictated by other humans and their ambitions.

Cynical of me, I supposed. I’d gotten lucky. For one thing, I actually had a therapist to talk to about this stuff.

“I got a good story out of it, so I think so,” Ace said, getting up. He picked up his Log Pose and strapped it to his wrist again, then waltzed to the Nautilus’s stern. “Okay, time for me to lead again. Slow her down a bit so Striker can catch up!”

“The *Nautilus* is definitely a guy,” I corrected Ace, but I still did as he asked and let the Nautilus relax a little.

Ace ignored me, of course, and took off as soon as he undid the tow line. Within a few seconds, his speedboat-raft was shooting along ahead in the water as though strapped to a rocket. All I had to do was get the Nautilus up to speed again.

“So, Yugito, did you have anything to add?” I asked the supposedly empty air.

Yugito obligingly dropped her camouflage genjutsu, then lowered herself into the seat Ace had recently vacated. “He’s not as observant as he thinks he is.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed no one around here has genjutsu resistance.” Still, I glanced over at her and said in a warning tone, “But try to be careful who you use jutsu on. As far as I can tell, chakra might literally be poisonous to people here.”

Yugito frowned faintly, a small crease appearing between her eyes. “Have you had to test it?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get a conclusive result.” Teach was still apparently alive, after all. And I’d have to check in with Ace later to see if he’d gotten motion sickness during this conversation, just to be sure. “I’ve mostly been treating the people here with kid gloves to avoid drawing unneeded attention.”

“Smart move,” Yugito commented.

Aaaand I was pretty sure I was being patronized. “Call me a soft-hearted idiot if you want. You won’t be the first.”

“Now who’s being catty?” Yugito muttered, then clapped a hand over her mouth in horror.
So I was contagious. Still, hearing Yugito make those kinds of comments helped calm my nerves a bit. “Yugito, I know we’re…kinda peers, of a sort.”

“We are,” Yugito admitted after a moment. After all, we were the same age, same rank, and had similarly-powerful Tailed Beasts shackled to our souls. “I don’t consider us friends by any means, just so we’re perfectly clear.”

Naruto and Luffy had both made fast friends out of people who said things like that. I didn’t have their knack, but I hadn’t exactly liked the Whitebeards at first either. Maybe I’d grow on her.

“Still, we have a similar mission. To get home.” It wasn’t like she could protect Kumogakure from the middle of the Grand Line, even if she knew where we sat relative to the Elemental Nations. “So I think a temporary alliance would be appropriate for the time being.”

Or longer. I have not spoken to Matatabi at length for centuries. She can likely convince her partner to be more amenable to a deal.

Yugito looked at my extended right hand, then slowly held out hers as well. We fist-bumped on it. “For now.”

“For now,” I agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Dramatic irony is fun. As are limited POVs. :)


“...You know, I expected him to be a lot scarier than this,” I said to no one in particular. Maybe the cow trying to eat a patch of clover nearby.

“You,” Yugito began, then sighed. She finished somewhat lamely with, “...are certainly not alone there.”

“He” was a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall Iwagakure shinobi who was placidly tending to an entire field of cows, with the assistance of a girl literally half his size. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Pause. Rewind. How did we get here?

Traveling by sea the way we did it, without a concrete destination aside from “next,” was a bit like leaping into a taxi and telling the driver “follow that car!” Only more tedious.

At least we didn’t end up in a seagoing seven-vehicle pile-up. We did attract at least one Marine vessel, but Ace set it on fire before Isobu drove a three-story spike through its hull and sank it. While the sailors piled into lifeboats, we made a speedy getaway in our absurdly fast watercrafts. Yugito and I were at least careful to change our appearances to hide exactly who was riding the vessel following Fire First Ace around, but sooner or later the Nautilus would lose anonymity.

At least I remembered to cloak the entire ship in a genjutsu to make it look like a Grand Line whale. It probably really raised more questions than answers, but as long as they were the wrong questions, I could live with that.

“Blackbeard’s been spotted on this next island,” Ace said, as we ate lunch. He, as always, ate the lion’s share. Even after face-planting into his plate. “I should be able to track him down pretty quick.”

“And we’ll all be home by Christmas,” I muttered, because it was never that easy.

“What’s Christmas?” Yugito asked, frowning.

“You don’t have Christmas?!” Ace burst out, spraying both of us with bits of food.

Yugito and I both had to clean our faces with napkins before we could reply to that. Yugito, perhaps of the opinion that the correction wouldn’t stick without a sharp reminder, reached over with one hand and slammed his jaw shut.

“Ow!” was what he said to that once Yugito let go, but at least he swallowed first. He shook
himself, blinking at Yugito, then said, “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. But you don’t know about Christmas?”

“It’s a winter holiday where people exchange gifts, celebrate being alive, and generally party,” I told Yugito, ignoring Ace’s astonished expression. “It’s a little like New Year’s, but with more shouting and heavier food.”

“How do you know about it?” Yugito asked, her eyes narrow with suspicion.

“I overheard some of the Whitebeard Pirates talking about it back on the Moby Dick,” I said, shrugging. It was a lie, but I didn’t feel like explaining everything to Yugito. Unless I was dying and for some reason the secret cure involved confessing every little thing I’d ever hidden from people. Even then, I’d have to think it over. “Something or other about Thatch’s Christmas pudding?”

“…Dammit, now I’m homesick,” Ace griped. Then, “What were we talking about before this?”

“You had some kind of plan involving Blackbeard,” Yugito prompted. “Though if he is as dangerous as you say he is, it might not be so easy.”

Which was what I was really getting at with the Christmas comment. “I’d rather be there for backup, if possible.”

You may not be able to, Isobu interrupted. When I dutifully rendered that remark into real speech for Ace and Yugito’s benefits, I got some odd looks.

“Why not?” Ace asked, though he didn’t seem all that disappointed.

Because I believe the next island we will visit is also where Kokuō and her host are staying, was the forcibly calm reply. Isobu still wanted to get his shot in at Teach and didn’t seem likely to forget it, but a Tailed Beast battle would pull him away from presumably-populated areas to fight his horse-like sibling.

“Already?” Yugito’s frown deepened. “That would mean we’ll be facing Han of Iwagakure.”

There really wasn’t any love lost between the major shinobi villages. Iwa and Kumo may have been allies when I was a kid, but times changed. Suna was only Konoha’s ally because of special circumstances owing to the last war and Sensei’s skill with fūinjutsu. That, and Suna was probably the weakest of the five major villages anyway. It didn’t precisely need allies, but it wouldn’t drop them for no reason.

And that didn’t even get into the nitty-gritty of actually tackling the fight. Neither Yugito nor I had any access to higher-level nature transformations like the Lava Release kekkei genkai, but both of Iwa’s jinchūriki did. Han’s was Boil Release, which was probably the worst of the two given what precedent Terumi Mei had set. Nothing before or since could melt a Susanoo outright.

“On the positive side, I don’t think he’ll be able to take on both of us if we fight at full strength,” I said after a moment of pure dread. If Han hadn’t met any other jinchūriki, he would only be fighting with his own power. Which was still significant, but not unbeatable.

“I think you both might be worrying over nothing,” Ace said with a shrug. “I mean, you two get along all right. And Gaara was a nice kid. Han should be decent, too.”

Yugito and I exchanged a glance that communicated one point with perfect clarity: “Is this guy serious?”
We sure as hell weren’t friends. Actually, I was sure the only reason Yugito hadn’t tried to murder me basically came down to “Isobu” and “I have more tails than you, nya-ha-ha-ha.” One possible secondary reason was…well, moments like this, where Ace did something that threw both of us equally for a loop.

Ace continued without apparently noticing our disbelief, “Anyway, I’ll see if I can figure out where Blackbeard is while you two find Han. The island isn’t too big, so it’s not like either one will be able to hide for long.”

Saying it like that jinxed us twice over.

Still, we did go with that as a sort of basic plan. Assuming that Teach couldn’t break the island in half or something equally extreme, Ace would…probably be okay. Yugito and I were less likely to be fine, but could probably double back in time for the inevitable literal firefight. Maybe.

In the end, Ace visited the actual city on the island. Yugito and I, however, looped around to the Spring Island’s abundant farming on the Nautilus and docked somewhere well out of the way. Without summoning either Matatabi or Isobu, we headed inland and observed for a good long time.

Yugito sat in a tree that looked about as large as some of the ones I remembered from the Forest of Death. I, meanwhile, went about bothering the townsfolk for rumors in a manner I was sure would remind them of Ace if they had seen him first. As it was, I remained a stranger bothering people for accounts of a giant white animal, because I didn’t have a clue what Han looked like if he took his armor off.

“Young man, are you talking about the four-horned unicorn?” asked one of the farmers as I sat on his fence.

Thanks to the Transformation technique, I looked like Lee back when he had a braid as opposed to his Gai-derived bowl cut. Not as small, of course, but anyone from home would have seen the resemblance my transformed state bore to him.

“There’s a four-horned unicorn?” I asked blankly. Didn’t that defeat the point of the term “unicorn?”

“Of course there is,” the farmer told me, beckoning me to lean down so I could listen to his whisper. “We try keeping it quiet because the World Nobles probably wanting to shoot it, but it’s a good beast.”

…Huh. “I promise I won’t tell anyone about it,” I lied. I had to at least tell Yugito.

“See that you don’t, kid. You look like a decent sort,” the farmer added.

Probably because Lee had the second most honest face I’d ever seen. And I was kinda borrowing it. “Thank you for telling me, sir.”

“In exchange, can you check on little Moda for me? Her parents work for the Marines, and they did hire a babysitter, but I’m not sure I trust him,” the farmer said, before I could hop off the fence and race to tell Yugito about Kokuō being sighted. “He’s just…shady, somehow.”

“Will do, sir!” I chirped, and disappeared the instant his back was turned.

Then I dragged Yugito out of her tree like she was an actual cat and I was a firefighter. Together, we set off down the lane looking quite unlike ourselves until we found a farm that looked a little different from the rest. Yugito playing at being C for a few minutes—or so she said—and I
pretended to be Tenten. We dropped our disguises once we were out of sight of anyone not on the aforementioned farm, then got a chance to observe again.

The cows were tiny. Like, half the height of the already-small child who was tending them. She was probably somewhere between nine and eleven years old, with light brown hair held back by a bandanna. She moved around the animals with no visible hesitation, carrying a pail of milk in each hand.

Those same little cows were practically footstools to the huge guy carrying one cow under each arm. Now, I had never seen Han in person, and his habit of wearing lobster-red armor as well as a white shroud made picking out any of his features an utter pain. But I did remember his flat brown eyes from the Bingo Book description. Everything else about him was a surprise, whether the fact that he’d clearly had his nose broken at some point or that his hair was a close-cropped dirty blond. Or that he was probably around thirty or so.

Also, the fact that he was basically doing his farm work in pajamas, with a white-and-green striped hat. And wore geta. Between that and his height he stuck out like one hell of a sore thumb, even if he was suppressing his chakra down to practically nothing. Still, everyone on this little farm seemed happy.

“I don’t really want to interrupt them,” I admitted, leaning on the edge of the fence with my arms folded. “You?”

“You are utterly spineless,” Yugito informed me.

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard that. Not even the first time I’ve told myself that,” I told Yugito, tilting my head slowly. “But I’m not gonna scare the shit out of a ten-year-old civilian by attacking first.”

Yugito sighed deeply. “Then how do you want to approach him?”

“I was thinking of saying hello?” Then I thought that over and winced as I remembered the whole Iwa-Konoha relationship and how thoroughly Madara had burned that bridge. “Or you can do it.”

Yugito kicked me in the ankle by way of reply.

I took that as a sign to get moving, and pushed away from the fence to follow my non-plan. “You get to pull my unconscious body out of there if I screw up.”

“I make no promises,” said Yugito. She smirked, so I had to assume she got the joke if nothing else. Or was making a joke at my expense.

As I trotted down the lane toward probable doom, I prodded Isobu for an update. Isobu, have you had any luck with contacting Kokuō?

Only as much as she will allow. Kokuō was always the shyest among us, and will not leave the forest.

How is she even hiding in there? She’s almost entirely white.

Kokuō is using the same mist generation ability as you and I do—though without the genjutsu component. Though a few humans have seen her, she does not feel threatened here.

That quick conversation helped tide me over until I reached the front gate to the little farm of miniature cows. Unlike the section of fence where Yugito and I had been standing before, these
walls were made of stones held together by mortar in varying states of repair. From the look of things, parts had been patched by Earth Release ninjutsu when nobody was looking, even if I couldn’t feel chakra in the wall anymore.

I could definitely feel it in the field, though, with Han’s personal aura tucked in tight against his core to avoid touching anyone else. Still, it felt like a tea kettle about to boil for me. Out in the woods beyond the farm, Kokuō’s pervasive chakra seemed to form an impenetrable barrier against other life that would dare do anyone harm.

Or maybe that was me projecting a bit.

“Hello there!” said the little milk-maid when she noticed me. “Can I help you?”

I waved back, though I pulled my chakra practically back into my Gates when I noticed Han looking over. “Mm, kind of. I was wondering if I could speak to your friend there for a moment?”

The girl whirled on the spot and said, “Mr. Han, there’s someone here to see you!”

I was starting to see why this girl’s neighbors were worried for her safety. But as Han made his slow, ominous way over to the fence, I found myself drawn back to her enthusiasm even as he approached.

“Miss Moda,” I said, prompting her to turn around again, “one of your neighbors asked me if I could check in on you. Are you and Mr. Han getting along all right?”

“Oh, Mr. Han is just fine. He’s helping me with the farm,” Moda said, just as Han finally got close enough to talk.

I had to angle my head back a bit to see his face, and the expression there wasn’t reassuring. He said, without taking his eyes off me, “Moda, could you go get some water from the river? I suspect our guest may enjoy some tea.”

“You got it, Mr. Han!” Moda said, bowing. To me, she added, “You haven’t had tea until you try it with milk from my farm, you know!”

We both waved as she took off. Han even managed a smile, but as soon as she was out of immediate earshot he scowled when he looked down at me. “If you even think of hurting that girl…”

“I would rather eat broken glass,” I told him, dead serious.

“Good,” Han said. “So, Konoha-nin, what do you want?”

Not for the first time, I wondered if my facial scar was the thing that gave me away. I certainly wasn’t wearing any village-based symbols.

“Is it so hard to believe that I just want to talk?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

Han did, too. “So, talk.”

“All nine of us are trapped in this weird world until we can all meet up and be friendly or something,” I explained briefly, though I didn’t doubt that Han knew exactly which “nine” I was talking about. There weren’t many available clubs that people from Iwa and Konoha could both join. “And if you make the Seal of Reconciliation with me, you should be able to use Kokuō’s chakra again.”
And like hell I’d reveal that Naruto could be around.

Han kept perfectly still for a long second. “And what do you get out of this?”

“I get more access to my partner’s powers, too, and I get one step closer to going home,” I said quietly.

“I have nothing at home to return to,” Han told me, closing his eyes. “I doubt my village is even looking for me except to retrieve Kokuō.”

Ah, dammit. I sighed deeply, my gaze dropping to one of the nearby cows. “Is that so?”

“It is. Here, no one knows who I am.” Han drummed his fingers along one bicep, then said, “It is…peaceful.”

“And yet you still look like you’ve been getting about as much sleep as I have,” I remarked, having noted the circles under his eyes. He was getting the same dreams I did. Yugito hadn’t mentioned anything since Corkscrew Island for the sake of her pride, but I was observant enough to notice that, too.

“The only reason I can see for agreeing to this bargain is to get Kokuō’s power to survive,” Han told me, still looming. “No dream can be as terrible as returning to that waking nightmare.”

I was saved from having to argue against that by a startled shriek from Moda, making both of us jump. “There’s a person in the water! Mr. Han, help!”

I vaulted the fence as Han took off with all the speed his ninja training gave him, reaching Moda’s little fishing pier over the river in a blink with me on his heels. I felt Yugito’s chakra flare as she also Body Flickered to the scene, perhaps thinking that Han and I had decided to kill each other after all.

Moda had retrieved a certain orange hat from the water on her own, but Han reached down and helped her haul the drowning victim out of the river with all the apparent effort of a man retrieving an errant kitten. It seemed that, once again, the commander of the Second Division of the Whitebeard Pirates had about as much luck with water as Ranma.

While Han dragged my pirate friend onto the little pier and Moda sprang into action like a tiny lifeguard, I slapped my hand across my face. “Dammit, Ace.”

“How often does this happen?” Yugito asked, while from the sound of things Ace spat up water like a human fountain.

“Way more often than you’d think,” I grumbled. Still, I thought as I finally felt ready to view this bizarrely commonplace scene, it could have definitely been worse. “Han, Miss Moda, thanks for saving this idiot.”

“I take it you know him, then.” Han picked up Ace’s hat and steam-cleaned it with barely a whisper of chakra, then pulled Moda back while Ace continued to work on the not-drowning thing. Coughing up that much water couldn’t be healthy.

“He’s been our navigator—of sorts,” Yugito hedged. When Han finally looked down at her and recognition showed in his eyes, she bowed and said, “It’s nice to finally meet you in person. Nii Yugito.”

“…Likewise, I suppose,” Han responded, a little off his game. “I’m Han.”
“Mr. Han, if this is their friend, we should help look after him while he recovers, right?” Moda piped up, since Ace had finally stopped coughing. He still didn’t move on his own, though, so perhaps this would take a bit longer to recover from than the last…three times?

For a guy whose power literally required him to sink like a stone, I would have figured Ace would be more careful around water.

Moda was the only one of us women who could pull off a puppy-dog look, so neither Yugito or I bothered. Still, Han folded like a damp paper towel. “All right, Moda.”

Han scooped Ace up like the pirate didn’t weigh anything at all, while I grabbed his hat and Yugito picked up Moda’s forgotten pails. The four of us (with one casualty) then trekked back to Moda’s house under her cheery command, only occasionally dodging miniature cow pies along the way.

In a way, it was kind of lucky that Ace wore more accessories than pieces of clothing. Han got him dried off and sorted out in record time, then bundled up in at least two layers of blankets and left him to sleep off the morning’s adventure in a spare cot that had to be Han’s. Given Ace’s weird physiology, I was going to assume that if he didn’t manage to die in the preceding few minutes, he’d be fine if we left him alone.

Even so, I needed to get him some kind of bell. Or get a vivre card from him if I could. I still didn’t know how they were made, but if they really were as accurate as reported, they sounded much more useful when direct chakra usage made him want to puke his guts up.

“Thank you for saving my friend,” I said as I bowed deeply to Moda, once everything was sorted out for the time being. “If you hadn’t spotted him, he would have drowned.”

“Our friend,” Yugito corrected me. When I blinked at her, she just took a long sip of the milk Moda served her guests, clearly enjoying the experience and my confusion.

“I’m just glad I could help,” Moda replied, while Han continued serving tea. With milk.

Moda certainly kept her promises, though Yugito declined the tea half of the equation.

“Miss Moda, would you like us to do anything for you on the farm?” I asked. I hadn’t done a real D-rank since the last time my students had earned punishment duty and was feeling a bit restless while waiting for Ace to recover.

“Well, um…” Moda hemmed and hawed, clearly unwilling to let guests work. I already knew from her nosy neighbor that her parents were working for the Marines, but the militaries that I knew of generally tried not to ship out both adults in a household at once. Yet another consideration for the pile. “I do have one thing that Mr. Han can’t help me with…but it will take a long time. Maybe after your friend wakes up?”

I bowed my head again over my mug of tea. “That’s fine. But if you do think of anything in the meantime, don’t hesitate to let us know.”

“What is this ‘we’ business?” Yugito muttered. When I elbowed her, she subsided with a wordless grumble.

“You could do something for me,” Han suggested, likely more to make us shut up than anything. He certainly used that kind of impatient tone.

Anyway, that was how we ended up patrolling the farm and nearby areas for Han’s peace of mind, in separate directions. Kokuō didn’t put in an appearance, though Isobu and Matatabi separately...
assured us that she was aware of our presence and didn’t mind us being there. Once patrols were finished, though, there wasn’t much left to do but wait.

Ace woke up about an hour and a half later, stumbling out of the little thatch-roofed farmhouse with a yawn already escaping his mouth. As though he hadn’t almost been killed by sheer accident and forgetting his buoyancy problems, he stumbled up to the low wall where the rest of us were gathered.

Moda crouched by one of her cows, stroking her fluffy head and singing softly as the animal drank from a repurposed roasting pan. Han knelt next to one of the other cows, running his thumb over the sharp-looking tip of one of her horns and clearly trying to decide if he wanted to file it down. Yugito was drinking her third or fourth cup of whole-fat milk and was clearly in heaven. As for me, I was writing up a series of tracking seals to add to the pile of non-explosive fūinjutsu I finally had a chance to work on.

I clearly couldn’t rely on Ace to do much to ensure his own safety.

“Did I miss something?” Ace asked when he finally reached the rest of us. Dressed in a clearly borrowed shirt and sandals, he resembled a beach tourist getting one over too many fruity drinks.

“You had another near-drowning experience. For the third time in a few months, from what Kei tells me,” Yugito remarked rather cheerfully, since she was still riding the emotional high of finding her favorite food in perfect form. It didn’t mean she couldn’t get a shot in, of course.

“How did that happen, anyway?” I asked, as I completed a mostly-passive tracker for Ace. He was a walking trouble magnet, and I needed a way to keep tabs on him if he didn’t want to hand me a vivre card.

“Funny you should ask…” Ace scratched the back of his neck and the tips of his ears turned a tiny bit red as Yugito and I watched.

The story, as it turned out, made me regret that I hadn’t chased after him the second I noticed that he was searching for Teach in a town. Not because I would have fought a pitched battle in a population center, but because every pit stop on our trip with a restaurant got to suffer Ace’s eating habits and his lack-of-payment habits. I’d been dealing with that problem by paying for his dine-and-dashing without letting him know, but this time I’d been occupied spying on civilian farmers. By the time Ace got around to explaining how he’d kicked a guy in the head without checking that he was Teach—as opposed to a completely unrelated Dr. Blackbeard innocently practicing medicine—I sympathized with the townsfolk more than I really wanted to. Ace could be annoying as all hell.

“Try verifying targets next time,” Yugito suggested, like a shinobi would never make that kind of mistake.

I knew better. Nagato’s childhood wouldn’t have ended with his parents dead on the floor if we did. But there was no point to adding that little detail to this conversation when Ace wouldn’t understand who I was talking about and Yugito wouldn’t care.

“Hey, you don’t even know what Teach looks like. The resemblance was pretty close,” Ace said defensively, holding up his hands to forestall Yugito’s scolding.

“Your information was nonetheless wrong,” Yugito argued, undeterred. “And that exhausts our leads.”
“So, Ace, Miss Moda over there has a favor to ask now that you’re awake,” I said, mostly to distract Ace and Yugito before they could do or say something ill-advised. Again. “Since she saved your life and all.”

Ace blinked, turning his attention from the two kunoichi mocking his recent “accomplishment” and toward the little girl and giant guy tending the miniature herd of mini-cows. He caught his hat without looking when I tossed it at him, then sat it straight on his head. “Right, then. I better go apologize for the trouble I’ve caused.”

“And nothing about the trouble he’s caused us, I’m sure;” Yugito muttered, then continued drowning her sorrows in milk.

“He apologized for mistaking me for a man when we first met.” I shrugged, folding up my seals for easy storage. “But at this point I think we’ve been folded into the ‘family’ category. Experience tells me families tend to be more casual about this kind of thing,” I concluded with a sage nod.

“…Weird,” Yugito said, after giving me a long stare.

I wasn’t sure if that reaction said more about her history or about mine, really.

…Probably mine.

Anyway, at that point Ace had gotten through the usual niceties with Moda under Han’s careful supervision. That included two exchanged deep bows of gratitude, and a brief recap of what had happened while Ace was out. She even introduced Han.

“Oh, and here!” Moda said, thoughtfully providing a cup of fresh milk to Ace. She might have been a very small ninja, because that cup appeared out of basically nowhere.

“Thank you very much,” Ace said, for probably the fourth time in the same conversation. “Is there anything I can do to make up for all the trouble I’ve caused you?”

“There is, there is! Please deliver this letter for me!” Moda concluded, bowing her head and holding out the envelope like it was the most precious thing in the world. “It’s for Vice Admiral Comil.”

While I pressed my lips together to avoid frowning, Ace remained unfazed by the idea of wandering into a naval base despite having a bounty of over half a billion beris on his head. Yugito’s chakra twitched like a disturbed campfire, but otherwise she didn’t react.

Ace just grinned, accepting the letter. “Of course I’ll deliver it. It’s no problem.” He tipped his hat to Moda, making her giggle, and then strode back toward the house to retrieve his other things. All the way, Han glared a figurative hole in his back.

“He does know he’s a pirate, right?” Yugito wondered at the universe as he passed.

“Some days, I wonder;” I remarked dryly. In a somewhat louder voice, I added for Ace’s sake, “I hope you don’t think you’re taking that mission alone after what just happened.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ace scoffed. He was pretty confident for a guy who would’ve been dead more than an hour ago if not for a sharp-eyed ten-year-old. “It’s just a quick infiltration, and I might be able to find more info on Teach.”

I rolled my eyes, already standing up with all my equipment packed. “Sure thing, hotshot. It’s not like we haven’t been using that kind of argument on each other since day one.”
Ace waved off my commentary, disappearing into the house.

I then turned my attention to Han and Moda, instead. “Han, I don’t think we’ll be coming back to this island after the mission. We’d better get the light show over with.”

“Is it going to be something fun?” Moda asked, while Han slowly approached me as though walking to his execution platform.

Dramatic of him. I held out my fist.

He stared at it. “Is this a Konoha thing?”

“It’s certainly a childish thing,” Yugito muttered.

“Just bump your right fist against mine,” I said, sighing. I didn’t want to admit that I’d gotten the impression that the fist-bump was about the least offensive way I could think of to get hostile jinchūriki to have anything to do with me. Such as Yugito, who hadn’t wanted to make the Seal either. “The Seal of Reconciliation has too much baggage, right? So just do this, and you’ll still be able to protect Moda better than before.”

“I don’t really need Mr. Han to protect me,” Moda protested. She flexed her skinny biceps. “See? I’m strong!”

Han’s gaze softened as he looked at his tiny charge, and he completed the fist-bump. It was easier than putting up with my whining, I supposed. Before Han’s wrist and mine completely blinded all of us with that obnoxious purple light, Yugito settled her hand over both of ours and Han’s Wristband of Doom gained two more kanji.

YOU HAVE FOUND THE FIFTH.

ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

Then all of us separated to the sound of Moda clapping.

I blinked to clear my vision of spots, then flexed my right hand and called on Isobu’s chakra. The four revealed numerical kanji disappeared under a layer of blood-red chakra, as dark as a scab and rippling like something alive lurked under it. I turned my hand back and forth, then let the energy fade away.

I had the V2 cloak once again. Not that I’d ever be able to use the whole thing after what I’d done to my left arm in the past, but having the ability to reproduce the Coral Palm gave me yet another fun component for my combat style.

“Well, well, well,” I murmured. “Four unlocked seals for the V2 cloak.”

“I suppose I’ll have to remember that, since you don’t,” Yugito said, shrugging as she turned off her own V1 cloak test firing.

“That stuff was really cool, even if I don’t understand it at all. Mr. Han, does that mean you can do new things too?” Moda asked, automatically turning back to her giant bodyguard.

“I believe so, Moda,” he said in a gentle tone.

“Then this was worth it. Show me sometime, okay?”
“I will—” Han began, though I was already shaking my head. “What is it?”

“I don’t even use that much chakra near Ace,” I told him. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder to Moda’s house. “People here have about as much resistance to it as most people do to Kokuō’s.”

Han’s eyes widened just slightly. He wasn’t truly surprised, because it wasn’t much of a logical leap for a jinchūriki to make after a few unfortunate incidents, but confirmation of the problem’s existence nonetheless firmed his resolve. Then he turned his attention back to Moda and corrected himself with, “I will not, Moda. I am sorry.”

Moda frowned for maybe ten seconds. Then she smiled again. “It’s okay, Mr. Han.”

This kid was definitely one of a kind. Ish.

…Now I kinda wanted to know what her reaction to Kokuō would be. It’d be something between hilarious and sad if she was just as accepting of Tailed Beasts as Luffy and Ace and her nosy neighbor were, when so many people at home preferred to run away in terror.

**Ignorance helps.**

*That it does.*

And then Ace wandered back out, gear in hand, and the game was afoot.

We got all our shit and shipped out, with Ace apparently deciding it was time to go back to being a half-naked cowboy pirate and getting a giant lunch box as a going-away present. We made sure to wave goodbye to Han and Moda, though I didn’t doubt Han was secretly still trying to kill us with his mind. He might’ve been an ally, of sorts, but he wasn’t much of a friend just yet.

Maybe later. I still gave him a means to track me down later, via fūinjutsu.

Anyway, we had a few things to clarify once we got on our way.

“We don’t have a plan, do we?” Yugito sighed as soon as the thought became a sentence hanging in midair, weighing us down by existing. “We never have a plan.”

“The plan’s pretty simple. I go in, mug someone for a uniform, and then sneak around until I find what I’m looking for,” Ace explained cheerfully, in between tearing huge chunks out of a loaf of fresh-baked bread Moda had thoughtfully packed for him. “It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“We never have a plan,” I agreed with Yugito, as though Ace hadn’t said anything.

“That hurts, you two,” Ace said. He had his hand over his heart. “Right here.”

I reached over from my position at the *Nautilus*’s wheel and pulled his hat down over his eyes. “Shut up.”

“Pff, hey, can you even imagine doing this kind of thing back on the *Moby Dick*?” Ace asked, once he’d rescued his hat from my attentions. “You were a million times quieter.”

“Guess I came out of my shell,” I said breezily.

**Ugh.**

Ace snickered, then devoured the rest of his allotment of food in a few seconds flat.

“I also have fire puns and cat puns,” I informed them loftily, suppressing any grin threatening to creep onto my face. “Don’t tempt me to use them.”

Yugito kicked the back of my chair. “No.”

Road trip shenanigans on a boat. We really were on our way to being friends, or else one or more of us would have killed the others weeks ago! …Or at least that’s what Naruto would’ve been able to say. I was still pretty sure one of us would be dead inside of another month. Yugito and I still treated each other like sea urchins. If she hadn’t been one seal behind me at all times, Yugito would use her V2 cloak and make me regret ever meeting her.

Once Ace polished off his ludicrously large chunk of our food supply, I eased off the Nautilus’s equivalent of a throttle and scrambled over the back of the seat so Yugito could take her turn and I could eat lunch. Yugito was probably a less-distractible helmswoman than I was, overall, but didn’t really enjoy water activities. She could sleep off some trips entirely, though I was never certain if it was due to motion sickness or not.

“What do we know about the internal structure of G-2?” I asked, while picking up a sandwich.

Ace shrugged. “Nothing.”

“The number of men?”

Another shrug. “Who knows? Big Marine bases can have a couple thousand, sometimes.”

I could almost feel a headache starting. “…Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Ace grinned. “I just make things up as I go along.”

_Dammit, Ace._ Still, Yugito beat me to the punch with, “If that is the extent of your thinking, Kei and I will be following along to observe your…method.”

…Close enough.

“Or are we testing the Marines’ security?” I wondered aloud.

“Who cares?” Ace said with a careless wave of his hand. “As long as the letter gets delivered, the Marines end up looking like the idiots they are, and we get out before they figure things out, we can do whatever we want.”

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True to his word, Ace mugged a Marine for a uniform. Specifically, he stole the jacket. And rolled up the sleeves so that his spelling accident of a tattoo was on full display. He stashed _Striker_ just out of sight while I slapped a fūinjutsu-derived genjutsu over both it and the _Nautilus_, then turned to Yugito and me with a clear expectation of not being laughed at.

And to be fair, we weren’t laughing.

“This…will be a disaster,” Yugito pronounced, shaking her head in disbelief. “A fiasco. We will be telling our non-existent future children about this as a warning for _their_ children. We’re going to need to put this in a report.”

“You seriously have that little faith in me?” Ace asked, unjustifiably baffled (in my humble opinion). “Come on, the Marines are idiots.”
I made the appropriate hand seals and vanished under a thin veil of water-based invisibility genjutsu. Sensei had given it a name I couldn’t remember, so Water Release: Refraction was what I was going with. Underneath it, I had a Transformation going that would make me look like any rank-and-file Marine mook from a distance.

Yugito’s genjutsu felt a bit hotter, probably based on heat distortion, but I had no doubt she knew how to avoid any attention that might bring her.

“You two both suck,” Ace said to what, to him, would have seemed like empty air.

Regardless, all three of us still ventured into the Marine base and immediately split up to explore.

I would not be surprised if he is heading for food, Isobu said as I snuck past a pair of chattering officers. I needed to find higher-ranking prey.

You and me both, Isobu, I thought wryly. Following the sound of one pompous voice and half a dozen others muttering underneath, I made my way up through the corridors and toward an apparent conference room.

“This coffee is undrinkable,” griped someone as I passed.

Not exactly the intelligence I was looking for. Though I’ll skip raiding the coffee pots anyway.

What is coffee?

Think tea, but far stronger, and it basically tastes burned. So what if I was describing it in the worst way I could think of? I had a style to uphold even if I liked coffee.

…Humans eat the strangest things.

I shrugged to myself and headed on, since if all the officers were trapped in a meeting it would be harder for them to personally defend their paperwork. I’d heard enough about Marines to know that of all the people in G-2, only the vice admiral was a real threat. Keeping out of his way made my life a little bit easier.

I spent a few more minutes loitering in hallways as people passed by, trying to decide which office to truly ransack. I wanted a few specific things, like a few more backups for my ink supply and every ship schedule I could get my hands on, but would also stop for such goodies as an unclaimed snail or an operational black book. Thanks to invisibility and the ability to cast a genjutsu on everyone besides Yugito, I could take my sweet time for that.

It took me about ten minutes to find something worth the effort. I managed to find Vice Admiral Comil’s quarters, steal an entire wall safe by stuffing it in a storage seal, and start prepping the filing cabinets for the same treatment. I was making progress!

And then the intruder alert went off, making me freeze in place even though I was still invisible. Outside, men ran all over the place and filled the halls with the sounds of their boots pounding on the floor, but none of them stopped in the office. If I had to imagine, the intruder was probably my terminally unsubtle friend with the pyromaniac tendencies. Yugito wasn’t that careless.

I packed up my things and eased the door open as soon as I couldn’t detect anyone outside of it, then strode out of the officers’ hall with half a mind to knock the freckles right off Ace’s face.

I wonder what broke his cover.
Probably something stupid. I rounded a corner as the Marines continued to run around in a panic, shouting about an intruder. Really, if this was their idea of decent response time, they needed a good kick in the pants.

Ace seemed willing to provide an incentive.

“I take it this wasn’t our fault,” Yugito’s voice whispered out of a hollow in the wall. At first glance, the shadow of the columns nearby was entirely innocent, but I could tell exactly where Yugito was.

“Not remotely,” I replied, already moving on. Yugito would be fine, and I needed to assuage my curiosity as well as Isobu’s by investigating the cause of the disturbance.

Of course, it had to be Ace.

A few seconds later, I came across an officer, who had clearly been punched unconscious, lying in the middle of a hallway. Judging by the way the Marines were still running all over the place and the officer’s lack of either a jacket or indeed any clothes other than his underwear, it had happened quite recently. That boy needs to wear some kind of tracking device. This is ridiculous.

And you need to give him one, Isobu responded. He yawned, then said, Incidentally, a new ship has arrived in the harbor.

Oh?

…It is now aflame. The window approximately thirty meters from your location disgorged a fireball.

…I don’t suppose you have any idea why?

“This coffee is terrible!” is the only thing I heard. Aside from the shouting going on now.

Though no one could see me, I dragged my hand over my face. This was becoming far too common of an experience. Would it have killed Ace to just not do that?

“The secret intelligence ship is on fire!” screeched someone, and I looked up from my moment of comedic despair to figure out who the hell had spoken.

Given the coat, this was Vice Admiral Comil. In the time it took me to think that, the man rushed off while shouting about fire control, clutching at his face in utter panic.

I sighed, then opened the window and snuck out. While G-2 was nestled in a pretty sheltered spot, the ability to walk right up the fortress’s walls made their physical defenses pretty useless. While the flaming ship in the bay marked the spot where Ace would probably end up, for the sake of the show he’d just started, I hopped from rock to rock toward the Nautilus.

About ten minutes later, Yugito’s chakra finally started heading my way. The entire time, I’d mostly just been watching the ship burn and wishing that someone, somewhere, had invented marshmallows. With Yugito on her way, though, I dismissed the thought of confections and turned my attention to the mission again.

“I probably don’t need to tell you where our navigator ended up,” Yugito said, still not dropping her genjutsu.

“Nope,” I said. “If I were a betting person…”
“Don’t even finish that sentence. I don’t want to know,” Yugito groaned, sitting down on the seat that, in a car, would have been “shotgun.” On the Nautilus, I wasn’t sure what to call it. None of the locals seemed to use anything other than flintlocks of various types, so the terminology probably didn’t carry over.

Sometime after that, Ace finally showboated his way out of the Marine ship’s funeral pyre, even if he got shot at plenty of times. And probably ended up standing on a man’s head. It took him a bit longer to actually escape the base, but by the time he reached us Yugito and I were already ready to go.

In fact, we were nearly gone, being already ten meters off the rocks by the time Ace arrived.

“Screw you both,” he said, once his leap carried him onto the back of the Nautilus safely.

“You brought that on yourself,” said Yugito, who was wholly out of patience.

“So you were going to take Striker?” Ace demanded. Why was he more offended by the prospect of losing his boat than his life?

“Actually,” I said from the helm, “I was going to bring them around in case we needed to pick you up.”

“Oh. That’s cool, then,” Ace said. He glanced around, then added, “Kind of a crappy haul, though…”

Yugito pinched the bridge of her nose, but otherwise ignored Ace’s remark. Instead, she said to me, “Why do you keep spoiling him? There are genin with more discipline!”

“I know, and I’ve trained three of them,” I replied, “but I basically gave up on controlling what Ace does months ago.”

“…The hell’s a genin?” Ace asked, once again perching on the back row of chairs like a giant bird.

Oh, right. “It means ‘low ninja,’ which means…something like ‘rookies,’ or the idiot sailors we ran rings around today.” I shrugged. “They’re usually young, generally get the boring jobs, and get to learn from teachers or retire. And they’re prone to recklessness due to ignorance.”

“On the other hand, genin are our precious children,” Yugito corrected me a bit aggressively. “Everyone above that rank had to start there.”

Spoken like a woman with no students. I loved my trio of dragon hatchlings, but their antics would be the death of me someday.

…Though Ace was forcing me to reevaluate that assessment pretty much every third day.

“Again, screw you both,” Ace concluded. He held up what looked like an armored briefcase—which still made me wonder how he hadn’t instantly burned everything when he was turned into Swiss cheese via bullets—and held it up. “I got the documents I need to find Teach. What did you get?”

“I stole Comil’s wall safe and secure filing cabinet,” I said. “Yugito?”

“Why do you assume I stole anything?” Yugito crossed her arms defensively.

“Because you’re a kunoichi hanging out with a pirate?” I guessed.
“I didn’t steal anything,” Yugito insisted.

“Then what’s that?” Ace asked, pointing to a lump that finally crawled up onto her back from the depths of her open rucksack.

The lump in question fully uncurled, revealing a disturbingly human-featured blue snail with a pink shell, easily the size of an entire backpack. It had the sigil for G-2 inscribed on both sides of its shell, complete with Marine flag. It bobbed its stalk-eyes and grinned rather nervously when it noticed Ace and I were both gaping at it.

“I heard you complain about using public snails on the island before last,” Yugito explained, shrugging. The snail crawling on her bobbed both eyestalks again, as though trying to imitate her movements and then remembering the limitations of being a mollusk. “So I asked this snail if it would like to join us.”

Ace recovered first, peering at the creature. “Wait, this is the big transponder snail for all of G-2.”

“If Komushi cared, it wouldn’t have agreed,” Yugito said coolly, while the snail attached itself more firmly to her shoulder and hunkered down for the long haul.

“No, I mean that Komushi probably has some serious range with that Marine transceiver rig,” Ace corrected, reaching over to gently poke at the dial on Komushi’s shell and make it spin. Though I hadn’t spent too much time around transponder snails due to traveling a lot in a very small boat or in a very large stomach, the metal contraption attached to Komushi was much more elaborate than the machines I’d seen before. The microphone even had an enamel-and-gold-filigree backing.

“So, does that mean you’ll finally call Captain Whitebeard yourself instead of making me give the updates?” I teased Ace. “Because if you skip out again, I’m going to start making things up.”

“Given your reaction to the stuff I actually do, I say you can do your worst,” Ace challenged me with a bright grin. “Besides, I can just top it next time.”

Punk. There were many reasons I occasionally wanted to throttle him.

“I’m missing a bit of context here,” Yugito said, watching Ace and me bicker. She took the time to feed the giant snail an entire head of lettuce, since Komushi had been patient so far.

“Everyone generally is,” I said distractedly, directing us out of the path of a rampaging Sea King before Isobu grabbed its fore-fins and dragged it underwater. The resultant swell flattened into something the Nautilus could manage when he flared his chakra, and we shot over the disturbance with Striker in tow without an issue.

Amazing how such things became mundane.

“Ace, give him a call,” I continued, like nothing had happened. “He’s probably going to hear about what happened at G-2 sooner or later.”

“Probably later, since we st—recruited their snail,” Ace corrected himself, as Komushi whipped both eyestalks around to stare him down. “You know if I call, I’ll probably get Thatch. And he’s just going to go on and on about food again.”

“I have that part handled,” I replied, so Ace had no further excuses.

While Ace picked up the microphone and punched in the numbers for the Whitebeards’ longest-ranged snail, Yugito frowned and leaned over to whisper, “Would that be about feeding him?”
“Thatch knows him pretty well,” I said. Ace ate like a black hole in a densely-organized star system, which would put a dent in most discretionary funds the world over. And unlike the Whitebeards, I didn’t generally have a steady income from knocking over Marine ships. “Or I guess he could be worried I still haven’t managed to do more on a ship than peel potatoes. He was pretty worked up about that last week.”

“That seems…arbitrary.” Yugito subsided, shaking her head.

“It’s kind of an inside joke,” I admitted, as the other end of Ace’s call finally picked up.

“Who’s this supposed to be?” Thatch’s voice rang out, and Komushi took on his wide habitual grin even if the pompadour and goatee were a bit outside of its capabilities. “Kei, is that you? Did you get another snail again? What did I say last time about buying your own?”

“Sorry, it sounds like I’ve got the wrong number,” Ace replied cheekily. “I’ll hang up.”

“ACE!” Thatch boomed. “Don’t you dare, you complete asshole! We’ve been—Marco, Marco, get over here, Ace finally showed his stupid face—”

And then the other end of the call devolved into a lot of voices shouting at once. Some of them were identifiable as greetings of various decibel counts and hostility levels, and I could pick Thatch out as one of the loudest and happiest of the lot.

“Yugito, do you want to steer?” I asked, leaning over the back of my chair. “I wanna talk to them a bit.”

“Should I introduce myself?” Yugito wondered aloud.

Izo’s voice broke in with, “Who’s there, Ace?”

I supposed that answered her question, then.

“A cat,” I said, before Yugito could say anything.

“I can answer for myself,” Yugito said primly. “My name is Nii Yugito. I am...an associate of Kei’s.”

“Strong words, there,” I said immediately, drawing a glare from her. “But Yugito and I do know each other and are traveling with Ace and won’t let him die.”

“I already said that,” said Yugito peevishly.

“...Is this the same Kei who couldn’t even hold a conversation with Namur?” asked Marco, because he didn’t stop being a snarker even if I was thousands of miles away.

“Hey, I got Ace to finally call you for real, so lay off,” I griped.

Ace rolled his eyes. “You can’t really call Marco out for nagging when that’s half of what you do.”

“...Why did I have to get stuck with you two?” Yugito wondered aloud.

Thatch’s voice piped up again, “Hey, Yugito, are you a cat that ate the Hito Hito no Mi, or a human that ate the Neko Neko no Mi?”

Yugito paused, nonplussed. “Excuse me?”

I got the impression that Thatch was scratching his head in confusion as he said, “So she’s a mink?”

“No, Thatch. Yugito’s human,” Ace corrected, but while muffling a laugh. “Probably.”

“Again, how did I get stuck with the two of you?” Yugito complained, shaking her head.

If that didn’t set the tone for the rest of the conversation, I don’t know what would. Anyway, we stayed on that call for maybe two hours, while Yugito somewhat distractedly steered us this way and that according to the Log Pose. She wasn’t as confident in the spinning hell-magnet as the rest of us, but she did perfectly well.

The next major island was more of a pit stop than anything, about two weeks later. We hit a couple of smaller spots, to avoid starving to death or running out of water, but it was the first time in quite a while for new bounty postings. The News Coo had too much trouble finding us to really get consistent reports.

“Oh-ha!” Ace crowed in triumph, holding another large sheaf of paper he’d probably stolen from the post office.

Yugito and I were sitting outside of a nice little café that Ace hadn’t hit yet, with Yugito testing her snail friend’s call list and me checking in with Isobu about other Tailed Beasts (while apparently reading a comic page in a day-old newspaper). Apparently, Matatabi, Kokuō, and Shukaku were still doing fine, and Shukaku rambled on about a new destination for the Straw Hats. I didn’t quite get the idea of a Sky Island, but apparently it was a thing despite physics sobbing in the corner.

And then Ace rocketed back from wherever and slapped the paperwork down between us on the fancy table.

“Hi, nice to see you again?” Yugito said, looking up from the mechanism she was poking at with a tiny screwdriver. The dial of the transceiver rig was lying on the table, but since Komushi wasn’t panicking I decided not to care even if I didn’t know when she’d done that.

“Luffy’s crew has new bounties after Alabasta,” Ace announced, pulling up a chair at our table. “Wanna see?”

I folded my newspaper and set it aside, where Komushi considered eating it. “Is Gaara in there?”

Ace flipped through the pile of paperwork, then pulled out a poster to hand to me. Glaring up from under a half-shield of sand, Gaara’s photo stirred something akin to pride at the same time as it made my stomach try to turn into a knot. Pirate or not, he was twelve years old. Sure, he could turn most grown men into bone-flecked meat paste or blood splatter, but…

“…I guess the Marines really don’t care that he’s a kid,” I muttered, frowning faintly. “‘Red Sand’ Gaara. A bounty of thirty-one million beris.”

“…Wasn’t that Sasori’s epithet?” Yugito asked, picking up what looked like Zoro’s bounty poster. Sixty million beris for the Pirate Hunter, apparently. I wasn’t sure why they kept calling him that when he obviously didn’t hunt pirates anymore.

“It beat Luffy’s first bounty,” Ace said, poking through the rest of the pile. “Huh, and so did his
Who assigns a partner of Shukaku’s a name like that? Isobu grumbled, quite unhappy with the sudden reminder of Sasori’s existence. Even if the guy was thoroughly dead, Isobu had seen my account of one version of Gaara and his (temporary) demise and could be tetchy about it.

Marines who have no idea what cultural context is, I think.

We flipped through the pile a little more, then found a few new faces for the Marines’ office dartboards.

“Wait, Ace, you didn’t just grab the Straw Hats’ bounties, right?” I asked as I stared down at a very familiar face.

“Nah, I grabbed the whole pile. There’s usually a note saying which crew they belong to,” Ace said, still drinking in the sight of his brother’s bounty poster. A hundred million beris in less than a year was an impressive accomplishment, I supposed. “Why?”

I groaned aloud and turned the poster in my hands around. Yugito gaped openly, while Ace just looked confused.

“Shanks actually got another redhead to join his crew,” Ace said. “So what?”

“Th-that’s—” Yugito cut herself off, then glared at me. While I held up my hands in clearly sarcastic surrender, Yugito snarled, “She’s a jinchūriki?”

That cat was definitely out of the bag.

I set the poster down on the table, looking down at a picture of Kushina about to punch the photographer’s lights out. “Uzumaki Kushina, new-slash-old nickname ‘Blood-Red Habanero’ and worth two hundred and fifty million beris just for being on an Emperor’s crew.” I paused, rereading the poster upside-down. “And for assaulting a Marine officer in the line of duty, and for aiding and abetting piracy, theft of government property thanks to raiding a slaving ship single-handedly, and for half a dozen other things I know she would’ve done. Fuck.”

“Your Hokage’s wife must not believe in low profiles,” Yugito commented, sotto voce.

“Nope.” I smacked my hand into my face again. Then I thought of a better idea and slammed my forehead into the table. Twice. Muffled by the table, I groaned miserably.

“What’s a Hokage?” Ace asked, probably tilting his head to one side like a curious bird. Because of course he didn’t share my pain.

“Think if one of the Four Emperors decided to settle on land. And establish a country,” I muttered into the tabletop. While Komushi and Ace digested that, I could hear Ace stealing my food but couldn’t bring myself to care. And then a thought struck me and I sat bolt upright again. “Fucking shit.”

“What?” Ace asked, around a croissant.

“I know why Kushina’s raising hell.” And it was because of Naruto. As the other jinchūriki for Kurama, that kid could’ve been pulled through the same way the rest of us were. Kushina was a shinobi even if she was pretty bombastic, and she knew the value of keeping a low profile when in a new environment as well if not better than I did. But if Naruto landed separately from Kushina, then she’d be willing to tear the planet in half to find him the second she realized that her son was
in trouble.

No wonder she’d gone full pirate. The Marines would’ve tried to stop her and suffered the consequences from both her and Yin Kurama.

Yang Kurama would only have the first shot at anyone who tried to hurt Naruto due to proximity.

“So...?” Yugito prompted.

So hell if I’d tell Yugito about Naruto before I had to. Even if Yugito seemed nice enough, if formal, I didn’t trust anyone from Kumogakure that far.

“So if she asks, I’m gonna help,” I growled instead, “even if I have to burn my anonymity in a funeral pyre shared by entire fleets.”

Yugito just looked away, all too familiar with the darkness associated with hanging onto humanity by the (extended) fingernails. Yugito would have figured it out before I had needed to, given how Kumogakure trained their jinchūriki, and she respected the abyss yawning inside some of our souls. It was hungry.

…I needed to never read Roku’s vent poetry ever again.

“Moving on,” Ace said warily, scooting away from me the slightest bit. “Know this guy?”

For the universe’s next trick, Yugito got to experience my reaction from the inside. “Killer B?!”

And right in front of us, grinning and making two perfect sets of bull’s horns with his fingers, was the other jinchūriki from Yugito’s hometown. He had his shades, too, but had replaced his Kumo headband with a plain bandanna with the iconic cloud stitched into it. I didn’t know if he’d lost it or what, but the guy was certainly rocking the new career choice.

“Oh nooooo...” Yugito moaned, dropping her hand into her hands. “Lord Eight-Tails, why would you do this?”

“He’s even on the same crew,” Ace remarked. He smoothed the poster against the table, still trying to read it while Yugito succumbed to comedic despair. “It looks like he’s wanted for a lot of the same things, but add in...cattle-raiding? What the hell is that?”

“Stealing cows,” I said, without looking up from the poster. Killer B and Kushina as a part of the same crew...

I didn’t know when I’d be able to contact them, but it was clear they were doing okay. I just had to wonder where Rōshi, Utakata, Fū, and Naruto had gone. Han was fine, Gaara was with Luffy, and both Yugito and I were going to keep doing our thing. At least until we turned Teach into a historical footnote.

“Ace, do you have any idea how we’d be able to talk to the Red Hair Pirates?” I asked. “Because while Kushina and Killer B are our seniors, we still need to find them.”

“They’ve already been found,” Ace pointed out, while Yugito continued to mutter into the table. While I tried and failed to come up with a reason for why new members of an Emperor’s crew might be in more trouble than we generally were, Ace went on, “We can finish up the hunt for Teach and then backtrack all the way to the New World afterward, okay? And I don’t have Shanks’s snail number anyway. I don’t think Pops does either.”
I sighed, weighing my options. While I could probably get back into the New World with just Isobu’s help, and bring Yugito along for the ride, I wasn’t comfortable leaving Ace to take on the Whitebeards’ traitor on his own. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in Ace’s luck after all the recent displays thereof, but we still didn’t know what had been so fucking special about the fruit that Teach would kill Thatch over it. Or try to kill Thatch, and fail by a hair’s breadth.

If Teach had picked up a crew to compensate for the apparent hitch in his step (going by the information Ace had uncovered about his movements, both personal and in general), anything could happen. The casualty tally would easily tick upward into triple or even quadruple digits depending on where it all went down, and I knew that while Ace would try to avoid hurting bystanders, Teach would not.

I couldn’t leave it to chance.

So I said, “Fine. Let’s roast that bastard on a spit and be done with it.”

Of course, events conspired against us.

While heading for some island or other, none of which I could recall by name afterward, Isobu broke through the general traveling haze of boredom by surfacing ahead of Striker’s nose, making Ace swerve like an adrenaline junkie to avoid hitting him and crunching his rocket-powered raft against my turtle friend’s face.

“What the hell was that about?!” I heard Ace yelling from Striker as Yugito and I pulled up alongside him. After a second’s thought, Yugito put the Nautilus directly between Isobu and Ace, preventing him from throwing a fireball.

“Saiken is approaching us,” Isobu announced, with his golden gaze falling on all of us in turn. Yugito and I already had our hands over our ears, and I saw Ace’s catch fire for a second. “At speed.”

Did he say why? I asked, already casting my chakra sense outward to see what—if anything—I could pick up about the Six-Tailed Beast before he arrived. He had the highest number of tails we’d encountered so far, beating out Kokuō by one. And I really didn’t want to fight him even if he was a slug slamming on the figurative gas.

I saw Ace pin his hat to his head with his hand, then hop over to the Nautilus from Striker’s bow. “Which number is he?” he asked once he arrived, cooling his heels on the stern.

“Six,” I said, frowning. “But…wait, Isobu—” What about his partner?

That is the problem. Isobu’s tails churned the water as he slowly turned to face our right. In the distance…yes, just entering my fifty-kilometer range, an absolute monster of a chakra signature was heading our way. Isobu was in that weight class, but the rest of us? Not even close.

“Brace for impact,” I said aloud in a grim tone. “Because this? This could hurt.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's title is also from Wreck-It Ralph.
Also, Ace's infiltration of G-2? That is canon. The entire chapter's events are mostly pulled from the arc of manga covers titled "Ace's Great Blackbeard Search."
Kei: Take 20 on a Heal check.

The song of this chapter is one of the *Assassination Classroom* openings.

Our first impression of Saiken was…uh. Mixed.

On one hand, he was a slug about the size of Katsuyu on one of her better days, but with legs and hands. Tiny hands on tiny arms. And he also had six tails, all of which were the collective reason why he wasn’t instantly sinking into the ocean. His eyestalks were about the only parts of him that weren’t flailing in a mad panic that looked entirely incongruous on a slug of all creatures. He moved far too fast. Saiken even towered over Isobu, who sat low in the water for the novelty of it even if he had to hold a conversation.

And then he spoke.

“**Bro, little bro!**” Now, I didn’t doubt that he had a roar somewhere in him, but that voice was not the type of sound that made sense coming out of something that big. He sounded like a monster had inhaled twenty thousand helium balloons and made the effect permanent. It was like a man post-groin attack, where it jumped two octaves in pain and then didn’t come back down.

“…Is that seriously his voice?” Ace asked me in a whisper, while hiding his mouth from view. Saiken was still a Tailed Beast, after all, and we were at sea and oh right Ace could easily drown.

“I do believe it is,” Yugito responded ahead of me.

I was too busy beating my forehead against the wheel.

Eventually, Yugito took pity on me and slid her hand between my head and the wood. When I stopped upon nearly crushing her fingers and rethought my strategy enough to look up, she said, “If you could be more productive than this, it would be very helpful.”

Or not.

Still, I redirected my attention out to the Tailed Beast reunion we were barely avoiding being flattened by. Ace couldn’t tow the *Nautilus* with *Striker*, but he could evaporate a wave or two before they capsized us.

“**Bro, bro, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you!**” Saiken wailed, making all of us slap our hands over our ears because *ow*. 
“You could at least try to use my name, Saiken,” Isobu said, and though I didn’t see his expression, his tone implied exasperation.

At a hundred decibels. Yeah, probably time for humans to not be around.

“Any ideas?” Ace called back over his shoulder, while Yugito joined him on wave-deflecting duty.

“Yeah. Not being right here.” I completed a quick sequence of hand seals, and the next incoming wave curled around us, conveying both vessels out of the inevitable splash zone.

Isobu’s right tail created a much gentler wave, pushing our boats to a safer distance the second my jutsu lost momentum. He didn’t really seem to be aware he was doing it—he’d gotten all too used to looking after our little human boats—but I picked up the thread well enough. To my not-so-experienced eye, it looked like Saiken was gearing up to jump.

“Yugito, the wheel’s yours,” I said as I stuck myself more firmly to the Nautilus with chakra. I’d probably need to be on guard for round two. “Ace, grab Striker and get ready to get a crash course in surfing.”

Ace eyed Saiken, then swore quietly to himself. “Got it.” In a flash of fire, he was gone and powering Striker back up to full speed. While Ace shot across the sea, Yugito accelerated the Nautilus a bit more slowly for our sakes. Not everyone was a Logia.

We made it before Saiken practically enveloped Isobu in his stretchy mass, looping around my friend’s shell twice over before anyone could catch onto what was happening. “I missed you s-s-s-so much, Isobu!”

“That is all very nice, but get off me!” Isobu shouted, unaffected by the constriction in terms of actual breathing, but sounding inconvenienced nonetheless. He thrashed on reflex alone, all three tails pumping, as Saiken latched on still more persistently.

For little squishy humans in the way, it was the next best thing to doomsday.

I made the appropriate hand signs, feeling my chakra converting to water almost as rapidly as I could stand. Just a little more, plus the environmental boost… Water Release: Water Wall.

As the titan-sized ripple—more of a tsunami to us—rose to engulf our boats, I blasted it head-on with a burst of water designed to shield buildings from massive Fire Release attacks. Alone, there was no way I could generate enough water to neutralize even one of those waves. But thanks to Isobu’s chakra and the ocean’s own mass, I could continually reinforce what chakra-produced water I could spit up, far faster and heavier than I would have been able to do on my own.

And it coincidentally made the Nautilus rocket away from the scene nearly as fast as Striker’s top speed, though in a more unstable manner.

“Next time, warn me before you do that,” Yugito said, as she steered the Nautilus’s bow to face the waves instead of whatever sideways skidding crap we were doing before.

I coughed, spitting a leftover mouthful of water off the side of the ship. Using saltwater as a shortcut made for a really nasty aftertaste. “N-No problem.” Hopefully I wouldn’t need to deal with that again for a bit.

I take it Saiken is upset. Even as I formed the thought, I balked at its inadequacy. “Frantic” would be a better word. “Inconsolable” was next on the list.
That may be an understatement, Isobu replied in a somewhat distracted mental voice. “Saiken, what happened to your partner?”

“Uta told m-m-me to l-leave,” Saiken sobbed, though I had half a dozen questions about the physical mechanics of such an act. The animal he most closely resembled didn’t have the correct anatomical structures for it.

“Did I hear that right?” Yugito asked me, her free hand pressed against her ear and her face contorted in a wince. I felt her use Matatabi’s chakra to speed her recovery before she spoke again. “Saiken abandoned his…host?”

“It sounded more like Utakata abandoned him,” I murmured, frowning.

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard of a complete breakdown in relations between Tailed Beast and human partner, but Utakata couldn’t be much better off than Yugito had been when I first met her. Sheer necessity should have kept them together while they found their feet. Saiken would have been his only ally by default in this mad world. Something must have happened.

Isobu and I had officially been partners instead of two beings allied by mutual survival for well over a decade. While I knew damned well that our friendship was unusual, I’d still never considered that another pair would split like this. Sure, Kurama—both of them—talked about this kind of thing when they were frustrated or deliberately provoking people, but I hadn’t recalled anything specific about Utakata and Saiken that would lead to a breakup. And if Saiken was this upset about it, the choice couldn’t have been mutual.

“We need more information,” was all I said aloud. Instead, I turned my attention to my partner. Isobu, what the hell happened with them?

Since Isobu was still being constricted by a babbling monster slug, I didn’t get an answer immediately. Of course I didn’t.

“Tell me what happened, Saiken,” Isobu managed, once he wasn’t being squeezed until his shell creaked ominously. He’d recover, but what the fuck. “And let go.”

“I-It was awful!” Saiken uncurled from Isobu’s shell, shifting back into his default form with his disproportionately small hands clutching at empty air in anxiety. “Uta fought another human, and I couldn’t reach him, and he got hurt and—I know where Uta is, but he’s not talking to me and the sea is too hot there—”

“Hot?” Isobu repeated. “Saiken, was there some kind of flame? Or lava?”

“Why would there be lava in the open ocean? Son Gokū is nowhere near here!” Saïken asked, flailing his tiny arms. Kinda Tyrannosaurus-like really. “I-I’m not stupid!”

I had an idea. When Ace reappeared from around the other side of the arguing Tailed Beasts, I stood up on the Nautilus’s stern and waved both arms to catch his attention despite the waves. Sure, I could have shot a Water Dragon Bullet at him, but that would probably count as “unnecessarily hostile” by any standard. Even if it was steerable.

“Answer the question!” Isobu bellowed back in his stronger brother’s face as Ace skipped across the waves in our direction.

“Did you catch any of that?” I asked Ace without so much as a pause for a greeting. We had two
“Hard to miss it,” Ace said, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the cacophony of background noise.

Yugito growled, while wrestling with the steering, “Does Lava Release exist here?”

I repeated the question for Ace’s benefit, and he responded with, “Lava—no, not by that name. But Admiral Akainu ate the Magu Magu no Mi, and he’s definitely someone to not tangle with.”

And if Utakata hadn’t met any other friendly jinchūriki and was instead limited to just his own power… Shit. Information, information… I asked the first question that came to mind. “Any idea what he looks like?”

Maybe Saiken would be able to identify him. Maybe not. But any information was more useful than the dearth we faced now.

“I don’t have a recruitment poster handy,” Ace said, his eyes briefly rolling skyward as he thought, “but off hand? Ten feet tall, probably around fifty, looks like a pinch-faced bastard uncle and has a Marine cap.”

“In what you’ve seen him before?” I asked, sitting on the edge of the Nautilus and holding Striker at a distance with both feet. I didn’t want to see what would happen if the boats collided, even in some minor incident like being pushed together by random eddies.

“Only at a distance.” Ace sat on Striker’s sole actual seat, leaning back to observe Isobu and Saiken’s continued argument. “So, this ‘Uta’ smacked right into an Admiral right off the bat?” Ace made a “tch” noise, then spat over the side of the boat. “Talk about rotten luck. Akainu is the biggest bastard out of all three Admirals. He’s all ‘absolute justice’ all the time or whatever. Never lets a pirate live if he can kill them first.”

Well, that suited what I’d read of the man. Melting entire enemy ships with lava was…perhaps overkill, perhaps not. But certainly most people wouldn’t survive that.

And “Absolute Justice”? I’d heard that line before, too, in the form of the “Swift Death to Evil” mantra. It was definitely less poetic when it was pointed at us.

I was nodding along until a thought struck me. I felt my face freeze in place. “Wait a sec…”

I shoved Striker away for a second, then stood up with Isobu’s chakra overlaying mine as much to get his attention as it was to make myself heard. “Ace, Yugito, cover your ears.” Once they did, I shouted, “Saiken, do you know if Utakata is alive?!”

Both Tailed Beasts’ heads swiveled toward me, though Isobu’s lack of a real neck meant he had to turn his entire body for the same effect.

“I-I think he is!” Saiken’s six tails all lashed, one after the other. A little more firmly, he added, “Uta has to be!”

Taking that as truth—Saiken would know if Utakata had managed to drop dead, right?—then something must have happened that could cut the connection between them down to almost nothing. And I still remembered the first time I’d been entirely cut off from Isobu after being sealed, thanks to the Five Elements Seal being installed as an emergency measure. But I was under no illusions about any kind of last-second, measured seal modification happening anywhere around here, least of all at the hands of an Admiral. Something he’d done must have screwed around with...
Utakata’s seal.

The last time that happened, I’d almost died even with Sensei and Kushina on hand. Utakata, at most, had me.

I ran a hand through my hair, decision already made. *Isobu, we’re going to follow Saiken back to Utakata and see what we can do to help.*

**You are certain?** Isobu’s question came out flat, like it wasn’t really a question at all. He already knew damn well that while I liked to waffle about things, I couldn’t say no to someone in trouble when I was the only one who could help.

*Yeah, I am.* And I still needed to check in with Yugito and Ace about the choice.

I let Isobu’s chakra drop back out of my system, waved for Ace to return since it was safe enough for his eardrums, and mentally steered myself. Ace brought *Striker* close again so we could hold the conversation, and Yugito cut the power to the *Nautilus*’s engine. Behind and looming over us, both Isobu and Saiken leaned in to listen.

“Got something to say?” Ace asked at a completely normal volume, since the Tailed Beasts were being polite again.

“Yeah.” I crossed my arms, frowning. “I need to follow Saiken back to Utakata and see what I can do for him.”

Ace blinked, then the words caught up with his thoughts and finally interrupted them. “Wait, you’re leaving? When we’re this close to finally putting an end to Teach once and for all?” Under the disbelief, the anger, I could have sworn I heard a note of…hurt?

Well, I’d already known this conversation was going to be a flurry of punches to the gut, so what was one more?

“Utakata doesn’t have a chance otherwise,” I said reluctantly, because each word hurt to form. I didn’t *want* to leave, but ultimately a mission of revenge didn’t compare to a life-saving one. In a lower tone, I muttered, “And even if he’s probably going to want to kill me.”

Yugito pursed her lips ever so slightly, then said, “I doubt he’ll get far. You’ll simply have to reunite with us in a few days.” Yugito knew all too well how weak she’d been before the Wristband of Doom started loosening. She, at least, had confidence in my ability to handle myself.

Ace still didn’t seem convinced. Flame flickered along his forearms as he drummed his fingers against them in agitation. “Can’t the guy just go to a doctor?”

I tried to imagine it. Blood, death, and destruction came to mind immediately. The last time I’d lost myself in Isobu’s strength had been…bad. Utakata wouldn’t be using Saiken’s power, but injured jōnin never reacted well to strangers trying anything out of the ordinary. Add in the likelihood that his injury wasn’t one medicine could handle…

“No, that…would be pretty much impossible,” I said, my shoulders sagging. “I’m the only person on this side of the Red Line who might be able to stabilize him, since Kushina’s with Shanks in the New World.”

“Aaaand I just told you last week that we can’t spare the time to go back,” Ace muttered. “Damn.” He tilted his head to one side, frowning. “What exactly is wrong with this ‘Uta’ guy?”
“I won’t know for sure until I get there,” I admitted, “but all of the likely options are pretty dire.”

Isobu raised his left tail, like he was in class. He didn’t have enough range of motion on his shoulders to do the same with his arms, but the effect was similar. “Is there a reason that Saiken could not simply summon Utakata back here?”

There was a very long pause. Then Yugito and I simultaneously smacked ourselves in our respective foreheads. I’d introduced her to the concept, and she hadn’t remembered either. Personally I thought I was more at fault for the brain fart since Yugito rarely summoned Matatabi, while I’d been through both ends of things before. Twice.

“Isobu, show him how to do it. We’ll just adapt.”

“I’ll summon him on your back, Isobu!” Saiken said, once he had the technique figured out. He leaned over Isobu, both stalk-eyes swinging around wildly as he tried to plan. “Parts are flat, right?”

Well, some parts weren’t spiky. Close enough.

I was already leaping out of the boat and toward Isobu, accompanied by all of my fūinjutsu gear, by the time Saiken made the first hand seal. I heard Ace shout when I bounced off a wave (“She can walk on water?”), but quickly shot out of range and up the miniature mountain that was Isobu’s crab-like shell. By using Isobu’s spikes as launching points, I arrived just as Saiken summoned Utakata to the apex of Isobu’s shell.

My first look at Utakata told me that we would have been better off if Saiken had brought him over on Isobu’s hand, because at least then I’d be able to access cool water faster. Parts of his skin were various shades of unhealthily pink, reddish, blistered and weeping, or even black in some places, indicating as many varied types of burns as there were ways to be burned. While no finger or toe seemed to have been entirely converted into dead flesh or bone, but he did not look good.

While I’d never seen Utakata in anything other than the blue kimono he’d died in, in another lifetime, here he’d found a pirate getup very similar to Marco’s but in blue rather than purple. It looked quite pirate-like, complete with a Jolly Roger. I had to wonder if that was what had gotten him into this mess. Either way, in some places his flesh stuck to the cloth where bits had burned.

Utakata wheezed a breath, but it dissolved into coughing a moment later as the other fun effect of being exposed to that much flame and heat—smoke inhalation—made itself known. Even at my best I couldn’t fix all of this.

Whether it was jinchūriki vitality or something else, Utakata’s eyelashes fluttered. His orange irises were clearly visible for a moment—unfocused but responding to light—before his eyes slid shut again. I channeled a small portion of Isobu’s chakra into my right hand to see if I could change
anything just on reflex, then stopped with my fingertips an inch above his singed skin.

I couldn’t heal him. I didn’t have the knowledge or the ability, and if I didn’t do something he would die.

Or at least I couldn’t heal him directly. *Isobu, ask if Utakata can regenerate from these kinds of injuries. Show Saiken what I’m seeing if you have to.*

But that kind of order was unnecessary. Saiken loomed over Isobu’s back, both stalk-eyes leaning down and examining his human partner without needing any prompting. “*Uta, Uta… This isn’t fair! That human—he wasn’t from Iwa—*”

“A lot of things aren’t working the way we think they should,” I told Saiken, and his stalk-eyes focused on me. I reinforced myself with just a touch of Isobu’s chakra, to withstand this conversation. “Saiken, can Utakata heal overnight like the rest of us?” From most things, anyway.

**“He can’t use my chakra. If he could, yes, but…”** Saiken’s tails writhed in distress and his arms flailed. **“What if he dies?! He’s my friend!”**

Utakata’s eyes opened again, half-lidded, and I heard him whisper through cracked lips, “Fr… friends…”?

**“Uta! Uta, you can hear me?”** Saiken cried, pushing his huge face closer to us. While I had never noticed before, Saiken’s single mouth had nine separate openings, each like a tunnel that could swallow a grown man, and all of them were pulsing as he wailed. **“Uta, please! Speak to me!”**

Utakata’s eyes rolled up in his head. A split second later, he went completely limp.

**“UTA!”** Saiken shrieked.

I would have *so much* hearing damage if not for jinchūriki healing rates. As it was, I still had my left hand clamped over my left ear when I waved to get Saiken’s attention. Once his eyes were on me again—not literally—I said, “Saiken, I’m going to see if Utakata’s seal is damaged. Please hold on, okay?”

I didn’t check to see if he was listening before I went through the hand seals for the Diagnostic Jutsu.

Unsurprisingly, there were plenty of surface-level and serious burns. Only the deepest damage had been done by direct flame, however—the rest was likely from radiant heat. If Admiral Akainu had confronted Utakata and this was just the damage from a bunch of near-misses or scaldings, then I did *not* want to see what that man could do if he got a direct hit.

Of course, my imagination was more than up to the task. I had a single horrifying image in mind, of a human boiling and burning to death in the same instant. Flesh bubbled and wisped away like smoke. The man in question—I didn’t need to see Shirozora’s death again. I *didn’t*.

**Concentrate, please.** Isobu’s mental voice was sharp, to remind me to stick to the present.

I shook myself to ignore those thoughts, then tried focusing on Utakata’s chakra network. A quick scan showed that his seal was on his back, between his shoulder blades. And so, with as much care as I could manage, I rolled Utakata over and cut his jacket apart with a chakra scalpel.

Like my seal had been at the start, his stood out in sharp black lines against his skin. And while
Utakata’s seal-work was similar to mine due to the primary organizational number being four—hooray for Uzumaki sealing style motifs proliferating across the sea—one corner had been burned clean off. Going from a stable four-cornered seal matrix to this…

Shit. No wonder his connection with Saiken was screwy. If he’d been able to pull on Saiken’s chakra after receiving this kind of damage to his seal, he would have probably experienced a total meltdown. In the nuclear sense.

Tearing my sealing kit from my belt, I unpacked all of my gear faster than I ever had in my life. I had scrolls, brushes, ink, references I’d built as memory aids with Isobu’s help, and a bottle of sake I’d gotten from somewhere. Not sure what the last one would be useful for, but if we were devolving back to Age of Sail levels of medicine, alcohol was something that ended up on hand whether I thought about it or not.

Any expertise either Yugito or Ace have on burns would be appreciated, I thought as I fished out the last inkwell I’d been able to steal months ago. The liquid inside was still good, so I uncorked the bottle and prepared for what really amounted to spiritual surgery.

Isobu’s voice asked the relevant question of the two resident fire-users, but there was no way I’d be able to hear any of their answers from so high up. Besides, I still needed to use my own blood as a catalyst for a seal like this, and carefully drew a line on my left hand with the point of a single chakra scalpel. There was no room for errors, no matter how small.

Yugito arrived next to me just as I finished dripping blood into the inkwell. I’d use the whole thing in one go.

“I can’t treat him for burns if you’re working on a sealing ritual,” Yugito told me flatly. When I looked at her, she was carrying the medical supply box we’d cobbled together when we first bought the Nautilus.

We did not have nearly enough bandages.

“I’m just prepping the ink. In a second, I’ll help you wash the burns out as best we can,” I said somewhat distantly, as I mixed the ink and blood together. Mostly, it meant capping the bottle again and swirling it around a few times. There were more precise methods for non-field surgery, but desperate times called for desperate measures. “But Yugito, if you touch his right hand and he gets Saiken’s chakra again, he might die from overload before he can recover.”

Yugito frowned, then glanced over my shoulder. “Ace, help me get his belt off. Anything tight needs to go.”

Ace bumped my back with his knee as he perched behind me, but did reach out to carefully remove anything that might constrict Utakata’s burns and reduce blood flow further when everything inevitably swelled up. “I’m not sure he’ll survive this. Akainu’s good at what he does.”

“That may be so,” Yugito said patiently, “but what I need is for you to manipulate his arms, because I can’t unless we want to see what happens when a jinchūriki explodes.” Yugito glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded. “So we need to work fast so Kei can repair his seal.”

Every time one of them cleared a section of Utakata’s skin, I carefully ran jutsu-condensed fresh water over the site to clean and cool the burns. There would be no point to ointment just yet, and I couldn’t even risk cleaning the sites where it looked like Akainu had burned Utakata past even his nerve endings, but we were doing our best. None of us were truly medics, or doctors, or nurses, but we all knew fire in one form or another and we knew something of how to help.
Slowly, bandages appeared as though by magic. Whether by the power of desperation and spare clothes or something else entirely, we got Utakata cleaned up.

Honestly, by the end it seemed like his back was the least damaged part of him aside from his face. His arms had taken the worst of it, as expected from someone trying to block an unexpected attack, but the other sites I could see were already healing. It made sense given what little I knew about the revised physical rules that all of the jinchūriki were living with. Even at my lowest allotment of Isobu’s chaka—no conscious use of it—I had healed from mere cuts in seconds. The scalpel cut I’d made to add blood into the ink was already long closed.

Though Utakata was no Marco the Phoenix, he was recovering without prompting from Yugito or me. Some of the burns were visibly shrinking, leaving new-looking flesh in their wake. But it was going slowly enough, relative to the damage, that it might not matter.

He needed Saiken’s boost.

“What worries me is that he’s not awake,” Yugito murmured, while she and Ace carefully turned Utakata onto his side so I could see his seal again. “Ordinarily I’d expect at least some kind of defensive measure…”

“Utakata’s out of chakra,” I said, digging around in my sealing kit and pulling out the rougher horsehair brush I used to manipulate the ink before actually using it. “If I had to guess, it took everything he had to survive fighting Akainu.”

“I still don’t get why he even would,” Ace said, looking down at Utakata’s unconscious face. “I don’t recognize him from any posters, so it’s not like he’s a known pirate. He should have been able to get by just by avoiding the Marines, like both of you.”

“We’ll simply have to ask when he wakes up,” Yugito said.

I glanced up at her, seeing her grim expression, and wasn’t honestly sure if she was putting on a brave face or acknowledging just how many laws we were breaking to interfere with Utakata like this. It wasn’t like we knew him, but the penalties for tampering with a jinchūriki’s seal, especially if they were from another village…

Well. We’d burn that bridge when we came to it, I supposed.

“The good news is that I know how to repair this seal,” I said, after I’d properly prepared my ink and brushes. And put the junk brush away. “The bad news is that even after I do and he gets his chakra back, we don’t know how long it will take him to recover. And we also don’t know if he’ll be hostile.”

“He shouldn’t be!” Saiken said, trying for something like being huffy and falling short by virtue of his worry. “Uta is a good person, you’ll see. He’s just…he’s had a hard time.”

“We’ll leave that to you, then,” Yugito responded, and both of Saiken’s eyestalks bobbed in agreement.

“Do you mind telling me what—wait, no, you mentioned this. This is the same sealing ritual you talked about before.” Ace was chewing the inside of his lip when I looked up from my last preparations. He looked up at Saiken, then asked, “Hey, what happens to you if this thing breaks?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never had it happen before,” Saiken said worriedly. “And I don’t want this to be the first time, either!”
“If a jinchūriki’s seal breaks, ordinarily the host dies and the Tailed Beast goes on a rampage,”
Yugito filled in, her voice solemn as she looked up at Saiken. “I don’t know what will happen if
Utakata dies like this, but we will do our best to make sure it doesn’t happen.”

“…‘Host?’” Ace repeated.

I didn’t need to know what dots he was connecting. I didn’t have time to care about it. I didn’t have time
for this.

Leaving that explanation to Yugito before it occurred to her that she needed to make one, I swirled
my smallest, sharpest brush in the ink and started writing the first line of the isolation seal. Yugito, Isobu, and I were all interfering with the process, but I could write us out of it.

“She’s an optimist,” Yugito responded. “That she and Isobu are in this together.”

…Clear skies and pure water unsullied… With a snap of the air that not even Yugito could detect, I
cleared our leaking chakra from the area. To me, it felt like a shockwave, a cold snap of some sort, and then the air was empty. That left just Utakata and Saiken.

And my will binding them together where the original seal had cracked.

Ace shivered, perhaps feeling the energy ghost past him.

“She’s an optimist,” Yugito responded. “And got very, very lucky. There have been others—”

Ace interrupted her, “The one that exploded.”

“He was not the first,” Yugito said coldly. “Not remotely.”

…Bind…beast and…soul…

“We aren’t called ‘jinchūriki’ just because we like the way it sounds,” Yugito told him, her chakra
twisting in on itself. “Entire nations—our nations—view us as monsters in human flesh. And if we
can’t be controlled, we need to be disposed of before the death toll mounts.”

Like what the Kazekage tried to do to Gaara, one timeline over.

…Until death…vow...

Like what almost happened to me at Sorayama.

I completed the last line, right over the healing edge of the burn that had destroyed the original
seal-line, and brought my hand up in the Seal of Confrontation. “Seal.”

The ink blazed for just a moment, then settled into its new place. Prodding at Utakata’s chakra
network with my diagnostic technique revealed that the seal would hold, though there wasn’t much
of anything flowing through it.

Time to fix that. “Yugito, take his hand.”

“Is there a reason you won’t?” Yugito asked, looking up from her discussion of pure cynicism with
Ace. She didn’t look any happier for it.

“I’ll put him out again if he’s a problem,” I said in an even tone, even as I held up my right hand
and the five purple flames alighting on the ends of my fingers. “After all, this is the Five Elements
Seal.”
Yugito sucked in a breath, perhaps recognizing the technique as a way to shut _her_ down as well, but she took Utakata’s right hand with hers anyway. Wasn’t like I knew where Yugito’s seal even was—if I didn’t figure it out in time, I’d just punch her in the face. Same effect, lower chakra expenditure. If I had to.

So much for being the optimist.

Utakata’s and Yugito’s wrists lit up, as was becoming annoyingly commonplace, and then Utakata’s seal finally had _something_ to regulate and thus justify its existence. In my mind’s eye, his seal started cycling reddish-orange chakra through his coils in a subtle manner as soon as the wristband from hell stopped acting as a dam.

And he was still weak enough that if something did go wrong, he couldn’t be a threat. Chakra exhaustion hit everyone pretty hard, even if jinchūriki took longer to reach the point where we couldn’t just get back up and fight some more.

Except… “Ace, Utakata is a Water Release user like me. You may want to back up a bit, just in case.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Ace said, choosing instead just to sit there, well within range if Utakata got enough mental resources to attack.

We waited with bated breath, but there was no flicker of consciousness in his chakra or behind his eyelids. He was well and truly _out._

“He’s burns are healing faster,” Yugito noted, allowing Utakata’s hand to drop back to his side as we moved him onto his back again. With the seal taken care of, we just needed to decide what to do with him while he recovered.

“We can put him in the _Nautilus_ for now,” I suggested, prodding Utakata’s right wrist so he and I would get the light show over with as quickly as possible.

YOU HAVE FOUND THE SIXTH.

ASSEMBLE THE NINE.

From the brief power surge, he got the ability to access V1 back as expected, while I needed to experiment to find my new limits. It had to be something from beyond V2, in my case, though I wasn’t sure what it could be. I didn’t tend to use much past V1 these days.

Regardless, I said, “It’ll be easier on him if he’s inside a vessel if Isobu needs to eat the boats for a quick getaway. It’s not pleasant.”

“…I’m not sure what it says about my life experience as of now that your sentences make sense to me,” Yugito muttered. “I’ll carry him down.”

Without waiting for any input from Ace or me, she picked Utakata up as easily as if he was just any injured comrade and started down Isobu’s sloping shell.

“It is over, Saiken,” Isobu said aloud. “You can look.”

“I _know_ it’s over!” Saiken snapped. “I _felt_—I _felt it when I could feel Uta again for real!” The giant slug finally pulled away from Isobu, dropping lower into the water so half his tails could finally be put to use in the water properly. Butting his bulbous head against Isobu’s shell, heedless of the spikes, he added, “I’m going to concentrate on helping him get better. Don’t try to
distract me!

“We will not,” Isobu promised, and Saiken let go of him.

As the giant slug sank deeper and deeper into the water until only his eyestalks showed like wiggly twin periscopes, it was clear that Ace and I were the only ones holding the awkward silence together. At that point, it was better to just let it die.

“We might as well head down now, too,” I muttered, packing up the rest of my stuff and, in some cases, sticking them back in storage seals. I got to my feet, starting the much slower descent. “Teach isn’t getting any more dead.”

“Wait,” Ace said, holding out a hand to block my path.

I stopped short of bumping into his arm. “Need something?” I asked mildly, like I hadn’t heard any of the conversation he and Yugito had been having while I worked.

“Why didn’t you tell me how bad it was?” Ace asked, his eyes hidden by his hat.

I just kinda blinked at him for a second or two. “How bad what was?” Wait. The jinchūriki thing. “Ace, it’s not a big deal. The people back home who’d give me crap because I’m a jinchūriki don’t matter. The ones who matter don’t mind.”

“And Yugito?”

“Yugito grew up in a town where one of the previous jinchūriki couldn’t handle the power, so his seal broke. People died,” I explained quietly as we walked down the slope of Isobu’s shell. It was the same incident where Gyūki had gotten one horn broken in half by the Third Raikage, but Ace didn’t need to know that part. “She got more pressure on her, and it’s clearly still a problem that people don’t let her forget.”

Ace was still frowning. “And you?”

“Like she said, I got lucky.” I shrugged. “I was already an established shinobi by the time Isobu and I met, and I helped stop another attack on my village. There were procedures in place by the time I needed to go public with it.”

Sort of. At the very least, I’d gotten the benefit of the doubt.

“I…guess I can kinda see your point,” Ace said, though he hesitated noticeably. “But you could’ve told me a while ago. I would’ve understood.”

“There wasn’t any point.” I turned to him, letting him see my entire face for what honesty it would convey. Almost unconsciously, my fingertips drifted to my scar before I realized what I was doing and stopped. “I could tell you why I have this scar on my face, or how my mother died, or a million other things if you wanted a personal horror story. But while those experiences helped shape me, they’re not everything I am. Then or now.” I patted his shoulder. “So I don’t let them define me.”

Ace went quiet for a while after that, though we continued to treat Isobu like a hiking trail. Yugito could control the Nautilus and with Striker tied to it, it wasn’t like we’d be in danger of losing the boats.

“You’re a really frustrating person to talk to, you know,” Ace said. When I glanced at him, he was rubbing a hand over his face with a wordless groan. There was clearly something eating at him. “Just really, really frustrating.”
“I’ve been told that before, and by you,” I replied. Peering at his expression, or at least what I could see of it, I came to a decision. I extended my olive branch of sorts. “What did you want to talk about?”

Ace let it go for a couple of seconds as we continued down Isobu’s back. “...Nothing.”

_Uh-huh._ So much for that. “If you change your mind later, I’m all ears,” I said, then hopped once, twice down the massive dip in Isobu’s shell that led to the edge. Ace followed in a burst of flame a little while after.

Yugito got Utakata situated in the _Nautilus_’s cabin while Ace and I dawdled, so when I got back to the boat there wasn’t much for me to do other than to take over the wheel while she cat-napped. At least, at first.

After another hour (and Ace passing out at _Striker_’s helm for ten minutes), we finally decided it was time to discuss what the strategy for taking on Teach would be. Isobu listened in with half an ear though my mind, while Saiken fussed in the other about Utakata in a low voice that sounded almost like water burbling from above the waves. A bit distracting, overall, but the session went sideways without their help.

At some point, I’d noticed that Ace was...reckless. He tended to charge into situations without properly assessing the risks, confident or at least impatient enough to assume that things would work out for the best. Irritatingly enough, it was only his _own_ life he treated so casually—all it took to see _that_ was to look at his record of near-death experiences just in the months I’d known him. Yugito and I had only managed to rack up one of those between us, which was more the fault of Grand Line weather than anything we actually did.

To be clear, neither Yugito nor I were afraid of taking risks. I’d almost died plenty of times back home, and Yugito was a career kunoichi who had undoubtedly seen major action if her life was anything like mine. But we avoided _unnecessary_ incidents because we generally weren’t stupid. Not knowing Teach’s powers meant Yugito agreed when I suggested caution.

Kinda.

“One of the first things my elders ever taught me was that simply blasting enemies into submission was a good way to get myself killed,” Yugito said, when asked for her opinion. “I had several object lessons to that effect.”

And yet she’d still tried overwhelming Hidan and Kakuzu point-blank in that other timeline. I couldn’t call it hypocrisy if this Yugito had never done it, but I made note of the irony anyway.

“Not to mention that we still don’t know what powers he might have,” I added, frowning. Even with all the bloodlines, back home was _way_ more predictable. In the Grand Line, every random asshole seemed to have entirely new rules to run with. Devil Fruits were bullshit. “I tried asking Thatch last time, but he didn’t know, and I guess Teach must’ve taken the Devil Fruit encyclopedia with him when he jumped ship.”

If I’d known that book had existed prior to Teach’s betrayal, I probably would have “borrowed” it during my short-lived obsessive research phase aboard the _Moby Dick_. And if I had, maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess at all.

Ace sat with his arms crossed on the deck of the _Nautilus_, listening to Yugito and me exactly enough to not actually take the advice. No matter how badly-delivered. “You think I haven’t been
out here long enough to pick up a few more tricks than ‘burn everything?’”

“I certainly haven’t seen much else,” Yugito said acidly.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. This was going swimmingly.

I still want to see who can get first blood, Isobu put in. Speaking of swimming… But because your strategy does not seem to allow me to flood the island, I will consider “killing all of his allies” an acceptable substitute.

Thanks, I thought back dryly.

“You don’t get to a bounty of five hundred and fifty million beris by being an idiot,” Ace argued, oblivious to Isobu’s murder plot.

Bad argument. Yugito growled out, “And Teach is a no-bounty nobody who’s been avoiding you for months. The money only measures how much the World Government wants your head.”

“Strictly speaking, you can get a massive bounty by being an idiot,” I said, having actually read most of the bounty posters. While Ace shot a half-hearted glare in my direction for that contribution, I said, “Just punch a Celestial Dragon.” Then I thought of something that had been bothering me for a while now. “Say, Ace, how long have you been a pirate anyway?”

“Three years,” was Ace’s somewhat proud reply.

Yugito and I exchanged a silent look of something akin to horror. No wonder he was as subtle as a sledgehammer. Three years of actual activity on the high seas? Compared to our approximately twenty years of combat experience apiece?

...Well, it wasn’t like pirates were subtle. Ever. Hell of a culture clash, there.

Ace caught our judgment, because we weren’t being subtle either. “Seriously? Screw you both.”

“It’s...partly a shinobi thing,” I said after a second wherein Yugito and Ace were the main ones fuming at each other. “Pirates may show off, but we’re usually taught not to. Though neither of us are all that stealthy by our standards—”

“Speak for yourself,” Yugito said in a dark tone. Like she had any room to talk.

“—Killing powerful opponents quickly is just common sense,” I concluded. “If I escalate, it’s because the quieter approach didn’t work.”

Though, of course, that only applied to my operating procedure in the Grand Line. Back home, calling on my particular skillset in the field meant that it was time to get loud.

“Well, anyway,” I said, digging around in my pockets for a few seconds. Once I found what I was looking for, I held out the prize to Yugito. “Here. A tracker seal in case we get separated somehow.”

“You think I could be blown off an island by one idiot?” Yugito demanded.

“We don’t know what his powers are,” I pointed out, though I hesitated to think of what kind of ability would enable Teach to knock Yugito or me fully out of the running like that. Then again, that was what summoning was for.
“You’re only tracking Yugito?” Ace asked, since Yugito looked torn between arguing or just accepting that I slapped a GPS device to all of my friends. Just in case.

I was becoming terribly paranoid of losing people.

“It’s more that my old style of tracking tag only works if you can channel the type of energy we do,” I said, scratching my head with my free hand. “But if…hm. Ace, can I have your thigh holster for a second?”

By the time Ace got it unbuckled, I had unsealed my set of paintbrushes and the very last dregs of ink. “Maybe…if I just pair the tags? No, that wouldn’t work…”

“Why not just make something that’s always on?” Ace asked.

“I’m afraid I’d hurt you,” I admitted, still not putting my brush to the leather. Even with my blood, the result would be more like an airplane distress beacon than anything. On a very limited battery life. Add in my concerns about chakra poisoning…

“I can take it,” Ace said, clearly unbothered by the idea. When I frowned at him, given that we both remembered the extreme motion sickness he’d gotten last time, he said, “I mean, it’s only gonna go active if we’re separated. That won’t be a problem for long.”

If only I could share his confidence on that front. What was the saying? Expect the best, plan for the worst?

“...Fine. Let me see what I can do.” I uncorked my bottle of ink and tried my best.

The resulting seal had probably one of the weakest pings I’d ever designed, and would only turn itself on as long as we were at least a few hundred yards or meters or something apart. I’d deactivate it permanently once Teach was dealt with, I promised myself. This was just a tiny risk, taken in case somehow things went to hell in a handbasket.

Then we got to planning.

The first thing I needed to do upon reaching Banaro Island was to isolate the battle from civilians. Given Yugito’s total lack of straight defensive powers that could be used without burning people with Matatabi’s chakra, I came up with two broad possibilities that would function about the same. They’d achieve the same result, at least, but I didn’t know how comfortable Yugito would be with them.

“I’ve basically got two barrier seal designs,” I said, holding out a single barrier seal in one hand and a set of four in the other.

“What’s the difference?” Ace asked, while Yugito examined both seals with a completely blank expression.

“This one is called the Uchiha Flame Formation,” I said, lifting the single tag a bit higher. “It’s a barrier made of flames that incinerates everything that tries to cross it. It only requires one seal, but it needs to be maintained with a constant flow of chakra.”

“Doing so would anchor one of us in the same place for the entire fight,” Yugito noted. “And anyone who touched it would die.”

Not great for avoiding civilian panic, either. It was a technique designed for basically pinning enemy formations in place for Uchiha fireball artillery, even if Obito never used it that way.
But it would certainly keep Teach away from noncombatants, one way or another.

“You get a choice, though.” I held up the set of four. “This is something a friend came up with. He called it…something involving compasses. I forget.”

“Why are there four of them?” Ace asked cautiously, which was perfectly justified given the previous seal’s description.

I grimaced, fanning them out like playing cards. “That’s the downside. This barrier needs either four seals or four people in a perfect square, but once it’s up it’s just a really tough wall. We won’t risk killing anyone on the inside until they start to run out of air.”

Ace looked from me to a clearly irritated Yugito, who would be the one dealing with the barriers’ fickle preferences if I didn’t. Then he said, “Let’s assume we do get one of these up. What about the actual fight with Teach?”

“You draw his attention while one of us takes the time to pick off his crewmates?” Yugito suggested, in no way interested in a fair fight. “And if things don’t go well, we leave via Reverse Summoning and Matatabi or Isobu bombards the island.”

I dropped my face into my hands. It was practical, but jumping straight to Matatabi was a hell of a leap. “Did I not just say we were going to protect the civilians? A barrier will take an indirect hit, but your idea of targeting might level the place.”

Ace’s jaw worked, but no sound came out. He’d gone alarmingly pale and was looking between the two of us in shock. Like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

My “Ace, what’s wrong?” was drowned out by Ace’s roared, “WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!”

Since he was louder, Yugito turned her gaze on him. I was fairly sure her hackles were rising defensively, insofar as she had any.

“Do either of you have any idea what’s wrong with your reaction?” Ace snarled, flames blazing along his back and shoulders.

Yugito remained stone-faced, but I decided to give it a hesitant guess. “Um, we did discuss the fact that destroying an island and killing innocents is bad…”

“No, you did,” Ace corrected me harshly, and the flames crawled down his arms. “No, I mean that right there. You’re both not getting it.”

I fell silent, while Yugito scowled at him.

“Explain,” she said in a cold tone. “You’re overwrought.”

“The attitude,” Ace bit out, as the fire receded a bit. Just a tad, and he was still going to leave scorch marks on the Nautilus’s deck. “Does the idea of killing hundreds of people really not bother you? Either of you?”

My eyes immediately focused on the tops of my knees. Guilt and shame reached up through my heart and stopped my throat, and still Ace kept talking.

“When you talk about using Isobu and Matatabi,” Ace continued, in a calmer voice that still managed to quiver with a mix of outrage and horror, “it sounds like you’re trying to use them for a
Buster Call.”

“What is a Buster Call?” Yugito asked, sounding vaguely concerned at most. But her chakra flickered uncomfortably, like a flame in the wind.

My stomach was already filling with lead before Ace spoke again. “It’s the World Government’s last, worst option.”

I looked up cautiously through my eyelashes.

He wasn’t exactly fidgeting, but his eyes blazed. “Ten battleships, five vice admirals, and whoever else they can throw in. The island dies in fire, until there’s nothing left of it or of anyone on it. The World Government doesn’t say that, but the goal is to destroy every trace that it ever existed.”

It probably said something…worrisome about Yugito and me that neither of us did have the instant denial reaction to the idea of killing an entire island dead. Part of the problem was that both of us had been involved in the kinds of operations that required a Tailed Beast Bomb or two to sort out. Another aspect was our respective roles as heavy artillery to our respective nations, where the target was usually hardened or at least resisting all other attack types. While Konoha avoided civilian casualties where possible and Kumo…sorta did, we probably had more in common with the Marines in a moral sense than not. Ace had “being a decent person” and Whitebeard’s moral code to work from. Yugito and I generally didn’t.

We weren’t good people.

“I could summon Matatabi to us, instead,” Yugito offered somewhat weakly, while I continued to feel like the scum of the earth. “But she would land on something, and it could be worse than a precision blast focused on me.”

She had to be aware that it wasn’t what Ace wanted to hear, but Yugito’s pride wouldn’t let her back down entirely.

“No,” Ace said flatly. “We’re not the Marines. We’re not that volcanic son of a bitch Akainu. And we’re not going to start heading that way, either.”

I averted my eyes and bit down on the rough edge of my thumbnail as I thought, wincing at the comparison to the Marines’ most brutal admiral. The one who’d burned Utakata like that, and the one who’d probably turn all three of us into charcoal the second he spotted Whitebeard’s emblem on Striker’s sail. Or Ace’s back.

Extreme options flipped between “No” and “All too easy” for jinchūriki. All too often.

And why should you allow your enemy a chance to strike you again?

And lo, the reason why.

Maybe I was just fooling myself.

We sat in silence—Ace and Yugito caught in a battle of wills—for a long enough span that it transcended mere discomfort and wandered into being downright tense.

Yugito looked away first, chakra twisting in shame and defeat.

“Let’s not get Matatabi or Isobu involved at all,” Ace said finally, when it became clear that Yugito had nothing to say. “That…that kind of thing isn’t something people should be able to
...I am not something to be used. Isobu made a pleased rumbling noise, sounding almost surprised that he was reversing his prior statement. In a good way. **Amazing. Someone here understands what other humans have not grasped in centuries.**

And it was a fact I’d needed to be reminded of. *This place is amazing and horrifying by turns.*

“We’ll take care of Teach ourselves, and that’ll be the end of it.” Ace nodded to himself, then cracked his knuckles. “Okay. Let’s do this.”
Chapter Summary

Kei: Get into a brawl. No, not that one!

Chapter Notes

Guess what? The song’s half by Fall Out Boy, half by Imagine Dragons!
I am a slightly lame person who loves mashups.

Banaro, as it turned out, was a tiny island in the middle of nowhere. Literally banana-shaped mountainous structures probably gave the island its name, making for yet another example of weird topography in the Grand Line. There was even a town on it that kinda looked like something out of an old Western movie, which probably explained why fashion choices like Ace and Eastwood’s hats were even a thing. And sitting right at the docks, apparently there for perfectly innocent reasons, was a particularly fat raft.

It was flying a flag depicting three skulls and four crossed bones. What information Ace had managed to gather about the Blackbeards had, of course, included their flag. There was no mistaking that design.

“That’s it,” Ace snarled, and then Striker shot ahead and across the Nautilus’s nose. Ace was entirely out of earshot in a few seconds at most.

“Yugito?” I prompted, since I was still steering the Nautilus. Yugito was perched on the vessel’s bow, ready to throw herself into the fray.

Keeping in line with my companions’ decisions, I was going to hold off on entering the fight until I could get Utakata to a safer—since nothing was safe—spot. Isobu’s stomach sounded about right. And even afterward, I’d be mainly defending the populace caught up in all of this. Hopefully, that would be enough to cover our bases until we could handle other problems.

Our second planning session had established that much, at least. And despite his worry, Saiken didn’t get to veto that without picking a better option. And he didn’t have the power to open his mouth wide enough.

“That have fun watching us kill him,” Yugito told me, with her tone as dark as Ace’s had been and her eyes flashing green and gold. With that, she leapt off the boat and ran to shore across the waves, barely taking the time to cover her approach with her heat genjutsu.

Hotheads, both of them.

I steered the Nautilus out of a trajectory that would bury its bow in the island’s sole town and into Isobu’s range. I didn’t want him being spotted by any of the Blackbeards before it was time to take
out the trash.

My partner surfaced like a prowling shark, far enough offshore that his body was mostly hidden by the waves and random surface detritus. With only his head showing because of the angle, he kinda looked like an all-devouring whirlpool of doom. With teeth.

“Take care of the Nautilus, okay?” I said, as I cut the power to the shell-engine thing. “And if Utakata wakes up…”

I will let him panic for ten minutes, or until Saiken takes him off my hands.

“...I was gonna say you should tell him what’s going on, but okay.”

Get going. Saiken is watching the situation progress without you.

I nodded, though Isobu couldn’t see me, and let the Nautilus drift into Isobu’s mouth while I stood on the water’s surface out of immediate gulping range. Once I was sure Isobu had swallowed it without any trouble—protecting Utakata and all our supplies in one go—I let myself drop through the waves.

Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet. Never having used the technique from underwater, there was no real way to know what would happen.

The dragon’s head formed first, swirling around me nearly invisible except for its glowing yellow eyes. I had a second to give a thumbs-up to Isobu’s submerged face before it enveloped me in its coils, then its body, and I was shooting off toward Banaro Island like a torpedo.

The dragon’s path let me curve around underwater obstacles as they appeared, following the flow of the ocean around us, and I reached the shore almost faster than I would have if I’d run. Certainly much stealthier.

When I emerged from the water, I shrouded myself in another transformation as though this was any random island. Even before I layered the usual water-based refraction genjutsu on top, I looked nothing like myself. I’d go so far as to say I looked more like the Anko-Rin hybrid I’d pulled off back in Nanohana. If it was just another island, then I didn’t have to worry about my companions’ safety. Just another day at the office.

And if Teach thought I was dead, I planned to keep it that way.

Someone needed to look after the people who lived on this fucking island while Yugito and Ace tore the place (and Teach) apart. Given the state of the town even at a glance, everyone in it was either unconscious or dead or soon would be. But there was a chance that not everyone across the island would get caught up in the S-class fight. Some of them had to have gotten away from the initial blast radius, right?

So I headed for the only part of the island that hadn’t been hit just yet, making Water Clones to reach the parts of the island that I obviously couldn’t take care of without being in more than one place at the same time. Thank goodness for clone techniques. All of them.

There were people dressed in clothes that reminded me instantly of Eastwood. Cowboy hats and all. Some were on stretchers, being carefully hauled away from the ongoing battle I was studiously ignoring. I could see black smoke rising in the distance, which sent people aflutter, but I didn’t especially need to worry about that.

Ace and Yugito could handle themselves. Pirates were all about posturing.
I pulled my four seals out of my hip pouch. Putting myself between the townsfolk and the town itself, I quickly mapped out the barrier parameter in my head, charged the seal with a lot of chakra, and planted it squarely on the ground.

Elsewhere on the island, my Water Clones did the same as soon as I was sure we were all organized into a perfect square.

Four Corner Barrier Formation. Or at least that was what I called it. I’d apologize to Genma later.

Using the seal as an axis, two glowing lines traced outward at a ninety degree angle from each other. From the seal at my feet, the seal’s form linked up with two of the other seals, creating four perfectly straight and apparently razor-thin walls that glowed and shifted like soap bubbles in the sun. As soon as the walls were fully formed, I stepped back. With my hands still locked in the Snake seal, I let the barrier flare to true life and watched the walls climb higher and higher in order to form a cube. The shape’s lid slammed into place, sealing the outside world and its effects out and the inhabitants of the island in.

Nothing would cross it besides me. And even then, creating a separate doorway would take more energy than my clones could easily maintain.

It was secure.

In the rainbow-tinged view through the barrier, I could see the column of black smoke rise higher and higher into the air. While I could sense Yugito’s chakra, I had no way of checking Ace’s position relative to, say, a random rock on the ground. Not without moving my hands, not when we weren’t far enough apart to trigger it automatically.

“Uh, ma’am?” asked a rather brave islander, in what...yeah, that was a Texas accent. What the hell, why not? “What...what’s happening?”

“Pirate grudge match,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. “We’re safe in here.”

Poor guy. He was probably completely out of his depth. “That smoke, though—”

“What about it?” I asked, turning to face him as best I could without standing up. I hadn’t felt Yugito start using Fire Release yet, and Ace’s powers were loud. What was he talking about?

The man was very clearly scared out of his mind. Not that I blamed him—this pirate crap had my brain turning itself into an illogical knot most of the time. And Teach had just hit this town.

“Th-the pirate just—the sky went dark, like the sun went out,” the poor man stammered, eyes locked on the smoke in the distance.

“Did he happen to say anything before he did it?” I asked, eyes narrowing.

“N-no, he just held out his hand and the s-smoke...” the man shook, then sat down with a thud next to my active barrier. Which, uh, probably said a lot about how nasty of a shock today had been that no one really seemed to be reacting. “Our island...”

People really didn’t need to be caught up in this. “I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t—”

And that was about as far as I got before people started screaming. Blinking in shock, I recoiled and then whipped my head around to see what they could possibly be looking at.

Through the slight distortion of the barrier, the ground in the still-visible town was...black. Exactly
as black as the column of smoke from before, but it was spreading like ink or some kind of particularly active slime. The black wave wove under houses and swallowed entire streets, heedless of a burst of fire—Yugito—that tried to fend it off and failed.

“What…?” I trailed off, staring openly.

It looked like a Nara had gone on a rampage, but there wasn’t a trace of chakra on the entire island that didn’t belong to Yugito or me. And a Nara would never be so imprecise about placing shadows, no matter how much chakra they had to spare. Producing a fraction of sheer volume would kill most of the clan’s members outright.

“Th-the darkness…” someone wailed, though not the same person as before.

The darkness reached so far outward from the center of the town that I worried about my barrier’s integrity. Shadows weren’t technically matter, and I’d never personally tested the barrier’s physical strength other than by punching it. There was no guarantee Teach wouldn’t be able to bullshit his way past it if his powers worked under different rules.

It was up to Ace and Yugito.

And then things started to…well, the best way I could think of to describe it was “go crunch.” Any building, wagon, or other object over a patch of shadows started to deform under its own weight, with boards splitting every which way. The cacophony of splintering wood and groaning metal rose into a unified shriek as the aboveground parts of the entire town sank into the shadows as though pulled.

Yugito and Ace were in that.

I couldn’t sense Ace, but Yugito’s chakra flared in pure shock that shifted rapidly to fear. Her inner fire managed that for maybe a second before she vanished entirely from my range. Her light went out, swallowed by unforgiving darkness.

When the sun finally shed its light on Banaro Island in full again, the town was nothing less than a giant, clean crater with support holes for building foundations, Teach standing under that column of smoke, and the orange-hatted figure of Ace perched on top of a pile of rubble. That rubble was the closest thing to “intact” left for a quarter-mile around Teach.

I covered my mouth with my hands, but refused to break the hand seal. Wh-what just happened?

“T-it’s gone! Our homes—oh no, no no no…” someone else behind me wailed as reality sank in.

Yugito was gone. Everything except Ace and Teach—all of it had vanished into the dark.

A thought struck me. I couldn’t perceive Yugito’s chakra, but maybe her partner could. Isobu, can Matatabi—?

Matatabi says her partner is still alive, but in great pain.

I’d take the “alive” part and just have to disregard the rest. But why had Teach’s attack avoided hitting Ace…?

I got an answer a moment later as the black cloud pulsed in a heartbeat rhythm. Teach shouted something—damn near anything with four syllables, given how little noise made it through the barrier’s walls—and the cloud rippled as though struck.
From the middle of the crater that encompassed all of where an entire town used to be, the smoke reared like a snake, opened its figurative jaws, and disgorged everything. Wood, nails, canvas, cloth in a hundred configurations, shattered beams or wheels—everything sucked up in the last round, spat out to make a pile higher than any of the buildings had been.

And Yugito’s chakra reappeared, wailing in pain and rage, and I could nearly see her tumble out of the undirected storm of broken buildings. I had to hope she wasn’t hurt so badly that she needed a rescue, but if she was conscious enough to even be angry, it was something.

But it didn’t feel like Yugito would be participating in the fight now. Her power was less designed for defense than mine, and neither of us were prodigiously fast healers. While she could still hide herself under a genjutsu—and I felt her doing so with Matatabi’s power—her only options were to either summon her partner or bow out.

I knew what she’d do, and was unhappily right. There was no great surge of chakra bringing Matatabi to the field, and there wouldn’t be if Yugito’s pride had anything to say about it. Instead, I felt the gentle pop as Matatabi summoned Yugito away for her own safety.

The rest was up to Ace.

I pressed my lips together until I was certain they’d gone white, still turtled away behind my barrier. Isobu, did Matatabi if Yugito is going to recover? Or where she is?

I needed to distract myself somehow.

They will be waiting for us on the next island over. Matatabi intends to rejoin the attack personally if it is still ongoing by the time Yugito recovers.

Fat chance of that happening. I thought as I watched what I could see of the fight. While I saw the green firefly lights Ace had used in our one fight, there was a distinct lack of Teach dying that set me to worrying again. I knew things were going to go wrong before the flames went out.

And they did, but not in the way I expected.

Kei! Utakata is awake—but he is not conscious. Isobu coughed—a noise I’d never heard from him before—and I could feel Saiken’s sudden shriek of rage even though the barrier continued to muffle sound. I was forced to eject him.

Shit. I’m gonna have to go after him.

I could feel Saiken’s chakra mixed heavily with Utakata’s, likely running his body on its own out of sheer survival instinct that bypassed cognitive processes entirely. Because of course Utakata, even if he was berserk, would head for a populated area. Not out of any personal malice, but solely because I was the only detectable threat in the immediate area and my luck was that bad.

Utakata was heading across the back part of the island, treating the banana-mountains like his personal highway. At the rate he was moving, he’d hit the Four Corner Barrier Formation’s back wall within a minute.

If I didn’t intervene, Utakata would kill everyone here that Teach and Ace’s fight didn’t. So much for keeping an eye on—on anything. On being able to control jack shit.

I drew my sword and drove it through the top edge of the seal, pinning my tag in place until I could create a Water Clone to hold it for me. There was no way the seal would hold onto its shape for as
long as it would if I was here powering it, but I had five minutes of leeway before the clone would pop.

Five minutes of charge on a barrier this big took a chunk out of my reserves, but I could go without it. My newest clone would just have to hold down the fort until I could take the burden back up.

I had to.

My new Water Clone picked up the slack as soon as it swirled out of the air, leaving me free to grab my katana.

“Wh-where are you going?!” squeaked the bartender man, as I prepared to cut a hole in the barrier and intercept our extra guest.

“If I’m not back in five minutes, hide in the forest,” I said, rather than answering. Either fight could level Banaro Island, but both of them needed to be handled.

Yugito was gone, and I was the only one who knew how to shut down a rampaging jinchūriki anyway. It had to be me.

I pointed the tip of my katana directly at the barrier’s wall, just over my clone’s shoulder, and made the Seal of Confrontation with my other hand. The sword started to glow like a torch as the steel picked up on the chakra I was channeling through it.

Isobu, whatever happens—keep an eye on the Blackbeards.

I happened to send that thought along just as Teach and Ace both decided that their best tactics involved creating massive balls of fire and darkness that looked like nothing less than a Spirit Bomb fight. Teach’s powers ate ambient light and shrouded the former town in darkness, while Ace’s flames fought that leeching effect directly and were nearly as bright as the full noon sun.

Make sure Ace makes it, I thought. Please.

Deal with Utakata before Saiken intervenes, was all Isobu said in response. If I did not, well, there might not be anything left afterward for him to monitor. And if Isobu had his hands full with his brother… Crap. I needed to move.

*Curve of the Moon.* The barrier tore wide open with the sound of ripping plastic sheets, giving me a gap wide enough to leap through before my clone automatically closed it.

And then I was on an intercept course.

Utakata was a mess. His posture was more like that of a zombie than a person, lurching around with his hair covering his orange eyes and making it hard to tell what exactly he was looking at. Add in the reddish chakra cloak forming a six-tailed silhouette around him, and I knew I was in for it.

I didn’t even know it was possible to go from a controlled, trained jinchūriki to a berserker in V1 alone. All of my moments where I’d lost self control either involved V2 taken way too far, complete with burning my own epidermis, or with the complete piece of shit seal I’d had at the very beginning. Utakata, to my knowledge, suffered from neither problem.

But he’d nearly died yesterday. Yugito and me throwing chakra around could have woken him into this borderline-mindless state. Theoretically.
“Utakata,” I called, to get his attention. I needed him to try and kill me. Focusing on me, ultimately, gave him zero room for anything else.

Honestly, I could have probably said anything. Anything at all. Using Isobu’s chakra made me the biggest threat he could perceive. Teach, Ace, Yugito, Isobu and Matatabi and Saiken—everyone else was background noise. Nothing mattered past the instant Utakata lunged right for me.

Utakata’s voice—supplemented by Saiken’s, twisted into something animalistic—came out as a wordless screech as he attempted an overhand hammer-blow that would have killed a normal person four times over.

My V1 cloak up and already active, I lurched sideways as though yanked by a tow line thanks to the power of Isobu’s chakra. Utakata’s pounce planted him headfirst in the ground, which buckled under the force, and I drew all three of my chakra tails to the front of the cloak in preparation for—

Utakata’s legs bunched up underneath him, his single visible eye alighted on me, and he bared all his teeth. With human teeth—and the fact that Saiken’s were all on his tongue—it was not as intimidating as it could be.

“Missed me!” I said in my best approximation of a taunt, under the circumstances. I slipped into Gai’s favorite starting stance, since I didn’t want to use kenjutsu and risk actually hurting him, and crooked my fingers at him in a challenge.

Utakata roared, hurling himself at me with his six chakra tails trailing behind him. I ducked under a wild roundhouse, feeling my V1 cloak disperse above my head just for a moment from the force of the blow. Then, before Utakata could fully recover, I slammed a sledgehammer-shaped projection of Isobu’s chakra into the back of his head like a baseball bat, sending him sprawling.

Utakata landed hands-first, but still plowed through the boulder I’d launched him into. To his credit, he took the headlong slide into solid rock like a champ—he was trying to throttle me with the chakra tails alone before he’d even gotten to his feet again. It was like being attacked by a corrosive octopus until I could slash, bite, and kick my way out of his grip.

We landed a few meters apart, but that separation only lasted for a few seconds.

“If chakra tails”—duck, weave, backflip over the lashing limbs—“are all you can do, you’re not going to win,” I told him, even as tails three through six merged into a single tail four times the length, and swung at me like a sword.

I Body Flickered out of the way, cursing on-the-fly inventiveness. *I should sue your ass for copyright infringement!*

Utakata followed me as I tore away from the town, into the Banaro Island mountains from whence he’d come. While the stone was already warping from the heat and force of Ace and Teach’s fight, I didn’t honestly care. Under V1, Utakata and I could survive the kind of force that would level the island, and even keep trying to kill each other afterward. We didn’t fear the sea.

**How long until you can subdue him?** Isobu demanded, his chakra and Saiken’s occupying nearly the same space.

*Unfortunately*, I said as I leapt from one rock to another while Utakata’s impact immediately afterward devastated the structure, *I left my Chakra Suppression Seals on the Nautilus. I’m gonna have to hit his back with the Five Elements Seal instead.*
Doing so will cut Saiken off from him, Isobu thought “aloud.”

The other seal wouldn’t do any better. I landed on all fours on the side of the biggest banana mountain I’d yet seen, three chakra tails arrayed out behind me and clinging to the stone.

Then the sun went out.

Utakata paused, wild-eyed, as the ambient light dimmed to a dull twilit version of itself. When I looked up in a panic, the sun was still there, but only as a circle of light about as bright as the moon. The black smoke of Teach’s whatever-the-fuck power reached upward from the center of the former town, just like before, sucking up light just the same way. From outside of my barrier seal, the view was much more worrying.

Utakata spat a miniature, half-formed Tailed Beast Bomb at me that missed and blew the top off a rock spire (and four after it). And it was on again.

I dodged, dropping like a stone from the mountain face as I cut the chakra sticking me to it. As I fell, Utakata obliterated much of the structure above me and sent a cascade of broken stone and rock dust down after me.

My set of chakra tails stretched outward, punching through the first layer of remaining stone and anchoring me in the air for a confused half-second. Then I let myself drop down again, treating the excess of the chakra cloak like a swing and whirling through the open air.

I soared halfway around the width of the banana-rock before the anchor slipped and I hurtled downward. The chakra cloak wrapped around me, forming Isobu’s spiky shell and tread-like tail spikes until I was essentially the head of a reddish, translucent cannonball.

I bounced, ricocheted off another banana-mountain, and smashed Utakata into another boulder on the rebound.

Across the island and back in what used to be a town, the sky seemed like nothing less than an even split between day and night. While the sun overhead was no brighter, a miniature star shone a little above the lip of the crater. From the wash of heat and the orange glare, the entire thing was about the size of a fully formed Tailed Beast Bomb—but without the precise chakra mix that tore through life forms like a combine harvester through wheat.

Ace really was holding back, was my immediate thought. Isobu had called us both on not taking the sparring match seriously months ago, but I hadn’t really understood it until there was a second sun right in front of me.

Just so, Isobu put in, but…

...You don’t think he’s going to win, I thought, even as I finally caught Utakata’s arm and twisted him into a joint lock. The sooner I dealt with Utakata, the sooner I could go see what was happening with Ace.

I think that Saiken will kill everyone on this island out of sheer stress if you do not sort the situation out now. Considerations past that point will have to wait.

I slammed Utakata’s head into the stone to stun him for the second time, with my knee digging into his back. Hyperextending his shoulder despite his chakra cloak tails bouncing off my head, I pinned his limb in place with one arm and one leg.
If he’d been thinking, he would have been able to wiggle out of my grip. Saiken’s chakra conferred some of the physical contortion abilities of a slug when it was used on purpose. But Utakata wasn’t thinking much and thus couldn’t escape.

Behind me, there was a flash of mingled light and dark—and heat and pressure that made my ears pop—just as I slammed five fiery fingertips directly into the seal on Utakata’s back.

My ears popped again, prompting a wince, as Utakata’s chakra cloak faltered and died. I was left holding a still-bandaged, unconscious jinchūriki before my chakra cloak faded out. I turned him over as gently as I could still manage, checking his pulse and respiration on automatic.

“Fine” was a strong word. But Utakata would live, and as a jinchūriki he’d fully recover. He’d been through worse.

**Saiken cannot sense his partner now. Did you succeed?**

*Yeah. I-I’ve got him now,* I replied unsteadily. My heart hammered in my chest.

Not because of anything Utakata could do—he was going to be out cold for long enough to not be a threat—but because the battle behind me had also gone quiet. Aside from the sound of stone falling nearby, Banaro Island’s trembling, and the distant buzz of my still-active barrier seal, the area around us was eerily silent.

Though he was taller than I was, I picked Utakata up in a fireman’s carry and headed back for town. I went only slowly enough to avoid injuring him further, but otherwise put my shinobi speed to work. **Body Flicker.**

“Ah, she’s—wait, who are you?” asked the bartender-looking guy from before.

Must’ve dropped my Transformation Jutsu in the fight. Whoops. Even through the Four Corner Barrier Formation, the size and feature differences were hardy subtle. “It’s still me, sir. Lemme just…”

I reached out and rested my hand against the soap bubble wall, killing it wholesale as I drew my chakra out of the barrier and out of all the clones. The entire cube collapsed under my hand, and I sighed as what chakra remained dispersed into nothing. I wouldn’t be getting much back at the best of times, but this felt like such a **waste.**

“Look after him for a minute, okay?” I said, as I dropped Utakata on the ground at the barkeep’s feet.

“I-I don’t—”

But I didn’t have the kind of time needed to argue. I walked over to where my clone had been standing and cut the barrier seal in half to complete the deactivation sequence. Then I sheathed my sword one-handed.

**Isobu,** I thought as I Body Flickered away from the place I’d protected, **status report.**

Trees and rubble of various kind was strewn all over the island, and the crater that had been the town was now scorched on one side in addition to everything else. I honestly didn’t know what I was expecting to find, not like this, but Utakata had distracted me for long enough. What had happened to my **team?**

**Yugito is conscious, but in Matatabi’s care on the next island,** Isobu responded, as I felt his
chakra move farther and farther around the curve of the island, underwater. My sister is trying to determine how she can most easily rejoin us without forcing us to give up the hunt.

I nodded absently as I landed in the middle of the crater after a particularly long leap. Heat from what I presumed was Ace’s massive fireball radiated up through my shoes, but a dash of Isobu’s chakra prevented me from taking any injuries from the still-smoking ground. And Saiken?

**Saiken is currently awaiting Utakata’s return**, was Isobu’s response as I poked through the rubble.

*Utakata will be unconscious until tomorrow, minimum,* I replied to his unasked question. Saiken and Isobu knew what had happened and what I’d had to do to subdue Utakata, but not for how long my “solution” would be screwing with him.

…I notice that you have not said or asked anything about our pirate companion, Isobu said after a long pause, in which I kicked over a random boulder and sent it rolling down into the center of the crater. Just because it was upright when nothing else was.

*It’s kind of obvious what happened, isn’t it?* I asked Isobu. If my voice had been working, I might’ve managed a shaky tone, but as it was there was a knot built up in my throat that I didn’t even want to deal with. *He’s dead.*

Obliterated, possibly. The tracker I’d given him wasn’t even providing a weakened signal. There wasn’t—

I blinked, focusing on a patch of orange in my wavering vision. Not *no* trace, then.

With shaking hands, I made my way over to the spot where Ace’s hat sat abandoned, upside-down and partly crumpled under its own weight. I picked it up and placed it on my lap, brushing away bits of dirt and a few splinters off the leather.

Its owner would never fuss over it again.

Isobu was silent for a long time, letting me sit there and just—

**Komushi is getting a call.**

Every muscle in my body seized up. The only people who ever called Komushi were the Whitebeard Pirates. We’d gotten the snail to block most Marine numbers within a few days of meeting it, and—

*Fuck.*

I pulled my long coat sleeve down over my hand and pressed it against my eyes. Not enough time. Needed to—I needed to *focus.*

*I-Isobu, what happened inside your stomach?* I asked. Last I remembered, we’d left Komushi on the *Nautilus.*

**Utakata’s initial outburst destroyed the ship, but my clones saved the snail,** Isobu said, and I sighed again. Today was… It was—

I took a deep, steadying breath. My chest shuddered anyway.

Today had *happened*, and I had to deal with it.
Get Utakata back here, and we will plan. We will regroup. Isobu sent me the sensation of being suspended in open water, weightless, and I closed my eyes briefly. He certainly couldn’t hug me, and it was beneath his dignity to try, but it was something. And we will succeed on our next encounter.

I couldn’t even dredge up the energy to look forward to tearing Teach in half. Lengthwise.

With a silent exhale, I turned Ace’s hat in my hands before placing its cord around my neck, so the hat itself hung down between my shoulder blades. I’d keep it safe until…until I could see the Whitebeards again and give it to them. For now, I had work to do.

*Body Flicker.*

I reappeared almost exactly where I’d left. The barkeep was even there, still, and jumped when I basically teleported right in front of him, from his perspective.

“Do you have a snail you can use to call for help?” I asked brusquely, even as I hauled Utakata up and onto my back like a child. I’d drag his ass around until I could fling him at Saiken, maybe.

“I, I, uh—” The barkeep swallowed hard, pupils blown wide by fear, and managed to say, “Y-Yeah, I’m sure someone does!”

“Then go and call the next island for help. Hell, call the Marines,” I tossed out, my temper badly frayed. “If you can’t find a snail, I’ll call them myself.”

The barkeep ran the hell away from me in short order. I blinked rapidly, but the itch in my eyes didn’t fade. Must’ve been pulling on Isobu’s chakra enough to get his eyes, then.

Utakata wordlessly groaned into my ear. I ignored him, irritated but unwilling to leave until I was sure the Banaro Island townspeople would be able to get along all right. If I’d burned my chance to actually save Ace’s life for them and for Utakata, I needed to see it through, didn’t I?

*Isobu, did you tag Teach’s ship somehow?*

*I got the original the first we saw of it,* Isobu said, and I got a flash of one of his little clones latching onto the keel of the glorified raft. *He stole another ship, so I had to send a clone over to it as well. It is hanging on.*

*Good,* I thought, but without a scrap of enthusiasm. I forced myself to say, *We’ll deal with him after…this.*

*My thoughts exactly.*

Once I got confirmation from a terrified citizen that they could call Marines on a snail several minutes later, and had done so, I vanished with Utakata via the Body Flicker technique. A few quick surges of shinobi speed later, and I arrived on an isolated stretch of coast just in time to relinquish Utakata to his sobbing slug partner.

“I’m so sorry! Uta, Uta, this never would have happened if I hadn’t been impatient—” Saiken was wailing, already turning back out to sea. Utakata couldn’t respond, but if he traveled on top of Saiken’s head and under a stalk-eye, I didn’t honestly fear for his safety. “*I promise, I’ll never—*”

Isobu, next to him, just cast the pair a long, dark look from his single open eye. He sank lower into
the waves as I approached, my chakra tucked in tight due to the sheer number of techniques I was using to keep myself steady in the face of this disaster.

Tuning the rest of it out, I stepped into Isobu’s open maw and slid down to his stomach as we left Banaro behind.

I slowed halfway down, coming to a stop just past the point where Isobu’s stomach really got weird. Catching myself on one of the spikes, I felt a headache on the horizon as soon as my eyes adjusted to the amber light and could see what had changed in here. Along with all the other unpleasant sensations swirling around in my system—chakra drain, physical fatigue, grief—I was belatedly surprised I could even notice it.

But Utakata’s rampage had gutted the Nautilus, tearing the mast in half and cracking the engine so badly that the shell just kept spewing water until the bow of the boat slammed into a spike. The Nautilus was impaled, entirely unseaworthy, and everything on it was either ruined or waterlogged to hell and back. Loose boards and splinters floated on the water Isobu had taken in not half an hour ago, almost like blood.

Fucking dammit.

I shook myself, then got back to business. Cupping my hands around my mouth, I called, “Komushi?”

Isobu’s stomach rumbled, and his mini-clones emerged from the spiky walls of his stomach. From a far-off dark corner, a whole legion of the dog-sized ones trooped out and into the orangeish inner light that lit the strange space. On one of their backs, emitting a “purupurupurupuru” noise, was the pink-shelled Komushi, safe and sound.

I took a deep breath, then headed for the other shore in a quick hop or two. Bounding off the water’s surface felt…dull, when I knew I’d have to be the bearer of bad news. No one else could. No one else was here or conscious and—

When I arrived at the other side, with Komushi still ringing, one of the Isobu clones bit me. Gently, but with enough intent that I looked down at it in surprise.

Be strong.

I’m trying, I responded instantly, looking down at the clone’s gold-on-red eye. “I’m trying…”

Don’t try. Do.

Yoda at me again and I’m not speaking to you for the rest of the day, I snapped at him. I picked up the microphone. “Hello?”

“Hi!” said Thatch’s bright voice, and I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. “It’s Thatch again, but I’m sure you could tell. How’ve you all been?”

I bit down on my tongue for an instant, then said, “It’s...been a long day. You?”

“Oh, Kei!” Thatch’s expression mirrored on Komushi’s face, showing a warm smile. “I’m fine, but the fact that Ace isn’t on this call means he must be sulking again, right? Did Yugito do something?”

The nails on my left hand were digging into my right arm as I fought to keep myself under control through pain. In my right hand, receiver creaked as it was caught up in the same attempt. “You
could say that.”

She’d failed to stay in the fight long enough. I’d failed to join fast enough.

Fucking hell.

“One of those kinds of days, huh?” Thatch’s voice seemed unconcerned. Or perhaps my control techniques were working all too well.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, pasting a neutral mask over the grimace I wanted to make. “What’s going on over there?”

I was stalling.

I understood the concept of death perfectly well, especially after a long and illustrious career of making people dead. But for some reason my emotions were just refusing to let me articulate what my head already understood. Too many of my feelings were tied up in shock and disbelief.

How could I lose someone just when we were almost on the cusp of victory?

Thatch answered, of course. He didn’t know what I was thinking. “Well, we’ve got the Red Hair Pirates visi—”

“Who are you calling?” asked a horribly familiar voice, and my breath caught in my throat a second too late.

“K-Kushina?” I asked, even though that voice could belong to no one else.

There was a pause on the other end as Kushina processed the sound of my voice. The other room was so quiet that Komushi didn’t seem to know what face to make. And then, as Komushi’s eyes turned violet, Kushina’s voice screeched, “KEI!”

Thatch’s voice followed nearly immediately. “Hey, give that back!”

“Kei, what happened?” Kushina demanded, and going by the sudden sound of steel hitting steel, she and Thatch were fighting over the snail on their end. “Why do you you sound like that? Where are you?!”

My vision went blurry. “K-K-Kushina…”

Even though I outranked Kushina, and had for years, hearing my surrogate big sister’s voice reached into my ribcage and clamped down on my heart. It was like being fourteen again, right after Mom died, and the effect was only magnified by how long it had been since I’d seen her.

Where had my self-control gone?

“Kei, Kei, come on,” Kushina said in a much softer tone, even as the sound of her chains hitting Thatch’s swords got louder. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

That would about sum the situation up, actually. Yugito and I screwed up, Ace may or may not have, but it didn’t matter because he was dead. Kushina probably didn’t even know who Ace was, and she couldn’t have known that I knew him because I didn’t let anyone know. No one outside of the Whitebeards would.

“Who are you and how do you know Kei?” Thatch yelled over the line. While I didn’t answer due to the knot in my throat, he seemed to have noticed the problem.
“I was about to ask you that,” Kushina’s voice responded, “because I saw one of her sumi-e paintings in your galley.”

I’d almost forgotten about that. It seemed like I’d painted it such a long time ago, back when I’d actually expected to not get caught up in pirate business.

Thatch stumbled. “That—how do you even—”

And then Ace had come crashing back through my non-plans, and things finally got rolling. I didn’t like Yugito much, but she was an (unfriendly) ally and getting her onboard had put us ahead of the curve and—

And then everything went downhill.

“Kei’s art is awful, but I’d recognize her handwriting anywhere,” Kushina said, focusing on Thatch. “Not to mention the tracker seal she left there. I know her work.” The sound of clashing metal stopped. “Kei, what’s going on?”

“I-I wanted a way to find my way back to the Moby Dick,” I said, surprising myself with how steady my voice sounded. I only stammered a little. “And, uh, I made the painting as a get-well present for Thatch.”

Back when I’d thought things would be okay.

How naïve of me.

“How’s Thatch?” Kushina asked.

“That would be me,” said Thatch.

This, apparently, was all Kushina needed to pretty much forget the previous few seconds had happened. “Oh, then that’s all right. I’m Uzumaki Kushina. Kei’s my little sister.”

They may have been shaking hands. I didn’t know. I just heard Thatch say, “Thatch, Fourth Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates. She saved my life.”

I covered my eyes with my free hand. And my hesitation had gotten Ace killed.

“So what’s wrong, then?” Kushina asked, having clearly not forgotten her original inquiry as she turned her attention back to me. “You sound upset, and the snail looks like it, too.”

Ah, that. Right. Expression mirroring went both ways.

I touched the little demon-shaped sigil hanging from Ace’s hat’s cord. After a second, I grasped it between shaking fingers. This hat had to make it back to them. Unscathed.

“Kei?” Thatch’s voice asked.

“It’s—it’s been a…” I trailed off, unable to even fully voice the thought. “I-It’s…”

The other end of the connection was silent, but I could see the open concern reflected on Komushi’s little face.

“We found Teach,” I said, after I’d taken a breath to steady myself. Two of Isobu’s clones nudged up against me, and I reached down to rub one of the left one’s head spikes. “It didn’t go well.”
“Komushi’s face adopted a look of horror that didn’t fill me with any confidence, but they needed to hear this. I needed to finally fucking say it.”

“Yugito—Kumo’s Yugito—she got hurt, and Matatabi pulled her out,” I said, because it hurt less to talk about her. She’d be okay. Matatabi wouldn’t allow her to be any less. “She’s on a different island, but I’ll meet up with her in a day or two.”

“And Ace?” Thatch asked, his voice almost painfully soft.

“He—” I began, and then cut myself off with a choking noise.

Not because I couldn’t talk. Not because of the devastated look that Komushi had to be copying from Thatch’s face. Not because I couldn’t feel the tracker seal at all and the emptiness ached.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Ping!

Ace’s tracker seal was active. It had been interrupted, perhaps, but the thing still existed and I could feel it again. The signal couldn’t tell me what condition he was in—it was only designed to provide a signal to follow—but I didn’t care.

I scrambled to my feet, microphone still in hand, and bellowed, “Isobu, can you feel that?”

Through you, yes. Isobu’s entire stomach rumbled as he growled. And it is coming from a direction I am already familiar with.

I let out a growl of my own, resonating with Isobu. Teach.

And apparently I’d made a spelling error in the seal tag I’d given Ace, because the signal had only activated when he was ten kilometers away. Of fucking course.

“Kei, what happened? Is Isobu with you?” Kushina asked, having probably shoved Thatch aside.

“Yes—he’s with me, we’re—” Oh, fuck it. “Thatch, listen! Ace is alive, but we got separated. I’m going to go after him right now.”

Komushi did its best to explode at me in Thatch’s voice. “THEN WHAT WAS ALL THAT DRAMA FOR?!”

“I thought he died,” I replied, but not nearly as loudly. In a tone that failed to keep my frustration internal, I explained, “Yugito and I got separated from him and he took on Teach while I had to go beat Utakata’s face in! When the tracker seal didn’t activate, I thought there was nothing left.”

“Why are you—nope, never mind, I’ll get the story later,” Thatch cut himself off, Komushi mimicking his scowl. “Where is Ace now?”

“I’m almost—” Isobu rumbled ominously, and I said instead, “I’m sure I can ask Teach that question. And get an answer.” I growled, “Ace is likely a prisoner on Teach’s ship. Isobu and I are going after him.”

“Kei, you’re going to use Isobu against a ship?” Kushina cut in. “You’ll kill everyone on board!”

“Who the hell is Isobu?!” Thatch demanded. “And what’s that rumbling noise, anyway?”

“The answers to both questions are the same.” Kushina sighed. “Kei, you know perfectly well that using Isobu—”
“Isobu considers Ace a friend. We’re both going after him,” I said in a cold tone. At any other time, I would have been astounded at my own gall, but today had been a bad day. “Whether any of you approve or not. Whitebeard isn’t my captain, and it’s my mission, Kushina.”

“Ace isn’t Obito!” Kushina yelled back, and I flinched. “If you’re going to launch a rescue, you need to think it through before you end up getting hurt!”

So what if he wasn’t? I’d known Obito was being kept in Madara’s basement for six fucking months, and I hadn’t had the power to do anything about it. I’d been a thirteen-year-old chūnin who flubbed so badly that history repeated itself uninhibited, just because I was too bullheaded to ask for help. And once he was there, the only thing we could wait for was his captor getting bored.

But Yugito had been blindsided by Teach’s techniques, whatever they were, and so had Ace. I escaped any damage during that fight because I hadn’t been in it, instead duking it out with a battle-crazed Utakata. And then—to top it all off—I’d failed to make the connection between Yugito’s chakra cutting off once she got sucked into the shadow and my own tracker seal either failing to activate within the same environment or suffering from the idiot behind its construction.

The former was a data point I’d need to complete my assessment of Teach’s powers. The latter was a caution against rushing in like Ace and Yugito had.

Still, Ace had been alive the whole time and I’d missed that. If I’d been on the ball, I could have rescued him immediately. Or at least twisted Teach’s arm until he either let Ace go or I tore it from his body.

I massaged my temples with one hand. “It doesn’t change the fact that Isobu and I are the only ones close enough to do anything.”

“I… You’re right. I’m sorry. That was out of line.” Kushina sighed, clearly trying to reorganize her thoughts. “I keep forgetting you’re in another sea.”

“Yeah, that,” I murmured. But I needed the reality check.

“Even so, you said you can get Yugito and Matatabi. And you mentioned Utakata as well, so that must mean Saiken, right?” Kushina asked, now that I’d apparently cooled down a bit.

I nodded, though she couldn’t see me. “Saiken’s on board, but as for Yugito… I need to ask her what she saw. And experienced. I didn’t get a good look at Teach’s fighting style.”

Kushina just asked, “Even so, what did you see?”

“Darkness, basically,” I said, frowning at the vagueness of the statement even as I voiced it. I needed to be more specific than that, and I had a couple of shorthand hints. “Think of…some kind of mix of Shadow Paralysis, the Deva Path, and Kamui. I know gravity went weird.”

I heard Kushina swallow, with Komushi adopting a very concerned expression. She knew perfectly well what each of those techniques could do in the wrong hands. I didn’t need to paint her a picture. “…That is terrifying.”

“I don’t know exactly how it all fits together,” I cautioned her. “But I’ll ask Yugito for hints.”

“Kei, do you know how to fight that?” Thatch asked. I imagined him wringing his hands, out of worry for both Ace and my decisions. Hopefully, I wouldn’t do anything to make him cry again.

“I have no idea,” I admitted. My ideas for fighting Shadow Paralysis basically involved being too
strong to hold, and I’d never gotten beyond theoretical tactics when it came to the Deva Path. “But Teach is still sunk if I can kill his ship on the open ocean. I’m fast enough to get Ace out one way or another.”

My main plan thus far involved Isobu ripping the ship in half, me darting into the rubble via Water Dragon Bullet train, and then grabbing Ace before I took off. It was vague as hell, and I certainly didn’t know the Blackbeard Pirates’ skills or even their members’ faces. I would be going in as blind as I had ever dared.

But I had to try.

“...Kei, I’ll approve on one condition,” Kushina said finally. Her voice was heavier than I’d heard from her for much longer than the last time I’d heard her voice. Maybe the distance from home was weighing on her. Or maybe she simply had a very good idea of the risks I’d consider “acceptable” when saving a friend.

“Name it,” I responded automatically. Not that her permission mattered. I was still going.

“Get Yugito as backup—but call back. Killer B will want to talk to her,” Kushina said. I was already nodding when she went on with, “Actually, we’re only here because Shanks wanted to warn Whitebeard about Teach, and have him call off the hunt. So I’ll handle telling Shanks what happened today, all right?”

I winced again. “I… I should probably…” Do what? Write a report?

Thatch saved me from needing to scramble for a way to describe the situation. “I’ll tell Pops. He needs to know.” He added, “But seriously, Kei, call us if you need backup. We might not all be as fast as Striker, but you know the rule. Attack one Whitebeard Pirate, and you attack all of us.”

...Was that what Teach wanted out of this? Shaking off the sudden worrying thought, I said, “I’ll check in, I promise. Once I get a location, I’ll go straight after it, but I’ll give you a bit of warning.”

Kushina sighed, and Komushi looked utterly exasperated. “Don’t get yourself in over your head. And here’s our snail number, okay?” Kushina recited a string of digits, which I quickly memorized. “Take care of yourself out there.”

“I’m starting to think that’s all I can do,” I muttered, before hanging up with a click. I patted Komushi’s shell, turning back to face the wreck of the Nautilus.

She did not mention Yin Kurama, Isobu commented as I sat down on the internal beach.

I kicked one of the shattered planks back into the water. I think she’s been hiding Yin Kurama the same way Yugito hides Matatabi. Killer B might have more leeway with Gyūki, though.

Isobu sighed, making his insides briefly contort. Kei.

Yeah? I tossed a loose stone onto the Nautilus’s shattered deck.

We will get him back.

I drew my knees up toward my chest, then rested my folded arms on top. Then we had better get Yugito and figure out what Teach can do.
With Isobu’s clone hanging onto the ship the Blackbeards used, and my tracker seal once again active, we had enough leeway to visit the island Matatabi and Yugito were trapped on. We lost a day reaching Water 7’s little collection of overpopulated rocks, but I had been cautious of the place even after just hearing about it. Unlike most of the islands we’d visited, it was both populated and densely so, and there was no way in hell a giant flaming cat was going unnoticed.

Which she had solved by dropping the entire island into a massive genjutsu. She tucked her tails around her feet and was preening when Isobu drew close, clearly unbothered by the people milling around her paws. They didn’t appear to notice the giant cat they were all automatically avoiding, and that enforced obliviousness included the local Marines.

“It is time for us to bid this place goodbye, dear,” Matatabi said, twirling her head around to look over her shoulder.

Yugito appeared—worse for the wear, but alive—from amongst Matatabi’s flames. She took one look at Isobu’s shelled form poking out of the water, sighed, and leapt onto his head without a further word. With Matatabi on his back, Isobu and I maintained the Hidden Mist technique long enough for us to head out to sea, and then it was time to talk.

I wasn’t looking forward to it. That feeling was probably why I let Yugito go more than an hour without speaking, though we were both sitting on Isobu’s head less than six feet apart.

“I’m still in pain, thank you for asking,” Yugito said coldly, breaking the silence.

I glanced at her, frankly out of energy for any of this shit. “You can take a nap if you want. We’re going to be out here for a while.”

Yugito had been hurt—there was a tremendous amount of blood soaked into the bundle of clothes she’d brought back with her—but she’d clearly healed since then. From the patches I’d need to repair, she’d been impaled through her leg and stomach, but the damage was almost imperceptible now. It was good to know, even if I didn’t want to know how she’d managed to remove the objects without passing out.

In response to my dismissive tone, Yugito gave a noncommittal grunt. Then, “Someone had to test him.”

“He manipulates gravity somehow,” Yugito said, still clearly irritable. At least she was playing nice with me. “Anything that gets caught in the shadow gets sucked into this...compressed space.”

Kamui, I thought again. Only Obito’s technique didn’t even have an explicit suction component—people could and did get out of it if they were forewarned. Or fast enough. It was just that a partial success generally amputated extremities.

“It felt like I’d been crushed in the Eight—in Gyūki’s hands,” Yugito went on, frowning. “If not for Matatabi...”

If not for Matatabi, Yugito would have died and I could have had that weighing my conscience down. As much as I didn’t care for Kumo, it did help to know that Yugito would survive due to Matatabi’s attentiveness. In more than one sense.

I didn’t want to think about what state we might find Ace in. He wasn’t a jinchūriki.

“I was quite worried about you, dear,” Matatabi said, lowering one of her paws so it could rest
next to Yugito on Isobu’s spikes. “In that moment, I couldn’t feel your mind or your heart at all.”

Which matched with what I’d felt when the tracker seal had disappeared. Maybe that shadow acted like the aperture of Obito’s Kamui, and what was behind it was some kind of high-gravity dimension? If so, Teach had a truly frightening range.

“I still feel like a giant bruise,” Yugito admitted, probably mostly to Matatabi.

“That is because you are one,” said Isobu.

“Isobu!” Matatabi scolded instantly.

“My partner is the only one to emerge from that fight unscathed,” Isobu reminded all of us in a pointed tone. “It was a fiasco.”

“Well, mine wasn’t supposed to be in that fight at all,” said Saiken, from somewhere around Isobu’s elbow. He was still carrying Utakata on his head, and he hadn’t woken up since I’d slapped him down the other day.

I also hadn’t unlocked the Five Elements Seal. If I had to deal with a hostile Utakata, I’d do so while he could barely walk in a straight line unassisted.

“Did you get caught up helping civilians the whole time?” Yugito asked with undisguised disgust. “You’ve been quiet. Are you ashamed of spinelessness?”

“I fought Utakata when he went berserk,” I said in a flat tone, closing my eyes. And the only reason I’d won was because Utakata’s Wristband of Doom put a cap on his power output. Otherwise, I would’ve had to call Isobu in, and everyone would have died.

I could almost see Yugito scowl, and I could certainly hear it in her voice as she said, “That was after I was forced with withdraw. What were you doing before then?”

My voice, on the other hand, only grew colder. “I was protecting civilians, as you asked. ‘Watch us kill him,’ wasn’t it?”

If she wanted to play the blame game, I had plenty to throw around. Most of it was rightfully mine, I thought, but I could catch Yugito in it as collateral damage.

“All I did was go protect people from the consequences of fighting on a populated island,” I said, still not looking at her. “I was out of your way.”

And right in the perfect spot to intercept Utakata. If I’d stayed on the Nautilus, maybe it wouldn’t have been destroyed, but hundreds of innocent people would have been killed by Ace and Teach’s attacks hitting each other and radiating outward. Utakata’s berserk V1 form, running around unopposed, would make quick work of whoever or whatever survived.

“You shouldn’t have sent a civilian to do a shinobi’s job,” Yugito hissed, and I opened my eyes to glare at her. She went on, “Ace just stood there as Teach used that shadow attack. When his first direct strike failed to kill the man, he should have followed up immediately.”

I didn’t have a good argument against that, other than the detail that I was not and had never been Ace’s commanding officer. It wasn’t like I’d been there. Still, I said, “I already knew Ace didn’t—doesn’t—have much of a killer instinct. But you do.”
“It wasn’t just that.” Yugito scowled. “The more I used my jutsu, the less his flames did anything.”

Oxygen starvation? Or something else?

I sighed. I’d have to ask someone who’d actually been there the whole time. “We’ll find out what happened when we find him. But Yugito?” How to put this...? “Honestly, you should have stayed out of it.”

Yugito bristled. “What?”

“Ace and I are the ones with the grudge against Teach,” I said, my voice astonishingly level. “Teach tried to kill me and almost murdered Ace’s friend. I should have been in there, and you should have been the one making sure no civilians got hurt.”

“I don’t have any techniques that would work for that,” Yugito snapped. Her nails lengthened somewhat, but I didn’t flinch for once.

“Then I could have given you the barrier seal,” I retorted, fighting the urge the grind my teeth. “And I am not an expert on your techniques or their use! You could have made some kind of effort to instruct me, if that was your goal!” Yugito got to her feet, looming somewhat ineffectively over me even though she was clearly furious. “You didn’t. Why?”

I glared back at her, my eyes itching as we both got our Tailed Beast chakra flowing. “Because I was weak.” While Yugito bared her claws, I went on, “I didn’t want to fight with you over something I thought you could handle. Especially after we’ve fought over damn near everything else.”

“You didn’t have the slightest idea what I could do,” Yugito snarled, while I heard Matatabi give a rumbling purr. Distinctly not soothed, Yugito continued, “And you didn’t dare spar with me even once while we traveled. Maybe if you had—”

“Do you trust me?” I countered, and my eyes itched more. “Because I sure as hell don’t trust you to hold back, or to listen, or to even know when to stop. The first time we met, I had to knock you into the ocean just to get you to stop trying to kill me!”

We might’ve continued to argue for a while longer, both gearing up for a fight, but Matatabi’s paw swiped across Isobu’s head and knocked both of us into the ocean.

Being underwater in a cloud of bubbles, I couldn’t swear out loud, but I gamely kicked my way back up onto the surface just as Isobu lifted a hand for me to grab onto. I pasted my hair back against my head as I got my bangs out of my eyes, still unhappy, but at least I’d stopped being angry enough to shout. About forty feet away, I saw Yugito being lifted out of the water via one of Matatabi’s flaming paws, and the urge to scream at her died.

“That is quite enough out of the both of you,” Matatabi said firmly, even as she lifted Yugito onto Isobu’s back. Once the blonde woman was secured between her paws, the giant cat went on, “Now, let us take care of the business ahead of us. Slinging blame will not help us now.”

Isobu allowed me to climb back onto his head from his hand, then said, “Sister, did you find anything of use on the last island?”

Matatabi tilted her head to one side. “I did not, but my partner saw some reports of a human sort. Dear, if you would?”
Yugito, by way of response, hurled a tightly-bound roll of paper at my head. I caught it one-handed recognizing the outside layer as a local newspaper. It was remarkably unscathed, given how Yugito was mostly enveloped in Matatabi’s paws.

*Isobu, I’m gonna head inside to get Komushi and see what all of these are, okay? I gripped the newspaper in one hand as I climbed down the side of Isobu’s head. My partner, who was far more obliging than I honestly felt I deserved, opened his mouth and let me head inside.*

Once inside of his stomach, I let Komushi climb onto my back and unrolled the newspaper. A series of bounty posters, clearly grabbed blindly from a stand, rolled out.

*“Straw Hat” Monkey D. Luffy: Three hundred million beris.*

*“Pirate Hunter” Roronoa Zoro: One hundred and twenty million beris.*

*“Cat Burglar” Nami: Sixteen million beris.*

*“Sniper King” (probably Usopp): Thirty million beris.*

*“Black Leg” Sanji: Sixty-six million beris.*

*“Cotton Candy Lover” Tony Tony Chopper: ...Fifty beris. Okay, then.*

*“Devil Child” Nico Robin: Seventy-nine million beris.*

*“Cyborg” Franky: Forty-four million beris.*

Well, we hadn’t explicitly told Yugito that Gaara was with the Straw Hats, but perhaps she’d gotten them by accident. I pushed the paperwork aside and dug around until I found two odd posters out.

*“Red Sand” Gaara: Forty million beris.*

And last, but certainly not least, a picture of a grinning green-haired teenager with orange eyes.

*“Silkworm” Fū: Ten million beris.*

...That certainly explained where the hell Fū was. There were no details on the poster of how the Straw Hats had run into her, but it was damned clear that she’d joined in when they went to invade some place called “Enies Lobby.”

I bit my lip briefly, then packed up the posters and handed them over to one of Isobu’s clones for safekeeping. Then Komushi and I headed up Isobu’s throat and into the world again.

Despite the glare Yugito leveled at me for appearing on Isobu’s back in front of her, I still set Komushi down on the shell surface and started dialing Shanks’s number.

“What do you want?” Yugito demanded, from inside the flames. For Yugito, they might as well have been foxfire, but I still didn’t want to touch them.

“What while you were on Water 7,” I said, “I got a call from the Whitebeards. The Red Hair Pirates met up with them, and Kushina got in on the call.”

She scowled again. “And?”

“And Killer B wants to talk to you,” I explained, watching Yugito’s face morph from that scowl to
a wince. “He’s probably just worried.”

I didn’t even know why I was bothering to reassure her. It wasn’t like Yugito believed me. At this rate, we’d still be bitching at each other until doomsday.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Yugito muttered, not making a move to take the receiver from me.

Komushi perked up, twisting its face into a grin. “Hey, I never get calls from the Marines. Who’s this?”

“It’s Kei,” I said, though the person on the other end hadn’t identified himself. “I promised Kushina I’d check in with her about...a day ago?”

Shit, time really did fly.

“Oh, right! She told me about that,” said the voice. “Only I think I might’ve been drunk. Oh well. HEY KUSHINA, YOU HAVE A CALL WAITING!”

Kushina bellowed back, from what sounded like the other end of the ship, “What the hell took so long?!”

“I DON’T KNOW!” was the shouted response. Then, in a less ear-splitting voice that probably could stand to be used more often, the-guy-who-was-probably-Shanks said, “What did you need to talk about?”

“The call’s actually for Killer B, if he’s around,” I said, though I held the receiver a ways away from my face. I got yelled at enough last time. “Tell him Yugito needs to talk to him.”

Yugito was rapidly shaking her head.

Too fucking bad. I clambered up Isobu’s sloping shell, set Komushi down closer to Yugito, and held up the microphone.

“He’s actually right here.” Which did not stop definitely-Shanks from shouting, “HEY, B, TAKE THE CALL!”

The sound of beatboxing took up the other end of the line, and then it sounded like someone had dropped the receiver on the Red Hair Pirates’ ship. Though I had some idea of what was coming next, I still didn’t know for sure.

“Hey-hey-hey, 'sup Nii Yugito,” said a voice that could only be Killer B. Komushi had even morphed itself a pair of sunglasses. “Been some time since we up and meet-o.”

“B, try being serious,” Kushina suggested, but she didn’t seem to mean it all that much.

Killer B, per usual, ignored this. “Can't stop the flow, in my head, in my toes!”

“Dahahahahaha!” Of course, Shanks laughed his head off in the background. I got to listen to that while Kushina and Yugito both groaned.

“I’m almost sorry we’ve only got one snail,” I muttered, while Komushi contorted its face again and again. Can we be a bit more serious for a second?

**Given what you and I both know about Gyūki’s host? Likely not.**

I pinched the bridge of my nose. *Point.*
“Kei, you can call back later,” Kushina put in, while Yugito pretty much cowered. “You and I don’t need to hear about too many Kumogakure things, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, mostly to get away from the conversation. The sheer pain involved in Killer B’s rhymes was enough to drive me to consider drinking, if there was any booze around. Not that it’d work. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Talk to you soon!” Kushina said cheerfully.

We need to plan for how we will attack the ship, Isobu said as I skittered down his shell and toward his head again. Far enough down, the sea would drown out Killer B’s voice. I can show you a projection of what it looks like, if you want.

What would I do without him? Thanks, Isobu.

Chapter End Notes

What happens when a group’s heart is ripped out? This.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Take care of business.

Chapter Notes

The song title for this chapter is one of my favorite general epic action tracks I use to write fight scenes. It's by Really Slow Motion.

The sea was vast, but not so much that there weren’t people or places to avoid. So we came up with new, better strategies for doing just that as a group.

Yugito and I eventually retreated to Isobu’s stomach for convenience’s sake, though she complained and I had to drag Utakata along despite Saiken’s protests. Once there, we could rely on hundreds of eyes to keep track of Utakata’s condition, and also to keep Komushi safe from the elements. Isobu’s clones were also convenient that way.

Out of respect for Matatabi’s wish not to be separated from Yugito again for a number of reasons, Saiken blew a stream of bubbles until he could engulf his fiery sibling. Then, once a super-bubble had been assembled out of the froth and Matatabi could curl up safely inside it, he dragged the bubble underwater with half of his tails hanging onto it. He kept up with Isobu while effectively towing Matatabi.

Isobu, for his part, manipulated the water around his siblings so that they could easily keep up with him. When I asked, it didn’t seem to bother him any more than it would a school of fish, so I left him to it.

And while we were under the waves, Utakata finally woke up.

Yugito and I were pointedly Not Talking at the time, though we were also folding the Straw Hats’ wanted posters into really terrible origami. As such, we noticed only because one of the Isobu clones let out a loud “Wah!” when Utakata started to stir.

“…huh?” was Utakata’s first word. Wasn’t even really a word, in my opinion. “Wha… What happened…?”

Yugito and I met each other’s eyes, not drawing on Matatabi or Isobu’s chakra, and left our “game” to the side as we stood to go check on him.

Of the two of us, Yugito was the one who wore her village emblem openly, since she actually had her headband. I suspected that it had been early morning in Kumo when she dropped out of the world, as opposed to the middle of the night in Konoha. I, on the other hand, had only the various sea iconography that Izo’s style choices had picked out for me. Under my recent tan—mainly as a
result of traveling around on the *Nautilus* and *Striker*—even my scar didn’t seem as prominent anymore. Therefore, I found it quite unfair that Utakata reacted to my face and not hers.

“YOU!” Utakata snarled defensively, backing away until he bumped into Yugito’s knee. He didn’t get all that far because, by silent but mutual agreement, we’d decided to sit on opposite sides of him. Oops.

“Yo,” I said, my expression completely flat. I did not move my hands, because the motion could be taken as a threat. “Can we get the arguing out of the way right now? We have better things to be doing.”

“What?” Utakata looked around wildly. “Where the—where am I? How did you get here?”

“What is the last thing you remember?” Yugito asked, looking impassively down at him.

“I don’t—” He spotted her headband admirably quickly. “A Kumo-nin?”

“Answer the question,” Yugito bit out. Seriously, he recognized *me* and not her?

Utakata looked around again, possibly expecting a sympathetic face or maybe some hint that he wasn’t in hell. Given all the little Isobu clones, me, and Yugito, he got no reassurance whatsoever. Because I knew his chakra control was still completely ruined and the little fact that he was covered in new bandages, he didn’t exactly have a lot of options. He still moved like an old man.

“…How did I get here?” Utakata asked at last, rather than answering. He didn’t quite glare up at us from behind his bangs, but he probably would have tried if his situation was less unnerving.

“Saiken brought you to us,” I said, and he blinked. When he opened his mouth to ask a question, I held up one hand and just said, “You fought someone who used Lava Release and lost. Saiken panicked and came to Isobu and me to make sure you’d live.”

Utakata’s mouth closed with a snap. There was a storm behind his eyes. After a few silent seconds, he said in a much quieter voice, “I…see.”

“I helped patch you up,” was Yugito’s answer to his unasked question.

While Utakata digested that, one of Isobu’s clones dragged itself to my side and rested its spiky chin against my thigh. I raised one hand and rubbed at the soft spot along its neck.

“Why?” Utakata asked, finally. Looking between Yugito and me, he said. “Why would you bother saving me?”

In spite of the bad blood between me and Kirigakure in general? I didn’t like to see people die in front of me unless I was the one responsible. And even then, I tried to resolve situations peacefully for the most part. Not always well, but I tried.

It was part of what had made me so ashamed of myself when Ace had called Yugito and me out for our attitudes before Banaro.

“You are one of the few fellow shinobi in this ocean right now. We are stronger together than apart, especially when our power is hidden behind these seals,” Yugito said, since I couldn’t figure out how to phrase what I wanted to say. She even lifted her wrist to show Utakata what she was talking about, at which point he picked at his sleeves to examine his own. “Have you also been having that recurring nightmare?”
Utakata’s wrist marking had his, Yugito’s, and my jinchūriki number designations in plain view. The rest of them were still invisible under pure black not-ink.

“I…I believe so,” Utakata said, turning his hand over. Then he looked up, still clearly skeptical. “A strange voice that the ‘Nine’ reassemble…”

“More or less,” I muttered, while the Isobu clone heaved itself onto my leg. “‘You have been called. You are the whatever-numberth. You will assemble the Nine,’ right?”

“…That is eerie,” Utakata said, staring at me.

“All of us are getting it,” Yugito said, drawing Utakata’s attention back to her, which was a relief for me. Her expression was faintly haunted. “They get more persistent the longer you ignore them.”

Having face-planted on the ground when roused from one of those dreams more than once, I just nodded along. I hadn’t been helpless in the face of that persistent message for more than a single day, and I already knew I wanted nothing to do with that entity unless it was to confront it.

And yet here I was, assembling along with everyone else.

I still didn’t know what would happen if all eighteen of the other people involved in this got together in one spot, but I was leaning toward “a very large explosion.”

“And this suddenly makes village relations not matter anymore?” Utakata asked, but not in an accusatory way. He was staring at me pointedly despite the lack of anger, sure, but I could brush it off.

Yugito looked away, shamefaced.

“They do matter, but do you see any villages around?” I asked him, exasperated. “We’re so far away from home that barely anyone even knows what ninja are.”

I was so sick of putting up with village relations bullshit when we jinchūriki were nearly alone in a clearly hostile sea. There were hundreds of thousands or maybe millions of miles between us and the politics that had made us, with no chance of going back or of even having enough power to survive if we didn’t cooperate. If coming out on top meant I’d have to work with people like Utakata—who had every freaking reason to hate me short of mutual attempted murder—then I’d do it.

I didn’t say any of that. Utakata had already learned the painful part of that lesson.

Utakata pinched the bridge of his nose, even through his drooping bangs. “I take it that means we have to stick together to survive.”

“Technically speaking, no, we don’t,” I admitted. I didn’t know of any jinchūriki who had actually died on their own in this world, though I worried. “But most of the others have formed groups or teams by now, because it is easier.”

Utakata’s orange eyes met mine. “Explain.”

“The Nine-Tails and the Eight-Tails host have joined local pirates,” Yugito said, and really, Utakata might as well have been a spectator at a tennis match. “The One-Tails and the Seven-Tails are a part of a different crew. And while we’ve met the Five-Tails’ host, he didn’t want to join our group.”
“And you two,” Utakata said, his gaze flicking to either of us. “The Two-Tails and the Three-Tails, then.”

“You’re currently in Isobu’s stomach,” I pointed out, holding up the Isobu-clone in my lap. I also gave him a perfect view of my kanji-adorned right wrist, which had more numbers exposed than Yugito’s thanks to my meeting with Gaara. “He’s carrying us to our next destination.”

Utakata’s expression remained blank for a while. “No pirates?”

“We…had one,” I admitted, and it hurt to have to say that. We’d get Ace back. “We’re on a rescue mission at the moment.”

“I didn’t hear that right,” Utakata said, visible eye widening. Oh right, Kirigakure was the only shinobi power that even really had any pirate problems. The rest of us had bandits, and generally not for long. “A rescue for a pirate? You?”

“I got the same reaction from Isobu before we met him,” I responded, tapping the Isobu-clone’s shell for emphasis. “But Isobu likes Ace, so we’re all gonna go and tear the world apart until we get him back. And he also helped us care for your wounds while I was making sure your seal didn’t break.”

That was…probably overstating things, overall. Utakata may have survived without our intervention. But I needed to get him on our side.

“I…see.” Utakata crossed his arms, though I was sure I saw his hands twitch toward his seal. “Do I get any say in this?”

“You do,” Yugito said in a cool voice. “Kei can undo the lock on your seal, and then you and Saiken can swim off into the sunset having accomplished absolutely nothing, plagued by the nightmares as they go on.”

“And I won’t be your problem anymore?” Utakata asked, deeply sarcastic.

“No, you’ll be our problem one way or another,” I said. When he looked askance at me, I just shrugged and explained, “The only difference is whether you join up now, or if other jinchūriki hunt you down in a few months to recruit you anyway. I already told them we’d met you.”

“Joy,” Utakata muttered. While Yugito clearly considered this the end of the conversation and moved off, I continued to sit next to Utakata as he finally hauled himself into a sitting position. “…You’re nothing like your reputation suggests, Tidal Blade.”

“Everyone keeps telling me that,” I replied, shrugging. I picked up the Isobu-clone and set it on the ground, where it wriggled across the space between Utakata and me and set its chin on his leg.

Utakata lifted a bandaged hand, paused, and then started petting the weird little monster.

“If you want, I can ask Isobu to let you out so you can travel with Saiken. We just went with Isobu because we could fit ships inside him,” I explained, though he hadn’t asked. “Not that we have one of those anymore.”

Not only was the Nautilus a lost cause, I hadn’t seen Striker since Ace had taken off toward Banaro Island. However long ago that had been, technically. Given the damage he and Teach did during their fight, Ace would need a new ride.

Utakata glanced up, then said, “I…would prefer if you could undo whatever you did to destroy my
chakra control, first.”

“No problem,” I said, drawing another shocked look before Utakata smothered it under a mask of indifference. I shuffled closer on my knees, checking for the exact position of the seal on his back. My Five Elements Seal had done its job, but we no longer needed its stopping power.

*Five Elements Unseal,* I thought, and my fingers lit up with blue flames. Applying the key far less violently than the lock, I undid Utakata’s binding.

Utakata heaved a sigh of relief as his chakra flowed, once more unimpeded.

“Just let me know if you want to leave,” I said, leaving Utakata to sit there. I instead rejoined Yugito at her origami station.

While turning Zoro’s poster into a giant origami frog, Yugito looked up. “Kei.”

It was the first time she’d addressed me directly in almost a day. “Yugito.”

Yugito stared at me for a long moment as I sat down, then sighed aloud. “Errors were made, during the fight with Teach.”

“Yugito, I—” I said, about to apologize, but she would have none of it.

“Shut up,” Yugito interrupted. “I was wrong and I should have done better. I should have known better.” Her fist clenched against her leg. “I am better than that.”

It wasn’t like I disagreed, but… “There’s no way you could’ve—”

“Stop interrupting me!” Yugito said, flinging the half-finished frog at me. I fell silent. “This is embarrassing enough as it is. Quit making things more difficult.”

I *almost* opened my mouth again, but stopped when I saw the look on her face. I mimed zipping my lips shut instead, like a five-year-old.

Yugito’s left eye twitched. But still, she continued, “I wasn’t careful enough. And now Ace is suffering the consequences of my—our—carelessness. We will not fail again.”

I nodded. “…Maybe I can tell you some of what Isobu and I decided on?”

“That would be helpful,” Yugito said, still somewhat formal, but we could work with that.

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**Kurama is here.**

My brain screeched to a halt. *Which one?*

Kushina couldn’t have possibly made it out here so quickly, could she? Not without bringing Killer B and the Red Hair Pirates along.

**Yang Kurama,** Isobu said, while the Isobu clones inside his stomach all screeched at once in alarm. *That means the boy will be nearby.*

I put my head in my hands. *Why now of all times?*

We’d been following Teach for what amounted to two straight days, and I’d slept so little that I would have been better-served by Yugito’s frequent catnaps. The problem was more paranoia than
anything. While I could sense the tracker seal, Isobu couldn’t on his own, and there was always a chance that Ace could be separated from the Blackbeards’ ship somehow. Teach had to have taken Ace alive for a reason, and I wanted to know the instant we got a hint of what that reason was.

And most annoyingly, Teach’s ship never quite stopped moving. Isobu had more than doubled the length of our trip by heading to Water 7 to pick up Yugito and Matatabi—though it was necessary—and I had no idea how long Isobu’s clones could last outside of his body and neither did he. Even if Isobu didn’t sleep, catching up to the apparently quite fast ship was a constant battle.

So, I’d worked myself into quite a state by the time Isobu interrupted my shadow-boxing meditation.

“When it rains, it pours,” more or less. Isobu sighed and his cavernous belly expanded briefly.

“When just looking for the others on our own, we could not find anyone. And now that we have a time constraint, fate deems it an appropriate time to fling everything at us.”

No kidding, I thought miserably. At the same time, though, there was no way in hell I’d leave Naruto out in the world on his own.

“Yugito, Utakata, we have another jinchūriki to pick up,” I announced to the other occupants of Isobu’s stomach.

“Maybe I’ll get V2 back this time,” Utakata muttered, from somewhere under a pile of miniature Isobu clones.

At some point over the course of the last day or so, Isobu had decided to let his little mini-monsters act as something like a number of hot water bottles for Utakata’s sake. He slept better with a crowd of them around him, despite their squirming. I didn’t.

“Do you happen to know this one?” Yugito asked, cleaning up a pile of paper stars she’d made out of the wanted posters. She swept them all into a sea-chest I still had from the first nameless boat I’d gotten from the Whitebeards, then stood up.

“Yeah, I do,” I said, stilling my shaking hands with sheer force of will. I’d been awake for longer before this and still been combat-ready, dammit. “It should be pretty simple.”

“Well, what number are we looking at?” Utakata asked as he sat up, dislodging an Isobu clone that was sitting on his chest four seconds beforehand.

“It’s the Nine-Tailed Fox, Kurama,” I said, bracing myself for a shout of surprise. “And likely his host.”

“That…” Yugito blinked. “But I thought that the Uzumaki woman was in the other half of this Grand Line. If she was here, Lord Killer B would be here, too.”

All of us sucked at geography, here, but Yugito had a point. Utakata was peering at us suspiciously, like he didn’t trust either of our senses of distance. Which, okay, was probably fair.

“Kurama,” I said carefully, “had an accident over a decade ago. And he got cut in half.”

“Kurama” Yugito blinked. “But I thought that the Uzumaki woman was in the other half of this Grand Line. If she was here, Lord Killer B would be here, too.”

Both Yugito and Utakata shuddered. It probably wasn’t because of sympathy for Kurama—who made a point to be fairly difficult in all senses of the word—but because if someone could cut Kurama in half, perhaps the other Tailed Beasts could survive the same treatment. It didn’t take a genius to realize that once people figured out how to mimic that procedure, things would go to hell for jinchūriki and fast.
And there was no way a jinchūriki could live through that without the absolute truckload of luck that Kushina possessed.

“One half of Kurama is with Kushina.” In some form or another. I had no idea how she and Yin Kurama would be able to hide their involvement in the Red Hair Pirates’ business, but that was a problem for another time. I held up a finger and said, “The other is the one we’re going to pick up.”

“…Let me guess—if we tell anyone who the host is, you’ll kill us?” Utakata asked in a bitter voice.

“Of course she won’t,” Yugito scoffed.

“I wouldn’t, but not for the reasons you’d think,” I said, sticking my hands in my pockets. When I had their eyes on me, I went on, “You’re better people than that. Both of you.”

Yugito blinked, then huffed a laugh under her breath. “Has being actively hostile toward the others ever worked out?”

I smiled somewhat crookedly. Not especially.

How about never?

“Exactly,” Yugito said, nodding to herself. “Utakata, we can show you how this works.”

“I don’t really care how it works,” he said, then reached up to sweep his bangs toward the left side of his face. “I just want to get enough power to never have to worry about getting melted again. And paying that giant bastard back tenfold.”

“Luckily, you also won’t be facing that Marine alone if we do run across him.” I cracked my knuckles. Sure, I had no doubt that fighting an Admiral would suck, but it seemed like jinchūriki were trouble magnets. It was best to get used to it. “No matter how much magma he spits out, he’s not immune to the drowning in seawater. Nobody with his class of powers is.”

“Is that how their power works? In that case, I look forward to it,” Utakata said, quirking his lips into a distinctly anticipatory smirk. Now that he had some of Saiken’s chakra back, he’d be far more dangerous whenever we ran into the Marines again. “So, where are we meeting the newest… recruit?”

Isobu? I prompted.

My partner sent me an image—however blurred by the sea—of a vast orange-red creature heading in our direction. Based on the tails and the pounding thrum of his chakra and his human-like arms and torso, it could only be Kurama. He is swimming out to meet us from the nearest island. Brace for impact.

Screw that, I thought, and dashed for Isobu’s throat. I needed to see if Naruto was all right.

Isobu happened to be on the surface of the water, and thus spat me out automatically though he clearly hadn’t wanted to. I hit the water’s surface in front of him and skittered out of the way as he continued to press onward through the ocean, trusting his brother to be able to keep up.

I darted up onto his head as he opened his mouth to let Utakata and Yugito emerge, and as Saiken and Matatabi came back to the surface. Matatabi’s bubble popped, sending her scurrying for relatively dry space on Isobu’s back.
In the distance, Kurama’s damp orange shape continued to close rapidly with our little convoy, cutting through the waves like he was built for it. Or just too big to let mere physics stop him, I supposed.

And bouncing all across his back, arms waving wildly, was Naruto.

“KEI-SENSEI! ISOBU!” Naruto screeched as Kurama finally drew up next to us.

Using one of Kurama’s whipping tails as a handhold or something, he hurled himself across the gap between our two Tailed Beasts. Naruto hit Isobu’s sloped shell and rolled back to his feet, running to meet me even as I braced for—

Oof! Naruto latched onto my ribs with bruising force, and I returned the desperate hug. “Naruto, Naruto, I’m so glad you’re safe!”

“I missed you, Kei-sensei!” Naruto buried his face against my shirt, and the fabric grew damp as he held on for dear life. I knelt so he could shift to grip my shoulders instead, and I bonked the top of his head with my cheek.

“I missed you too, Naruto,” I murmured into his hair, rubbing circles into his back. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Naruto shoved his way into my arms, forcing me to sit down hard on Isobu’s back and jolting right up my spine. I squeezed him as hard as I dared, because he hadn’t let anyone hold him like this since he was an Academy student, citing a dislike of being called a “baby” by Sasuke. If he felt a bit bonier than I remembered and seemed more clingy, well, I both didn’t mind and was planning on burning the world down to get back at whoever had done this to him.

“I can see why you thought we’d be better than…that,” Yugito’s voice said from over my shoulder, and I finally looked up.

Yugito and Utakata both sat nearby, with Utakata keeping a more cautious distance. Yugito tilted her head to one side in open curiosity, her eyes a bit wider than usual, as she clearly bit down on the urge to actually approach.

Naruto wriggled around in my arms until he could see Yugito fully. His chakra felt more cranky than afraid, so I didn’t make any move to stop him before he asked, “Who’s better than what? Who’re you?”

“Nii Yugito,” was her response.

Naruto tilted his head to one side, mirroring her. “Hey, Kei-sensei, is she your friend? Even though she’s from Kumo?”

I met Yugito’s eyes over the top of Naruto’s head and caught her minute wince. Still, my lips quirked into a somewhat hesitant smile. “Close enough. Be nice.”

Naruto, who was probably making his signature fox-faced scowl, abruptly brightened. “Okay, Yugi! Old Man Yang was talking about how his brothers and sisters were out here and we had to go see them and I guess you’re sorta like that?”

Yugito blinked. “…Yes?”

“Have you ever tried teaching the boy restraint?” Matatabi asked either Yang Kurama or me. “Or manners?”
“Bah! Trying to teach him anything is like talking to a wall!” Yang Kurama scoffed, his long ears nearly flat against his back.

“You’re just a bad teacher, Old Man!” Naruto yelled back down at the gigantic fox, making all three of us adult ninja wince.

On the other hand, Isobu rumbled in agreement and Yang Kurama automatically snarled at him.

“Who the hell is this kid?” Utakata asked, taking his fingers out of his ears.

“I’m Namikaze Naruto, and don’t you forget it,” Naruto told him sharply, of course pointing right at Utakata’s face. His manners must have died of neglect in the time he’d spent with just Kurama for company. “So who’re you supposed to be?”

“Utakata, the host of the Six-Tails,” Utakata replied somewhat defensively, making a sweeping gesture to point out Saiken’s stalk-eyes, just visible over the edge of Isobu’s shell.

“Then you’re Uta,” Naruto pronounced, while Saiken’s eyes bobbed in agreement. Then he blinked. “Hey, you’re both from other villages. What’s going on here?”

I finally let Naruto up, at which point he clambered onto one of Isobu’s spikes. While Naruto didn’t really seem to have trouble paying attention when he was interested, he liked to be doing something while waiting for people to explain much of anything. Balancing on a spike seemed about normal for him.

“Some kind of…monster-thing dragged all the jinchūriki and all the Tailed Beasts to this ocean,” I told Naruto, who nodded along. “We’re the only shinobi out here.”

“So does that mean Mom’s around, too?” Naruto asked, instantly jumping to the option that would make him the least homesick. I suppressed a wince as he went on, “Old Man Yang said he can feel Old Man Yin a long way off, but it was too far when I asked him last time and we keep running into jerks so we can’t go that way.”

“What kind of jerks?” I asked, concerned.

Naruto shrugged. “I dunno, like, these guys in white? I know the sign said ‘Marine’ but I mean, isn’t everything on the ocean sorta marine? Like, by definition?”

“You’re…not wrong,” Yugito said cautiously, drawing Naruto’s attention back to her. “They are the Marines, soldiers of the World Government. And we already know they will put bounties on… children.”

Oh, so that had bothered Yugito. I’d wondered about that.

Naruto scowled for a second. “Then they are jerks. Oh, and there are these guys who keep carrying these skull flags around,” Naruto added, scratching his head. “Old Man Yang said I was supposed to sink those if I saw them, but none of them came close.”

I snuck a glance at Yang Kurama, who was suffering through Matatabi grooming his long ears. Yeah, I could definitely see why people would avoid the angry fox the size of an aircraft carrier.

“That was lucky,” Utakata commented, and I caught him picking at his bandages. He ought to have healed fully, so I needed to check those again.

Naruto paused, then practically teleported to Utakata’s side. “Did one of those Marine guys do that
Utakata nearly jumped—Naruto could be fast when he wanted to be—before saying somewhat grudgingly, “Yes, one of them did. I’m fine now.”

“Naruto,” I said, and he made the fox listening face at me again. “We’re on a mission right now. Are you going to join in?”

“A mission?” Naruto whirled back over to me, sitting in a pose that reminded me almost perfectly of Ace’s brother. He leaned forward eagerly. “What kinda mission?”

“What in the world can you possibly have to do in this ocean that counts as a ‘mission’?” Yang Kurama wanted to know.

“Finding the rest of us is a start,” Matatabi said, smoothing down Yang Kurama’s ear-fur with her paw. “I believe we have mostly succeeded as we found more and more of each other. The only one of us who remains lost is Son Gokū.”

Yang Kurama shook his head, splattering his sister with seawater, and she hissed. Ignoring that, he replied, “That overgrown monkey will turn up sooner or later.”

“Are we saving a princess?” Naruto asked, while the Tailed Beasts sniped at each other.

“Um, we may be killing a villain!” said Saiken, both eyes focusing on Naruto. “I’m still not clear on what he looks like, but does it matter?”

“Oh, we are definitely killing him,” Isobu growled, making his shell tremble with the force of it.

I slapped my hand down against the bone-like structure. Give it a rest for a minute, okay? Naruto needs to know what he’s getting into.

Isobu subsided with another growl, but at least he didn’t argue.

“To answer your question, Naruto,” I said, “we’re saving a friend.” And that was as far as I got.

“Then I’m in,” Naruto agreed instantly. However, the gravity of the moment was ruined by his stomach giving a ferocious growl.

I took in his shabby appearance again—not enough food, had clearly been yanked out of our world in his pajamas and stolen more clothes to make up the difference, and was about as sleep-deprived as I felt—and made a decision. I definitely had a lot of stored food, which was mainly a side effect of putting up with Ace’s appetite, and maybe my spare clothes would fit him for now.

Though I did wonder how the hell he’d learned how to wear a cravat, or when he’d gotten used to close-toed shoes, at least the orange-tinted goggles were somewhat consistent with his usual choices.

“Naruto, come with me. I have food and things stored in Isobu’s belly.” While he slumped a bit, I added, “And you should call your mother. She needs to hear your voice.”

“Y-you can call Mom?” Naruto stammered, his eyes wide and suspiciously shiny. I was nearly certain he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from crying.

Well, he’d already cried earlier. What did it matter? “We can. Now, let’s go.”
Inside of Isobu’s stomach, I tracked down the sea chest I’d been storing some of my supplies in. While I dug around for snacks he could store for later, Naruto devoured a selection of fish and rice that I’d scrounged up on the last island before Banaro. I kept one eye on him to make sure he didn’t choke or make himself sick, but as far as I knew our robust systems could handle worse than refeeding syndrome without much trouble.

I came up with a truly worrying amount of food. Apparently, I’d stockpiled for a nuclear winter at some point and never really noticed, because Ace ate that much.

“Kei-sensei?” Naruto asked, after he’d finished eating. There were at least four empty plates beside him, and there went everything I’d actually cooked recently. Whoops.

“Hmm?” I asked distractedly. I’d found the giant red coat with the Whitebeard Pirates symbol and was frowning at it, since I didn’t know when the hell it had gotten into my stuff. Maybe Izo had snuck it into my luggage at some point? I didn’t know when he would’ve found the time, but I was pretty certain I had put this particular item back amongst the spares before leaving the Moby Dick.

Naruto poked me in the back, getting my attention for real. “Whose stuff is this?”

I finally looked up, and realized Naruto was referring to the drying lines I’d stuck to a couple of random spikes inside of Isobu’s stomach. Sure, nothing dried in here, not for real, but Ace’s clothes had been among the things on the Nautilus when it met its ignoble end. Naruto, who had a boy’s eye for items with a story, had his attention fixed on the big black coat Ace had worn when we visited Drum Island.

“That stuff belongs to the person we’re going to rescue,” I told Naruto, setting the jacket aside for later consideration.

Naruto cocked his head to one side. “I thought we were gonna rescue a friendly princess? Isn’t that too big?”

Pff, Naruto had no idea how big people around here could get. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were literal giant princesses.

“Actually, he’s a pirate. He was showing Yugito and me around the ocean, but we got into a fight with another pirate and he got kidnapped,” I explained, since the idea of not rescuing a princess seemed to disappoint Naruto a bit.

“Oh,” Naruto said, scratching his head again. “I guess that makes sense. After I talk to Mom, can you tell me about him?”

“We can both trade stories,” I said, eyeing him carefully. I still wanted to know where Naruto had been for the past however many months, because he seemed considerably more put together than Yugito had. Who had he been spending time with? “But for right now, someone important is waiting to hear from you.”

“Oh!” Naruto burrowed into the jacket because it was there, sticking his arms into the sleeves and flapping them around like wings. The coat made him look absolutely tiny. “How are you gonna call Mom?”

“Just a second. Isobu, can I get Komushi over here?” I asked the stomach at large, and then the rumbling of the Isobu clones on parade began again.

“When Old Man Yang ate me, nothing inside was this cool,” Naruto commented, picking up the smallest of the Isobu clones. “So which one is Komushi?”
I picked up Komushi’s pink shell from among the crowd of Isobu clones, turning the snail and its transceiver around so it could emerge facing Naruto. “This is Komushi.”

Komushi obligingly bobbed its eyestalks in greeting.

“Wow!” Naruto set the Isobu clone down and scooted up to the snail’s side. “This is a way bigger snail than the ones back home. Do you think they feed them weird stuff?”

“…Maybe? I never did ask,” I admitted, while Naruto rummaged around in his pockets. “Why?”

“Cause this one’s kinda tiny for a talking one,” he said, as he pulled out a snail shell on a leather strap that had clearly been ripped off someone’s wrist. It looked like a type of top-shell that had been turned into a living watch. “Cool, isn’t it?”

Komushi extended its neck, peering at the device as the conical top shell flipped open, revealing a jet-black transponder snail no bigger than a pinecone. It yawned widely, then spotted Komushi and bared its tiny teeth. The larger snail recoiled, eyestalks wobbling.

“It’s certainly something,” I admitted. Like, for example, “a bit unfriendly.” “Well, let me dial the Red Force and see if your mother’s around.”

Naruto set the black snail down on his knee, bouncing in place as I punched the numbers in.

“Oh, hey, it’s the stolen G-2 snail again!” Did Shanks have his ship’s snail in his cabin or something? “Hello, Kei! Are you calling for Kushina?”

“Hello, Captain Shanks,” I said, with one hand on Naruto’s shoulder as he started to tremble. “Could you tell Kushina that Naruto’s calling?”

“Eh? Sure.” I held the receiver away from Naruto’s ear as Shanks bellowed, “HEY, KUSHINA, SOMEONE NAMED NARUTO IS CALLING FOR YOU!”

“WHAT?!” came Kushina’s answering shriek. Though she was clearly shouting from a different deck, the sound of crashing wood made it clear that they weren’t staying separate for long. On the other end of the line, Naruto and I could both hear Shanks’s crew starting to shout in concert, and perhaps Killer B started laughing during the chaos somewhere. “Naruto? Speak to me, please!”

Naruto burst into tears. “MOM!!”

While I did bundle Naruto up in the Whitebeard jacket as a makeshift blanket as he continued his (shouted, screaming, crying) conversation with Kushina, in the end I left them to it for the most part. I packed up some of the things that Naruto had discarded, storing them safely away until next time they were needed, and rescued the black snail from the throes of an Uzumaki reunion.

The weird part, though, was that the black snail never stopped talking.

“If I knew where you were, Naruto, there was no way I would have—”

“—Mom, I missed you so much, it’s been so weird—”

I didn’t want to listen in on their conversation, but neither did I want to bring the black snail back so it could repeat the entire soundtrack back to them. Instead, I gently pushed it back into its shell and headed out of Isobu’s stomach.

“Loud reunion?” Yugito asked, once I emerged and climbed back onto Isobu’s shell.
“Everyone shouts over snail calls,” I griped, though I didn’t mean it maliciously. It was just that my ears would be ringing for months at this rate. “I don’t know why.”

While I’d been busy, all of the Tailed Beasts had fallen into formation with Isobu and we continued to steam onward. Yang Kurama was the least streamlined of the group doing their own swimming, because Matatabi had gone back into the bubble. He could only really swim effectively at the surface, which was why Isobu was still half-exposed to the air and Saiken’s eyestalks were all that was visible.

“That boy is…excitable,” Utakata said, after a silent moment of just lying on his back on Isobu’s shell, one hand behind his head. “He’s the Fourth Hokage’s son, isn’t he?”

I nodded.

Utakata sighed. “He needs to be more cautious than that.”

And who out here would want to kill him over who his father was? If there were any takers, I’d sort them out personally. Assuming that Kushina didn’t beat me to it.

“I guess.” A thought occurred to me, and I tossed the black snail to Yugito. “You were messing with Komushi when we got it. Maybe you can figure out how to make this thing repeat something other than Naruto and Kushina’s conversation.”

“Is it a parrot or something?” Yugito asked, as the black snail pushed its way open again.

“I have no idea,” I said, as the snail opened its mouth.

“—been eating your vegetables, Naruto?”

“Mooooom, I’ve been on the sea! And like four islands! I didn’t have time for—”

“Make it say something else,” Utakata suggested in a sharp tone, while Yugito extended one claw-nail to fiddle with the side of its shell.

The snail belted out a series of clearly intercepted broadcasts in rapid succession as Yugito’s nail moved.

“—supplies are running low on G-5—”

“—only good pirate is a dead—”

“—which one of you decided to drop our last hammer?!?”

Utakata rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s useful.”

“I wonder what this creature’s range is?” Yugito muttered to herself. She moved her nail another millimeter, and the snail glared up at her before opening its mouth again.

“—Zehahaha!”

I jumped and Yugito flinched, nearly dropping the snail. Utakata sat up, more startled by us than by the laughter, which was spine-chillingly distinct to the two of us.

“What the hell was—?” Utakata began, but Yugito and I both shushed him hurriedly.

**What are the odds that more than one man can have that particular hideous laugh?** Isobu
wondered to me.

*I’m hoping they’re low,* I thought, and then shushed him too for good measure.

“You’ll receive confirmation of your new appointment once we’ve transferred Fire Fist Ace to Impel Down,” said a much colder voice. Sounded like a Marine. *But for right now...*

“Zehahaha! You’re looking at the newest Warlord!” Teach’s voice rang out. I bit down on a snarl, and Yugito’s nails grew out to a solid four inches. *Don’t feel like congratulating me, Ace?*

*Go to hell, Teach,* Ace’s voice growled. Something was off about his breathing, though. Did he have broken ribs? But even as I worried, the fact that Ace was still *alive* sent my thoughts awhirl. I hadn’t known for *sure* and Isobu’s clone hadn’t been able to confirm his survival, but hearing his voice was both relieving and immensely frustrating.

We still weren’t close—wait.

*Isobu, is there any way for your clone to attack?* I asked, while my heart thudded in my ears.

**Unfortunately, no,** Isobu replied, and I felt a faint pulse of guilt from him. *They are too small to be able to carry much of my chakra, and this one is likely at the end of its lifespan. They are not designed to last for days without being regrown.*

Which meant we probably wouldn’t be able to track Teach at all once Ace went into Marine custody. I couldn’t see Teach hanging around a Marine ship for long, or the Marines tolerating him all that well. Even if my tracking seal continued to work for the next however long of a timespan until we *finally* rescued Ace, Teach would get away *again* if we didn’t kill him first.

The snail recorded the sound of some kind of scuffle for a little longer, and then it rattled off a string of coordinates that I couldn’t hope to recognize. We didn’t even have a freaking *map*—that had been on Striker and definitely gone down with the ship. Even if we did have it, Ace had been our navigator by default for a reason.

Then the Marine said, *“Be there tomorrow for prisoner transfer.”*

We’d just have to hit them before that.

As the snail finally fell silent, I flopped back against the surface of Isobu’s shell. Knowing that Ace would be stuck with Teach for another half a day or so didn’t make me feel any *better* exactly, but I had a timetable. I could work with that and possibly inflict maximum casual—

**No.**

The goal wasn’t to kill everyone. It was to get Ace *out.* Everyone who’d get hurt in the process was *collateral damage,* not a set of bowling pins for my personal amusement.

I rubbed my eyes with my right hand, trying to clear my thoughts.

**You have not slept in two days.**

*I’m aware,* I thought miserably.

**Rest now and you will be more able to help tomorrow,** Isobu suggested. His voice was rather soft, even considering that he was one of the Tailed Beasts more aware of human tolerance limits for a lot of things. He was trying.
That drew a sigh from me. He was right. …I’ll try.

After telling Yugito and Utakata that I’d be up in a while to try and help them strategize (while admitting that I’d be useless at it for the moment), I headed down into Isobu’s stomach for a nap.

Naruto latched onto me the second he saw me. “Mom says she can’t come and meet us yet, but she wants us to be careful.”

I sighed again and rested my head against the top of his. “Sounds like a plan. Naruto, I’m going to sleep for a bit. Do you need to rest?”

“…Maybe a bit.” He resettled the giant jacket over his shoulders and bundled himself up in it. “I’ll go up and bother Yugi and Uta if I get bored.”

“Sounds fine,” I murmured, as a pile of Isobu clones clustered around us.

I took my cat nap, which was only briefly interrupted by the usual horrible bellowing (though the wording was **YOU HAVE FOUND—ASSEMBLE THE NINE** and only unlocked *half* a slot) and glowing wrist problem when Naruto happened to touch my right hand with his. I had to tell him to go and directly bother Utakata and Yugito about it while I slept, trusting Isobu and Yang Kurama to keep him safe.

We’d promised, after all.

We finally came within striking distance in the early afternoon the next day.

I sat inside Isobu’s stomach with my fellow jinchūriki, eyes screwed shut as I tried to think up some kind of plan for our attack.

For one, Naruto’s black snail—which he’d named *Kuro mushi*, just to be confusing—continued to belt out as many different data sets as there were snail calls across the sea. Yugito was managing its signal, with the threat of her nails going somewhere soft, while Utakata took notes on what we picked up. The other two adult jinchūriki were less synchronized with their partners, so our visual data from the outside world came down to what Isobu would let me see. Naruto, who had learned fūinjutsu at his parents’ knees, was making one hell of a contingency plan.

And not just for the obvious reasons.

“Kei-sensei, I told Mom this already, but I wasn’t just there in the middle of the ocean because I wanted to be,” Naruto said, settling his new goggles more firmly on his forehead. He took a moment to fluff out his hair, like he would when wearing his Konoha headband at home, and then sat down next to me.

“Why were you out swimming with Yang Kurama, then?” I asked, while I cleaned my katana with an improvised sword-cleaning kit. I was a pretty good scrounger when I had to be.

“I kinda got a mission from the people who got me these,” Naruto said, and I looked over to find him holding onto the goggles again. Then he tugged at his cravat with his left hand, undoing it and stuffing it into a pocket. “And the neck-napkin thing here, but I think Uncle Sabo called it something else. Though I wish I had more orange and maybe less blue. I feel like Sasuke here.”

Naruto made a theatrically disgusted face for a second. It faded in favor of a more glum look as he recalled that he hadn’t seen his best friend in months, but Naruto had always been good at putting up a cheerful front. And this just made me worry *more* about this mysterious new ‘uncle’ he’d
picked up.

Did I need to break a man’s nose? And legs? And every body part of which he had two?

“What mission did this ‘Uncle Sabo’ give you?” I asked suspiciously.

“Uncle Sabo didn’t give me the mission. I mean, even if he’s Chief of Staff or whatever, I can just call him that and piss him off. And he’s only a little older than Itachi, so it’s funny. But he did give me the goggles, so maybe I shouldn’t do that as much,” Naruto rambled freely, unaware of my misgivings. “And the mission, uh, that was another guy with these tattoos all down the left side of his face! Everyone called him ‘Dragon.’ Or ‘Sir.’”

And that was how I found out that Naruto had been spending the last few months with anti-World Government forces known as the Revolutionary Army. On the plus side, the Rebel Alliance had fed and clothed him for a decent stretch of time, and didn’t seem to mind the fact that he was an abnormally cheerful princeling of a child soldier. On the other hand, they had also allowed him to single-handedly tackle a Marine patrol after seeing what he and Yang Kurama could do, which I wasn’t sure I could forgive them for. Even if Naruto took “many hands make light work” to a new and terrifying extreme with the Shadow Clone mobs he could create on a whim, that was not cool.

Naruto also still owed them a black transponder snail and a mission report. And possibly an “I’m not dead” notice.

Maybe the Revolutionary Army would end up being useful to us. I didn’t know for sure, and since Naruto had effectively disappeared into the wind by their standards, I had to wonder if he’d accidentally severed all ties to their faction through impulsiveness. He certainly didn’t seem to remember a snail number with which to contact them again.

It was probably going to be a problem later.

As for our non-Naruto options: the Tailed Beasts were coordinating—Yang Kurama was in a bubble now, to his immense and vocal displeasure—and turning themselves into what was effectively a combat-operational submarine fleet. While the Marines were powerful, as far as I was concerned Yang Kurama and his Yin counterpart in the New World were close to invincible. Add in the distinct reliance most people had on ships, and well…

Yeah.

Still, it felt like we were waiting on a sign of some kind.

“I think I have something.” Utakata set his pen down and flexed his fingers.

“What is it, Uta?” Naruto asked as he gathered his completed seals into a huge pile and stuffed them into the Whitebeard jacket’s pockets. Oh, those would make terrifying confetti.

“The little snail—”

“Kuromushi!” Naruto insisted.

“—fine, whatever. It’s been spitting out snippets of Marine activity every time Yugito moves her nails,” Utakata said, jabbing the end of his pen at the Kumo-nin. “And nearly every one of them has been taking new orders or talking about some place called Banaro or Impel Down or whatever the hell these stupid islands are called.”

Yugito and I exchanged looks as soon as Utakata named the location of our last spat with Teach.
We’d filled both Utakata and Naruto in on as much as we’d learned about this world, from snail telepathy and major powers to Sea Kings and Devil Fruits, even if neither of them believed all of it. Our collective grasp of geography and navigation, however, remained poor-to-middling at best, no matter how many islands we’d visited in our separate journeys. Naruto hadn’t had time to learn to navigate even with the Revolutionaries, and getting him to stay still for that long was a losing prospect at the best of times.

We were all hopeless at memorizing the names, too.

“I…think I’ve heard…” I paused, racking my brain for any kind of data that we couldn’t simply overhear. The problem with being in a brand new world was that there was so much context missing, and people would instantly peg us as foreign (or Luffy-grade oblivious) the second we asked about things that were basic facts to them. Even if we never actually talked to anyone besides the worried Whitebeards or the Red Hair Pirates.

Utakata was being really patient about the whole situation, but I had to wonder if it was because he’d had it burned into him. Come to find out that he’d actually killed an entire pirate crew (by having Saiken flip their ship over) for screwing with him at the wrong time, and the battle drew the attention of Admiral Akainu’s personal flagship and two other battleships. Not as easy of a fight. Not even close.

And I had no doubt the story wasn’t that simple. He and Saiken were too cagey about details.

“I think Impel Down is one of the three World Government strongholds in Paradise?” I tried. I needed to call Thatch or someone else to confirm that, but at least it was a name. It was a start. “I know I read that the Straw Hats knocked Enies Lobby down. But…”

“Ah!” Yugito said, holding up one finger. “The other one is Marineford. I believe I…yes, I remember. ‘The judicial island of Enies Lobby,’ and then the ‘underwater prison Impel Down.’”

“I’ve heard of it,” Naruto said, frowning a little as he thought. “That’s where a whole bunch of Revolutionaries got thrown a few years back. But I think Dragon can still contact them.”


I bit the edge of my thumb as I thought.

I didn’t know how the World Government tended to roll with regard to big-name pirates beyond their payout policy for live ones, but I had a couple of ideas just based on how shinobi dealt with criminals that were caught instead of summarily executed. Combining that with what I remembered of the usual secondary appellation for pirates and bandits of a land-based nature—“enemy of all mankind” was a good start—and it didn’t take much of a logical leap to come to a grim conclusion.

Ace was going to end up at Impel Down or Marineford, probably be tortured for information about the Whitebeards’ activities, and then be killed. Possibly in public.

And I was busy agonizing over if I’d be able to save him while accompanied by a battle group that had four Tailed Beasts.

I kept the tracker seal’s signal transfixed in my head. It and the Isobu clone’s signatures could diverge at any moment, but I needed to pay attention to this conversation too. “Yugito, if you want to hit Teach again, do you think you could succeed this time?”

It was perhaps a bit of a pointed question, but Yugito’s eyes blazed at the thought.
“On the ocean, he would need to worry about seawater and his ship’s integrity,” Yugito murmured thoughtfully. The expression that crossed her face was nothing short of vicious. “Oh, I believe I have a few ideas of how to keep him occupied.”

“That ship is never making it to another island,” Utakata said, and his eye glowed when he looked up. Red, instead of the orange glow Isobu’s stomach usually offered or the orange of his usual eye color. He blinked slowly, then added, “Saiken and I will keep it from escaping, no matter the result.”

Given Saiken’s ability to produce enough sticky slime to strangle an armada, I wasn’t worried that they’d fail.

“Yugi, are you gonna set them on fire?” Naruto asked.

“Likely, yes,” Yugito said with a nod. “We at least need their sails to burn. It should keep them from being able to move.”

Naruto frowned thoughtfully, then nodded to himself. Then he reached inside a hip pouch I’d lent him and dug out two fistfuls of exploding tags. “You’re gonna want some of these, then. Kei-sensei won’t let me near the fight, so I can help like this, right?”

And knowing Naruto, he’d stuck more than a few ship-destroying seals inside the stockpile. I probably never should have taught him demolition seals, but it burned an afternoon once upon a time.

“Thank you, Naruto,” Yugito said, though I doubted she had any idea how much firepower a twelve-year-old could make given enough time. She just tucked the seals away into her pockets, as though humoring him.

“Then I’ll do what I have to,” I said quietly, carefully stretching my fingers. In a darker tone, I said to Yugito, “It’ll be Hidden Mist or genjutsu at first, then I’ll be inside the ship looking for Ace. As soon as we’re clear, kill all of them.”

Yugito’s eyes glowed gold and green. “Finally, an order I agree with.”

The Blackbeard Pirates were partying when we arrived.

Isobu didn’t let Naruto leave his stomach—the boy could get in so much trouble the second I took my eyes off him otherwise—but Utakata, Yugito, and I were all ejected just as Matatabi wove her genjutsu. Since a simple “notice-me-not” compulsion wouldn’t interfere with Utakata’s aim or Yugito’s fire, I approached the anchored ship at a casual stroll across the water’s surface.

Saiken started laying down the sticky slime the instant Yugito and I slipped over the railing. Yugito, in an admirable show of restraint, waited until one of the Blackbeard Pirates passed the main sail before she set it on fire.

While the pirates got to panic over an apparently spontaneous ignition, I slipped belowdecks in the wake of a general fire drill scramble. Though the corridors in this ship were far narrower than the halls of the Moby Dick, I barely had to press myself to the wall to avoid being stepped on or bumped into. Some of the pirates were so stinking drunk that they wouldn’t have noticed the extra presence even if they had tripped over me.

Where are you, hotshot? I wondered, channeling chakra into my feet and hands to muffle the
sounds of, say, occasionally stepping on a creaky board.

Ace’s tracker seal felt more distinct here—possibly because it had jammed in the “on” configuration—but I didn’t know much about the structures of ships. I didn’t know if I was heading to the brig or to the pantry and wouldn’t until I got there.

Above me, Yugito continued to torch random components of the ship while apparently invisible. Because she hadn’t directly targeted a single pirate, none of them seemed to quite know what to do. There was a lot of undirected shouting going on, and the pounding of a dozen differently-sized feet on the deck didn’t help.

As I traversed the length of the ship from mid to stern, I felt Isobu and Kurama moving around the open ocean. Saiken had glued the bow of the ship to a mass of coral Isobu grew for that exact purpose, and was finishing up the rest of the ocean-to-gelatin conversion as I went.

Isobu, how are things going out there?

Naruto is not causing trouble, and Yang Kurama wants to know if or when he should tear the ship in half.

I think that honor belongs to someone else, I told Isobu, taking the last few steps toward a locked door.

The padlock on it was about the size of a human hand, made of slightly rusted iron, and was in my way. I could feel my own chakra making up the signal I’d made. I pressed my ear up against the wood, expecting some kind of sound. Some sign of life.

I heard metallic clinking, at most, as the ship jolted to a stop in Saiken’s slime trap. The shouts of pirates overhead didn’t help my concentration, but I couldn’t worry about that. Yugito had it in hand.

Coral Palm, I thought as I brought the blood-red chakra cloak to life over my right hand. My fingertip against the keyhole, I grew a coral key and gently turned it in the lock.

The padlock popped. My heart was already dropping before I heard the first metallic ringing, and it landed somewhere around my toes when the door creaked open.

All I’d managed to find was the Blackbeard Pirates’ treasure room. Right on top of the pile of gold and silver, flung there carelessly by a cruel hand, was the thigh holster on which I’d crafted my seal. Taking the leather band in my hands, I turned it over and found my tracking seal, still intact and broadcasting faintly.

How utterly useless.

Isobu, I said distantly while rage pounded at my temples, the next time I give Ace a tracking seal, I’m going to be adding to his tattoo collection.

Does that mean he is not here?

…Not necessarily. I strapped the empty holster around my leg and slammed the treasury door shut, not caring who I startled. I’ll do one last sweep of the ship.

Very well. Isobu sent me the image of the topsails and the rigging, burning merrily away under Yugito’s care. Teach wasn’t visible just yet, but I knew who Isobu was looking for. You may have
enough time to interrogate him.

I wasn’t sure I needed to, but I appreciated the offer to get my shot in. Instead of replying, I drew Isobu’s chakra up through my seal and bared my teeth. With V1 cloak up, I didn’t need to stop for mere walls, either.

Dynamic Entry, jackass.

Ten violent wall-demolishing strikes later, and it was clear Ace was nowhere on the Blackbeards’ ship. I’d done two sweeps of it, tearing through structural supports and rattling the entire vessel down to its keel more than once. Much more damage would cause the deck to collapse under its own weight, or so Isobu’s ship-knowledge informed me.

Good.

I cut the cloak and headed up again.

“Ah, so nice of you to join us,” Yugito’s voice greeted me once I appeared at the base of the stairs and started heading up.

I didn’t respond directly to her. Instead, I climbed up to where she was and surveyed the deck.

In the mere minutes I’d been gone, Yugito had sown utter hell across the ship.

The main and mizzen-mast were burning wholesale, as was much of the deck and an entire barrel of what was apparently pitch. Yugito sat out of the way while the Blackbeards scrambled to try and put out the fires, utilizing more than one bucket chain, and would stealthily set yet another spot on fire the moment that the pirates doused one blaze.

She’d also set two pirates on fire, just on principle. I was pretty sure one of them used to be the Blackbeards’ sniper, given the eight-foot gun, but at the moment he was doing double duty as a human torch. The alcohol that was omnipresent at pirate parties did not appear to be assisting anyone in putting them out.

Yugito’s eyes narrowed as she took in my appearance and the distinct lack of Ace. “He isn’t here?”

I shook my head. My hand was on the cord to Ace’s hat, which I was still wearing.

Yugito’s chakra—Matatabi’s chakra—sprang out of her coils and enveloped her in the signature red-orange aura of a pissed-off jinchūriki. “Then we might as well introduce ourselves, don’t you think?”

I snapped my fingers and the general buzz of genjutsu dropped from the ship. Not because I could control what Matatabi did, but because Yugito had a sense of dramatic timing.

And at once, every flame on the ship went out.

The Blackbeards froze, unable to decide what to make of this, until Teach spotted us sitting in plain view on the deck’s steps.

“YOU?!”

Aw, he shouted just like everyone else.

How irritating.
“Did you think you had killed me?” Yugito asked first.

I was a bit busy drawing up enough of Isobu’s chakra to deflect bullets. Just in case.

“You? I don’t even know your name, Blondie,” Teach said, dismissing Yugito almost entirely. Her nails did *not* lengthen, though I could tell it was a close thing, before he spoke again, “Kei, though —I killed you already!”

I rested my head on my knuckles, my eyes narrow and itching as Isobu’s chakra made itself known. “You were mistaken, Teach. I survived, and so did Thatch.” I tilted my head to one side. “And you’ve made enemies you can’t even imagine.”

Teach ignored that, because how could he even *comprehend* the shitstorm about to descend on his head? He looked up at the damage done to the ship, while his crewmates mostly tried not to catch Yugito’s attention. Given the sparks still flashing intermittently from around her hands and mouth, it was kind of obvious who’d been setting their ship on fire.

“Well, well, well, the old man picked up a real monster this time, didn’t he?” Teach asked, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “Freakish endurance, eye colors changing…”

As he moved, I finally took in his appearance while mostly ignoring his words. He had picked up a captain’s coat, along with a set of pants that actually fit his massive girth. Around his waist was a belt, and a sash, and I focused on two particular trinkets standing out among the jewelry and other random shit he decided to wear.

“I’m surprised you have my kunai,” I said, having not processed any of what he said in the last ten seconds. Next to my kunai was the hilt of Ace’s knife.

The bastard collected *trophies*.

Teach’s face pulled into a massive frown. “That was you? And here I was just making my recruitment speech!” The deck started to go black beneath his feet. “Say, tell you what—my crew always has use for monsters. If you can take a hit *and* fight, well, so much the better. We’ll start by taking the World Government for a ride, then move on up to the old man! What Devil Fruit did you eat, anyway?”

Isobu’s chakra *nothing*, I wanted to kill him entirely on my own merits. A growl bubbled up in my chest as I gripped the handrail and splintered it. “What did you do with Ace?”

“Only what I had to!” Teach said, as though the danger in my tone meant nothing to him. “He refused to join my crew, so I just turned him in for the Warlord title and the bounty. He’s been on his way to Impel Down for hours!”

For—and I hadn’t—

Next to me, Yugito let out a noise that sounded entirely inhuman.

“But hey, maybe he could use company before the Marines cut his head off,” Teach taunted us, his grin widening. “It can’t be long now.”

Distantly, I could feel my chakra cloak start to form Isobu’s signature spikes. Yugito’s chakra cloak flared blue in places.

“Zehahaha! Come at me and see what the Yami Yami no Mi can really do!” Teach cackled, raising an arm that was already half-enveloped in shadows. “What’s a mere monster to the future King of
the Pirates?!”

“Oh, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” I promised him, malice coloring every word.

“Monster?” Yugito murmured, sounding faintly offended. Her glowing eyes narrowed. “I will boil the blood in your veins.”

“Try it!” Teach grinned wildly, slamming one hand into the deck of his own ship. “Black Hole!”

Darkness started to leak across the deck from beneath Teach’s feet like liquid tar, setting my internal alarm bells ringing before Yugito lashed out with her right arm and bowled me off the ship. She followed a moment later, landing like a cat on the water’s surface and darting out across the waves as a gunshot bounced off her chakra cloak.

A second shot bounced off my cloak, above my eye. Someone had pretty good aim, even if it wasn’t going to help him much.

“Get back here!” Teach snarled. “Black Vortex!”

How about no? Seawater shot upward from beneath us like the world had turned upside-down, but a quick Water Dragon Bullet dragged me and Yugito out of the firing line until the water settled again.

“Liberation!”

All the water that had been sucked into Teach’s pocket dimension during his first attack made an abrupt reappearance, blasting out of the shadow like a single massive Water Release: Gunshot from Gamabunta’s mouth.


I carved the incoming flood in half by sending a chakra-based shockwave up its accumulated mass. Water didn’t compress all that well, and the power of Teach’s Kamui ripoff didn’t change that. He should never had tried to use the basis of my nature transformation affinity against me.

Yugito and I dashed in opposite directions, with Yugito wheeling around at the Blackbeards’ bow and setting their sails on fire with another four-meter-wide fireball mid-spin. Before a retaliatory strike could head her way, whether it was a barrel thrown by their pro wrestler giant of a crewmate or another well-aimed shot, Yugito vanished underwater.

I tracked the progression of inky darkness as Teach’s third attack also amounted to nothing, then ducked underwater like Yugito had. I even saw her clinging to the bottom of the ship, cutting through the hull with a narrow, intense flame that worked like a cutting torch. She’d be starting a fire in the hold from what I was fairly certain was the powder room.

There’d be very little time to make our point to Teach before his vessel sank beneath the merciless waves.

Using my chakra cloak to propel myself, I shot forward like a missile and clamped onto the hull, then scrabbled up the side of the vessel inside a shell of seawater. The instant I made it over the edge of the deck, I lunged at the first crewmember I saw with both my real hands and Isobu’s projected teeth.

I ended up dragging a horse and its passenger into the sea, tearing them to bloody pieces with repeated passes of Isobu’s shell-spines before they could mount an appropriate response. While I
was no saltwater crocodile, I could spin in the water like one, and I could also launch near-simultaneous Rasengan strikes from any point of the cloak. The effect was similar to cramming a living creature into a jet engine.

Two living creatures, perhaps.

I felt more than saw Yugito burrow into the ship, tearing a flaming hole into the hull at the opposite end relative to my position, just catching her two lashing tails as she disappeared into it. Plotting her approximate trajectory in my head, I lurched up from the depths and reappeared on the Blackbeard Pirates’ deck just as Yugito tore the wood apart from below and did the same.

Of the pirates that remained, no one looked happy. The mime was gray where white had been before, the sniper was scorched, the hulking helmsman was trying and failing to keep the ship level in the face of the damage Yugito had done, and Teach looked like he had no idea how the hell anything in the past five minutes had happened.

But he gave it a half-decent shot, even with his ship falling apart around him.

“Black Vortex!” Teach shouted.

Yugito and I automatically slammed our respective tails down and looped the appendages around the hull. We’d decided ahead of time that we wouldn’t be yanked around again, and our respective demon limbs worked just fine for that purpose.

Teach thrust his hand out and while gravity did go weird, the effect was not heralded by either Yugito or I being pulled through the air.

No, instead it was the sound of the ship groaning against the strain of that tightening constriction and then shattering under our feet that really made up the soundtrack.

In that time, I let go of the ship, spun in midair, and met Teach’s face feet-first. I shoved as much chakra into the strike as I could, making certain to inject it through the points of Isobu’s spiky aura. His head snapped back, leading his entire bulk backward and sending him crashing into the weakened deck, splintering it.

The deck tilted under my feet when I landed, the keel cracked and the supports already weakened from my earlier rampage. I clung to the wood anyway, refusing to budge.

“Captain!” screamed someone else. Probably the huge bastard supposedly steering the damned ship. Not that it was going anywhere.

Teach coughed, spitting up blood from me knocking his face more or less inward. Maybe I’d dislodged some of his teeth. As he heaved himself up on his elbows, beady eyes meeting mine, he scowled up at me with all the anger and cruelty of the overambitious mass-murderer he was. “So, that’s your answer?”

I growled again, chakra tails ripping through the deck even as I started circling him. The crackle of flames from Yugito’s burning chakra cloak was so loud that my voice came out almost inaudible, despite the tone I borrowed from Isobu. “You tried to kill me.”

“Hah! If the Whitebeards had someone to blame for Thatch’s death, like their passenger, would they’d have even noticed me disappearing? It was nothing personal!” Teach staggered back to his feet, and I could already see the first signs of chakra burns starting to obliterate the skin around his mouth. When he went to wipe the blood away with his sleeve, he flinched and had to stop when his flesh began to quiver. “Ow, ow! What is this?”
Like I cared to tell him.

Then there was *real* screaming, because whether the crew’s mime had wings or not, or the exact nature of Teach’s powers, it didn’t really matter in the face of Yugito’s snarled, “Cat Fire Bowl!”

And then the entire ship was on fire all over again.

Perhaps learning from his earlier failure to hurt us, Teach decided to forgo his powers and aimed a devastating punch at my head with his right hand. Our relative sizes ought to have ensured I was either launched off the ship or had my skull smashed to pulp under his fist.

I caught his punch in one open hand. The impact shockwave traveled across Isobu’s chakra rather than up my arm, and the nearby ring of fire briefly went out as displaced air rushed through it.

“I have you now, you…” Teach trailed off, staring down at me. He’d grasped my entire lower arm with one hand after my casual block, engulfing it, and failed to crush my bones into shards despite his best efforts. At most, I was aware of pressure, but it didn’t mean anything more than water did nowadays. “You shouldn’t still be glowing. *Why can you still use your Devil Fruit?*”

So *this* was his last, best trick. Ace couldn’t have known Teach could cancel out Devil Fruit powers. As Teach suddenly realized that I wasn’t playing even by his expanded rulebook, I let Isobu’s chakra cloak flare bright and loud, blasting Teach away from me with chakra burns blooming across his entire front. He hit the burning mizzen-mast and plowed through it with a shriek of surprise, and I tore straight down through the ship to reach the sea again.

I had nothing to say to him or any of his little friends.

Yugito and I left the Blackbeards’ ship to burn, while Matatabi and Saiken picked off every crewmember that survived the blaze with either flaming claws or high-pressure blasts of water that hit like cannonballs. The scattered explosive seals Yugito left as party favors made certain that no piece bigger than a human hand would ever be seen again. Our destruction of the ship and crew was almost complete, with one glaring exception.

And underwater, after watching him sink like a stone for a minute or so in apparent apathy, I approached Teach on his unerring route to the sea floor. With three chakra tails spinning behind me like propellers, I picked Teach’s long captain’s coat open and plucked my kunai and Ace’s dagger from his belt. He wouldn’t need those ever again.

Turning, I kicked off from his belly in time to give my partner his free shot.

Isobu rose from the depths, looking for all the world like an ancient god of the primordial ocean. While I wove among and past the spikes scattered across his shell, he loomed over Teach just long enough to inflict maximum fear. Then he smashed the pirate between his hands like a bug.

When our battle group all surfaced again, Naruto came tumbling out of Isobu’s mouth and onto one massive armored palm with both snails stuck to him. He looked around at the rapidly-sinking carnage, probably not even noticing all the burning corpses, then took in our appearances as we stood around watching the debris sink.

Naruto instantly shot to my side, and I knelt so he could easily throw his arms around my shoulders.

“Ace wasn’t here?” Naruto asked, when he pulled back. He’d done the head count.

“No. He’s been gone for a while,” I admitted, my voice still rough from Isobu’s chakra infusion.
“We missed the transfer.”

Because I’d been careless, again.

Naruto bit his lip. “It’s not over yet, though. It can’t be over.”

“It’s not,” Yugito said, while Utakata hopped down off Saiken’s head to free his Tailed Beast partner up to clear the ocean of slime. “We have yet another location, but it’s one we don’t know how to find on our own.”

“So call someone who does,” Utakata put in. He crossed his arms, eyeing the burning wreckage of the thoroughly overkilled ship. “Not that their navigator would have been trustworthy, but…”

Yugito shrugged, deflecting blame. “I don’t even know which one was their navigator. They all needed to die, so what does it matter now?”

I sat down on Isobu’s shell, running a hand over my face and shoving my bangs out of my eyes. Once I felt more human, I crooked a finger and said, “Naruto, can I make a call?”

Naruto plopped Komushi down on my bent knee. As I started to dial, he asked, “Who’re you gonna call?”

Help, for one. I punched in the number I wanted.

“What is it?” Komushi asked, with Marco’s voice.

“Hey, Marco,” I said, while the snail mirrored an uncharacteristically wide-eyed expression on the usually stoic Zoan. Maybe he’d never expected to hear from me again after the realization we had been going to confront Teach? So much for that. “Teach is dead, but Ace is being taken to Impel Down. We’re gonna need some navigation help. Whatever you can tell us will be fine.”

There was the sound of someone smacking their head into a table. The call picked up Jozu’s voice and expression instead of Marco’s, while someone who sounded an awful lot like Thatch swore in the background.

“For the love of…” Sounded like we’d managed to frustrate the Third Division’s commander, too. “All right, Impel Down is in the Calm Belt…”

So it turned out that the Calm Belt was something we were already familiar with, in the silliest way possible. Isobu and I, for example, had actually been running around parts of the West Blue during our two-month hiatus from the Whitebeard Pirates, because the Calm Belt and its lack of wind and abundant Sea Kings meant nothing to a Tailed Beast. Utakata and Saiken, in their adventures, had passed through part of the East Blue twice without apparently noticing. Only Yugito and Matatabi hadn’t left the island they’d landed on—even Naruto and Yang Kurama had run wild for a bit.

Really, it was amazing that none of us had managed to get bounties before the pair with the Red Hair Pirates. Just through sheer carelessness.

“You’re going to have to deal with the defenses on your own,” Marco admitted, once we’d exchanged as much information as we dared over open channels.

Since meeting Kuromushi, we were much more wary of other black snails possibly listening in. It wasn’t like Naruto had found the creature in the wild. He’d kicked six shades of shit out of a Marine to get it, instead. That meant there could easily be more of them in Marine hands.
“That’s okay,” I said. While the other three passengers on Isobu’s back nodded along, I added, “We’ll manage.”

“I’m sorry we don’t have any more information for you,” Marco said, while Komushi drooped somewhat to reflect his lack of satisfaction with the issue. “But if you can hold the position for a few days…well, we’ll see what happens.”

I didn’t know what kind of mustering would need to take place before the Whitebeard Pirates would be on this side of the Red Line again, but it wouldn’t be fast enough for my purposes. I’d seen a good twenty or so other crews’ flags on a wall in one of their halls, and though those subordinate crews could be anywhere, we wouldn’t get any further along by waiting around.

“Hoist the colors or whatever, I guess?” I said with a shrug, though my air of casual indifference was ruined by the way I gripped the receiver so hard the metal components creaked. “In a few days, it’ll be over one way or another.”

Meaning that whether or not the rescue mission a success, the World Government would be feeling it. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

"Sorry, Mario! Your princess is in another castle!"
"FUCKING TURTLE-BASTARD!"

It said a lot that that sentence was the most coherent thing anyone had said for the past hour.

Ace hadn't thought much about the stray beachcomber when they first found her—okay, he remembered thinking she was a man until Thatch threw an onion at his head—but whatever. It didn't matter where Kei'd come from or what she'd been like or some other things Ace couldn't put into words, but she hadn't deserved that.

Namur broke the news. He'd been following Kei for a bit since he was a Fishman and could swim after her. He could do things like that when a lot of people would've drowned. And then there'd been a Sea King out of nowhere, too big to fight and eat or do something about and it ate her. Ate Kei, boat and all. And then got away.

I would've drowned, Ace thought, while his thoughts went vague toward the ends. But… He wasn't sure what.

"She n-n-never even got to eat my pies!" Thatch wailed, leaning heavily on Vista and sobbing openly.

"All of them?" Izo asked, from the next table over.

Thatch's pompadour bent against the table. "Sh-she missed the pecan and the lemon meringue and th-th-the cherry one!"

Ace's head slipped off his hand and his chin thumped against the tabletop, jarring him enough that he almost focused again. In front of him, there were two sake bottles, but he was…not sure when they got there. And then there were three.

He shrugged to himself, since it didn't matter that. Oh well.
Jozu had taken the big painting Kei did, put it on a easel or something, and it sat in the center of things next to Pop's chair. They didn't have a picture or a painting of Kei, but they did have the painting she did, and that was kinda shitty, but it was what they had. Thatch said Kei said it was supposed to show something from her hometown, but the picture was all gray and kinda blurry and only really looked like water after some squinting, when Ace was pretty sure he was drunk.

There weren't any flowers or anything under it since there just weren't, but Izo got a black cloth and it didn't look as bad as it could have.

"She was supposed to be strong," muttered Haruta, and Ace couldn't begin to guess how many he'd had. He was hanging off Jozu's shoulder. "Strong 'cause of the water thingy and tricks. But I guess the water thingy wouldn't be all that good against giant turtles…"

"Picked out her sword meself," was what Vista managed. He was flat on his back on the floor, and Ace didn't remember when he'd gotten there. So was Thatch.

Sinbad muttered into the floor, "…so happy when we got those paint—uh, the things…"

"Ate the Grand L—the—lead thingy. Fish! That was the word," Eastwood said, swaying in place. Ace saw two of him for a second, and was about to tell him to stop doing that, but Eastwood became one Eastwood again when he continued, "Freakiest thing I ever saw."

"No, see, the freaky thing was… Uh, it was…?" Thatch trailed off, then smacked Vista with the back of his hand. "What am I trying to say?"

"I dunno," said Blamencro, fishing a handkerchief out of the pocket on his face. The one on the left, maybe? Either way, he blew his nose with a noise like a dying bag-based musical thing.

"She beat me?" Ace guessed, while Vista shoved Thatch across the deck until he rolled to the base of Pops's chair.

"Tha's not tha' bad," said Fossa. Probably Fossa. The voice came from the direction Ace was pretty sure Fossa was in, anyway. "Pops beat you fer… three months? Straight?"

"Wasn't on the crew yet," Ace grumbled. "Doesn't count."

"The hell it don't," Fossa argued halfheartedly.

Ace stumbled to his feet, then made his way over to where Marco sat. He almost tripped over Thatch and Vista and Sinbad and maybe a couple other people, but he didn't. Like Marco, he stuck his legs out between the posts in the rails or something, then leaned heavily on the only sober one because Marco was always sober. It was kinda unfair. To Marco.

"…I'm gonna miss her," Ace said into Marco's shoulder. Pretty sure it was his shoulder. If not, maybe his knee? Whatever. "What kinda idiot beats me and then j-just gets eaten like that? It's not fuckin' fair."

"Couldn't tell you," Marco replied, while Ace muttered a low string of curses into his pant leg. "Just don't fall asleep on…you're already asleep, aren't you?"

A loud snore was his reply.

Marco sighed aloud while Ace drooled onto his pants. Leaning back a bit, looking up at the starry night sky, he said, "Kei, wherever you are… I hope you're smiling down on us."
Pops’s low, rolling laugh drifted across the ship. "I don't doubt that she is."

But that wasn't the end of it.

Within a few weeks, stories drifted back to the Whitebeard Pirates from across the New World. Ghost ship stories were pretty common. Hard not to be when there were countless fools jockeying to be the biggest, baddest pirates of the age. But what made this different?

Well, it hit a bit too close to home.

"It's been appearing on and off the Blues..." someone would say.

"Gone for a week and then popping up on the other side of the ocean," would be a rejoinder later, accompanied by shaking heads.

"It is said to wait for a passenger willing to travel the seas," cackled the greengrocer Thatch met on the shores, while trying to restock on pumpkins, "before disappearing into the fog like it was never there. The people who pilot it are never seen again."

The final straw was an old man, probably older than Pops by two or three decades, telling Vista, "I heard that if one man goes out, another person will come out the other side. That it carries the willing to another world."

Though with that story it could have been just reminiscing and half-remembered stories from other years and other ships. He looked to be ready to head to "another world" as it was. Still, it was getting out of hand.

A ship with Whitebeard ties appearing at random across the sea was not something to be ignored, especially when it became clear that the rumors were all too true. Someone had snapped a picture of the former skiff they'd given to Kei, being captained by a young man with white hair instead of their friend. Though the Whitebeard Pirates hadn't been able to make Kei a part of their family while she was alive, they thought of her as one now.

No one insulted their sister's memory like that.

"I'll go after it," Ace volunteered. On Striker, he was the fastest of the Whitebeard Pirates aside from Marco, who needed to stay with their flagship. "I'll make that white-haired creep pay."

"There's been more than one," Marco said, handing Ace a list of descriptions he'd put together. "I don't know if he's the fourth or fiftieth person to use it, but the consistent part is it's Kei's boat. And I don't care if none of them are ever seen again. Get it back."

Ace nodded, but turned to Pops before he made any move to leave.

"Go, my son. Make sure this insult is avenged," was the response he was looking for, and he got it. It was almost a month before they heard back about that.

"—shoving, for fuck's sake... Oh. Is this thing working?"

"You've reached the Moby Dick," Thatch said, frowning as he answered the snail. The voice sounded kinda familiar, but maybe a little more irritated? Who was this?

"Hey, Thatch!" Ace's voice cut in, and the snail grinned wide enough to nearly split its head in half. "I found out what was going on with the ghost skiff thing!"
"Does it have anything to do with the woman I just heard?" Thatch asked, still trying to place the voice. Wait…

Ace burst out laughing. "You have no idea!"

"Who's on the snail?" Izo asked, sticking his head into the comms room.

"It's Ace, but I can't get a straight answer out of him," Thatch complained, while the snail continued to cackle.

There was an "oof" from the other side of the call as someone kicked Ace off the connection.

"Jerk," said the same woman, who picked up the receiver. "So, uh… Um. This is kind of awkward." She cleared her throat. "Yo. It's been a while, Thatch."

Izo had both hands over his mouth, his dark eyes widening.

"KEI?!" Tears dripped down his face before he even completed the word, because he finally knew whose voice he'd been hearing. "KEI, WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?!"

Izo ran out of the room, eliciting an "OW!" from Blenheim. Still, his call of "Everyone, Kei's alive! KEI IS ALIVE!" was heard far and wide.

"…There's no way that was Izo, right?" asked Kei's voice, while the transponder snail picked up her suddenly meek expression.

"Oh, you know it was!" Ace crowed. "See, Thatch, Kei had the boat the entire time!"

"WHAT?!" bellowed Vista as he barreled into the room. And it turned out he was just the first person in line in what turned out to be a mob, because every Whitebeard Pirate who could fit into the comms room was making a damn good run at pulling it off. The ones who couldn't were left sticking their heads into the room or demanding that their fellows pass on messages, though anyone who tried would need to fight Thatch for access to the snail. And he wasn't giving up.

"I'm so sorry for making everyone worry," Kei's voice told them, but she sounded more baffled than anything. "I didn't realize you all cared that much."

"OF COURSE WE CARE!" roared the Whitebeard Pirates as one.

"…Ow." Kei's voice was replaced by Ace's, and he went on with, "Hey, where's Pops in all this? Did anyone tell him the good news?"

"Izo told most of us," Rakuyo replied. "But he's not back yet, so he must be telling Pops."

"We need to take the snail to Pops," said Janey, forcing her way to the front of the pack. "Thatch, come on."

Thatch couldn't be pried away from the snail, not even by Jozu, and so they carried him with it to the deck of the Moby Dick. While the procession moved through the corridors, everyone could hear Thatch sobbing something about lost kitchen helpers and all the pies, but the rest of it was too indistinct to interpret. Ace's laughter blasted from the snail with only occasional interruptions from Kei in the form of semi-frantic apologies.

"THE WAKE WAS AWFUL!" Thatch yelled as they finally reached the deck.

"What wake?" Kei asked, while the snail looked flabbergasted. "Ace, you didn't say anything about
"That's because he drank so much he doesn't remember most of it," Marco said, once Thatch was dumped at the foot of Pops's seat. He didn't attempt to take the transponder snail away from its stranglehold in Thatch's hug, but it was a close thing.

"I remember everything just fine!" Ace protested reflexively. There was a pause on both ends of the call, silent except for several pirates sobbing openly, before Ace admitted, "Okay, I remember like five minutes, and not all in a row."

"That's not important!" Janey said from the back of the crowd. "Kei, we didn't even have a picture of you for it! We need to change that right now. Come back to the ship so we can get Fossa to make something!"

"How did you survive being eaten by a Sea King?" Namur demanded. The rest of the Whitebeard Pirates quieted down, because Namur had been the last one to see her before her "death." The sharpness in his tone was fed by guilt, and the others knew it.

"It spat me back out," Kei said, while Ace muttered something indecipherable in the background. "But I couldn't find you again, so I just..." The snail's face twisted into a regretful grimace. "I've got a knack for disguises, so I figured I'd just keep going with my mission."

"Why didn't you just ask for help?" Haruta asked, climbing across a sea of heads and shoulders until he made it to Pops's chair. "We could have done something!"

"I... Um. I... didn't want to... get you in trouble...?" Kei's voice replied, and the transponder snail turned faintly red despite the fake mustache stuck to its face.

Silence reigned for a brief, perfect second.

Then there was a snort. Like someone was trying to avoid laughing. At the same time, the transponder snail's face contorted again, its mouth practically vanishing in an attempt to bite down on—

Ace's "HAHAHAHA!" burst from the snail at the same time that Pops broke into a loud, "GURARARARA!" In a wave, laughter spread across the ship in various levels of hysterics, with Thatch at the laugh-sob combo end of things and Izo tittering with his fan hiding his mouth. Haruta fell off of Pops's chair and landed on Marco, who immediately tossed him to Blamenco and initiated a multi-pirate pileup.

"I know, I know; it sounds pathetic," Kei griped as the laughter died down. "But hey, now I'll be traveling around with Ace, so everyone can blame him when we run into trouble."

"Take that back! You're the one who got eaten by a Sea King before you even got an hour away!"

"Well, I see Kei's adjusting to being one of us just fine," Vista commented, brushing a tear from his eye while Ace and Kei continued to trade barbs. The mock-anger was sort of endearing. "It's like she's been here for years."

"What happened to the polite young woman we got to know?" Izo asked, having somehow made his way to the front of the crowd. He had his hand on the grip of one of the pistols in his yukata, and loomed over the snail that had quite suddenly gone still. "Ace, have you been a bad influence already?"

"Uh... No?" Ace replied. When Izo's frown deepened just a bit, he said, "You don't understand!"
"Kei's really like this. The politeness is a lie."

"Sounds a lot like you, actually," Marco said, and the pirates laughed off Ace's offended, "Hey!"

"Polite or not, we're all happy you're alive," said Pops, while his children finally quieted again. "When are you returning?"

"I can't until I finish my mission," Kei replied instantly, and the snail bowed its eyestalks. "I'm sorry, but I don't know how long that will take."

"I'm gonna stick around and help her navigate," Ace added, though the grin on the snail was perhaps too wide to be fully believable. "Someone's gotta look after this disaster."

"Uh-huh," was Kei's concise, skeptical response. "We'll call you again soon, okay? Just so none of you worry."

Pops didn't reply for a brief moment, and Marco looked up to meet his eyes. There was concern there, under layers of patience with his children. Neither Ace nor Kei had told the entire truth, though the crew as a whole hadn't caught on.

"Once a week?" Thatch suggested.

Ace replied, cheeky as ever, "Or when we can find a snail. Later!"

There were more than a few tearful faces by the time the snail call ended with a click. But now they knew they had something to look forward to.

Ace hadn't ever seen someone get burned as badly as Utakata and live.

Sure, the burns disappeared quickly under bandages and that bizarrely accelerated healing rate Kei explained as the new normal for people like her, but Ace had a lot of experience with fire. Between Edge Town and learning the quirks of his Mera Mera no Mi powers, he'd seen more than a few examples of just how destructive fire could be. Caused a few of them, too, before he figured out exactly how to determine what would burn and what wouldn't.

And Utakata wasn't burned just by fire, but by Admiral goddamn Akainu, the Marines' mad dog. Utakata was lucky he wasn't dead already, but Ace had no idea how long that would last.

"We need to work fast so Kei can repair his seal," Yugito said, and that had started it off.

Patching Utakata back together honestly passed in a kind of blur. Ace was no doctor, nor had he ever pretended to be, and neither Yugito or Kei really seemed the type. But between all three of them, they got the work done. Maybe it wasn't as fancy as one of the nurses back on the Moby would have, but oh well.

And then came the really weird part, which he didn't understand and Kei didn't explain. Watching the ink lines almost materialize under her brush, marking up a big circular area under Utakata and on Isobu's back, was fascinating at the same time it was just plain weird. While she'd freaked out at him over the paper box, and done weird things since then with the paper inside, she never really tried to make him get it.

"Do you mind telling me what—wait, no, you mentioned this. This is the same sealing ritual you talked about before." And while that had sort of made sense, in a vague kinda way, he didn't really know what the ritual entailed beyond ink and blood and a lot of weird energy. Ace looked up at
Saiken, then asked, "Hey, what happens to you if this thing breaks?"

"I don't know! I've never had it happen before," Saiken replied, wiggling around like he was made of some kind of goo. "And I don't want this to be the first time, either!"

"If a jinchūriki's seal breaks, ordinarily the host dies and the Tailed Beast goes on a rampage," Yugito filled in. When Ace blinked at her, she went on in a flat tone, "I don't know what will happen if Utakata dies like this, but we will do our best to make sure it doesn't happen."

"...'Host?'" Ace repeated warily. That... That didn't sound like a good thing. Not at all.

Kei never talked like that. Oh, sure, she could talk about ugly parts of her hometown's history like she'd been there for some of it, but this was different. There was something hiding behind Yugito's dark eyes, a feeling so deep and dark he nearly recoiled before he recognized it. Yugito always did her best not to let her emotions show on her face, but she didn't react quite fast enough to mask it.

Deep down, Yugito hurt.

It was like looking into a mirror.

Kei ignored both of them, mumbling under her breath as she wrote and more across Isobu's shell. She didn't seem to even notice Yugito's anger.

"Kei always said you were partners," Ace heard himself say, because he couldn't have understood Yugito correctly. "That she and Isobu are in this together."

The look Yugito turned on him could have struck a man dead. Her eyes didn't change color, but they didn't need to. However headstrong, confident, or controlled Yugito seemed, her self-hatred flowed through like a riptide. It lurked there, out of sight, but remained a threat to the unwary.

Ace shivered. What a time to find someone exactly like him.

"Did I deserve to be born?"

He'd never expected to find that question staring back at him out of someone else's eyes.

"She's an optimist," Yugito responded, giving no hint about her internal conflict in her voice. "And got very, very lucky. There have been others—"

Ace interrupted her, "The one that exploded."

There was no way Yugito wasn't speaking from some kind of experience. Of someone going before her and then crashing and fucking burning, staining the water for miles around.

Or tainting a bloodline.

Then again, the shinobi had something called the Clan Wars era. Maybe they knew all too well what being hunted for something as thin as blood could be like.

"He was not the first," Yugito said coldly. Her fingers flexed, her nails turning briefly into claws before she got ahold of herself. "Not remotely."

Shit.

"We aren't called 'jinchūriki' just because we like the way it sounds," Yugito told him, her expression twisting in on itself. Her tone dripped with acid.
Kei's voice rang out through his head, replaying their conversation weeks ago. Yugito must not have slept through it.

"What the Tailed Beasts wanted never came into consideration, and none of us humans were asked for our consent either. The word we use for it is 'jinchūriki.' In a word, 'the power of human sacrifice.'"

So this was the puzzle piece he'd been missing.

Yugito bared her teeth, showing long eyeteeth that didn't look entirely human. All of her anger made sense now. "Entire nations—our nations—view us as monsters in human flesh. And if we can't be controlled, we need to be disposed of before the death toll mounts."

"What do you think the World Government would do if they found out we were hiding him?!!"

It wasn't Dadan's voice, but it was close enough to draw a wince. The World Government had scoured the world looking for Roger's child, fearing that exact thing. Any child of a demon would grow up to be one, too. They'd taint the world around them like a poison or a plague. Everything connected to them—him—would be destroyed utterly. Any child of a demon needed to be disposed of before... Before...

Thankfully, Kei's voice interrupted the thought before Ace could finish it. When he looked up, her expression was totally unaffected by any of what Yugito had said. But didn't it apply to her, too? "Ace, Utakata is a Water Release user like me. You may want to back up a bit, just in case."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Ace said, choosing instead just to sit there, well within range if Utakata got his shit together. It was obvious that Kei was uncomfortable with the idea, but she didn't say anything.

So what if Utakata did, say, leap up and try to strangle Ace with his necklace? Yugito and Kei would deal with him just like they dealt with everything else.

...Maybe that thought was just a bit bitter, even for him.

Nothing happened. Utakata, at most, twitched a finger before going still again except for his breathing. While Kei and Yugito briefly discussed where to put him before Yugito hauled their unconscious fourth group member away. Ace still wasn't sure if Utakata would be a friend later, but there'd be time to figure that out after knocking Teach's teeth in.

Ace watched Yugito hop down Isobu's shell with Utakata over her shoulder, trying to gather his thoughts into some kind of order. For lack of anything better to do, he crouched on one of the big spikes that overlooked their ships. Below, Striker and Nautilus looked almost like toys compared to the Tailed Beasts. It didn't take a lot of guessing to figure out why people would treat the jinchūriki—would treat Kei and Yugito and Utakata—like ticking time bombs.

Like they were gonna snap at any second.

The Tailed Beasts argued, as he was starting to realize was a regular thing, and Ace let them since Kei didn't seem to care. Saiken was just worried over Utakata, so it wasn't like he was hurting anyone. Isobu was just being a good brother and letting Saiken do what he had to.

Kei started packing her equipment back into whatever pocket dimension she liked to use. "We might as well head down, too," she said, like nothing Yugito had said had fazed her at all. When she finally got to her feet again, she just shrugged and went with, "Teach isn't getting any more dead."
Ace held out one hand, making Kei pause since it was in her way. Words got caught in his throat, but one made it out. "Wait."

"Need something?" It was like nothing touched her. Like Yugito's pain wasn't universal.

Still, Ace remembered the moment she offered to join his hunt and chase Teach across the sea. He'd been surprised, sure—it was Whitebeard business, Ace's grudge and not hers—but there had been understanding there, between the glee in introducing him to Isobu and the easy rhythm they'd settled into afterward.

There was just as much darkness hiding in Kei, but it sat further back. Tamed somehow, where Ace's self-hatred gnawed at him when it was given half a chance and Yugito's had been drawn to the surface. How had she done it?

You're like me.

You're like both of us.

Why couldn't you tell me?

"Why didn't you tell me how bad it was?" Ace asked, peering toward her with his hat's brim set low. He could see Kei's hands—could judge her reaction—before lifting his head and meeting her eyes.

She blinked, confused. "How bad what was?" Then the light came on. "Ace, it's not a big deal. The people back home who'd give me crap because I'm a jinchūriki don't matter. The ones who matter don't mind."

How?

"What would you do... if the Pirate King had a son?"

He'd gotten a dozen answers over the years. And yet some part of him kept asking, though he knew the responses by heart.

"A son? That devil of a man?!"

"It'd only be right to kill him, of course!"

"Would serve him right for carrying that demon's blood in his veins!"

Ace pushed the voices back, instead asking, "And Yugito?"

"Yugito grew up in a town where one of the previous jinchūriki couldn't handle the power, so his seal broke. People died," Kei explained in a quiet voice. Her voice was heavy with something like empathy—she knew what Yugito had gone through and understood it, but the pain wasn't hers anymore. "She got more pressure on her, and it's clearly still a problem that people don't let her forget."

Ace tried to imagine what it would have been like, being blamed for something that happened to someone else when it had nothing to do with Yugito or her actions. Something that killed a ton of people and made enemies of the survivors.

It took no time at all.

"They'd have to make it public, so the whole world would know! They should burn the little bastard
"And you?" Ace asked, trying to shake off those voices. Sure, he'd gone back more than once and beaten the shit out of the people who'd answered his question like that—all of them—but it didn't make the words cut any less.

"Like she said, I got lucky." Kei made a little motion with her shoulders that might've been a shrug, but that would have implied she even cared that much. "I was already an established shinobi by the time Isobu and I met, and I helped stop another attack on my village. There were procedures in place by the time I needed to go public with it."

That couldn't have been all of it, not going by the slight hesitation in her expression. People had hurt her. Had hurt Yugito.

Saving a town didn't change what people thought. Hurting people with the right backers didn't, either. If it did, the Marines would all be burning in hell for what they'd have done if they found anything on Dawn Island that linked back to the Pirate King, or to the Revolutionaries. If it did, Luffy would have one of the lowest bounties to ever come out of East Blue, not the highest.

Maybe this was enough digging for one day.

"I…guess I can kinda see your point," Ace said anyway, though he hesitated before continuing. "But you could've told me a while ago. I would've understood."

What would she say if he posed that question one more time?

"There wasn't any point," Kei said, facing him full. Her gaze was clear, unclouded by anything like the hatred he and Yugito carried. Though her fingers twitched toward the scar on her face, she didn't break eye contact.

The words were on the tip of his tongue. Kei didn't know enough to be one of the people who'd been touched or hurt by Roger. She was from strange, faraway world that had never even heard the name. Oh, she knew what the Great Pirate Era was because the Straw Hats were Luffy's, and because Luffy dreamed big and wanted to succeed Roger, but she didn't know. She'd never heard the horror stories. She just saw the Pirate King like any other random person she'd know was famous, and then think nothing else of for the rest of her life.

What would you do if I told you I was Gol D. Roger's son?

"I could tell you why I have this scar on my face, or how my mother died, or a million other things if you wanted a personal horror story." Kei said, when he couldn't get the words out. While he stared, she went on, "But while those experiences helped shape me, they're not everything I am. Then or now."

How did you do it?

Ace almost didn't feel it when she patted his shoulder, trying to make him understand that she was fine. "So I don't let them define me."

How?

Sabo had dismissed the question as a concern, just citing that he was a noble anyway, and weren't both of them running from their pasts? Sabo had been a test, and the fact that he'd passed—the fact that Ace had even admitted it to someone who wasn't Gramps or the bandits, who already knew—had been a gift he hadn't known he wanted. Hadn't thought he could wish for. And Luffy—
"Hey, Ace! Can you tell me about the Pirate King?"

—had been an idiot, but so completely honest that there was no doubt with him. Knowing Luffy could accept him made it easier, made it possible to tell Pops anything. Sure, half the reason he'd been so tied up in trying to kill Pops back then related to proving himself against what, in the end, was the memory of a man who'd died before he was born.

What did he have to prove here?

"You're a really frustrating person to talk to, you know," was what Ace said aloud, rubbing his face. He couldn't do it. Not just before confronting Teach. "Just really, really frustrating."

"I've been told that before, and by you," Kei replied, her tone light as she walked down Isobu's shell ahead of him. "What did you want to talk about?"

"...Nothing. I'll tell her after Banaro. When—if it goes bad, it'll be a clean break. No regrets."

"If you change your mind later, I'm all ears."

And that was the end of it.

A drop of water fell from the ceiling of the cell and hit the back of Ace's head for the sixth time in a minute. Sometimes it was more than that. Sometimes it was less. There wasn't any pattern to figure out, but his mind insisted that there had to be something to make sense of down here. But the inside of Impel Down, in truth, was simply designed from the seabed up to be nothing short of hell on earth. The truth was that the unknown architects had succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.

There were two hundred and fifty-six bricks on the ceiling, including the one that was dripping on his head. The floor was the same, though the walls varied from that count. The cell door was sixteen bars high and thirty-two wide, not counting the door. Aside from the four lengths of sea prism stone chains keeping his arms and legs bound, the wall had room for two more full sets.

Though that was just his cell. In the distance, he could hear dozens if not hundreds of voices. Giants in a cell nearby were snoring, while someone else laughed and rocked themselves going by the clinking chains. He could hear prisoners speaking to each other in low voices, but others hurled insults at each other at the tops of their lungs. He'd seen some of them while being dragged to this little slice of hell, but even now he wasn't sure how many of the other prisoners he even recognized as people anymore, never mind any old bounties or anything else. Oh, they'd been the right shape, but being alone down here...

Ace shook his head slowly. This isn't helping, he told himself. Even if he couldn't even move enough to scratch his own nose, and even if blood still dripped down his face and pooled on the damp floor and his half-dozen cracked ribs burned like fire couldn't anymore, there was no reason to give up entirely.

There was still a chance Kei and Yugito had made it out. Maybe the barrier had held up after Teach had beaten him unconscious. Maybe the gut wound on Yugito hadn't been real—it had to be less than that, something less fatal. Maybe the reason he hadn't seen them was because they'd been able to run away. Maybe they'd been able to use Komushi and call Pops.

Maybe he was lying to himself because it was easier than facing the truth.
Bet Isobu's pissed off now, Ace thought with a bitterly amused tinge to his thoughts. Only question is if he's more pissed at me for fucking up or if he's gonna go after Teach alone. His eyes slid closed. Maybe he'll swing by here. If I could be half that lucky...

It'd be quicker—cleaner—than anything the World Government would dream up. Biting his own tongue off wouldn't be either, and he'd seen the medical response team work all too quickly on a prisoner who tried that just after he arrived. Level Six might've been a lonely hell, but it was one the staff seemed to want to draw out as long as possible.

Besides, Ace didn't have any illusions about what would happen next. Not once his father's name—the one he hated, the one that didn't have the right and had never claimed him—got out. Not when his execution would draw the wrath of Whitebeard right into the Marines' waiting jaws.

_I wish I could have been better_, Ace thought, looking up at the ceiling as though he could somehow see the sky one last time and throw his wish to the wind.

_A better brother_. Luffy's face flashed across his mind for just a split second, and the realization that he'd never see his brother again hit him like a sledgehammer to the stomach. Immediately after, Sabo's gap-toothed smile appeared like a vision. The aching, long-healed scar across his heart twinged like a faint aftershock of the moment that Ace and Luffy had lost him. And now Ace was here in this living hell, like Sabo had never wanted. Like Luffy would hopefully never know.

_A better friend_. Yugito's self-satisfied smirk after discovering milk she actually liked, and Kei's embarrassed little smile when she realized she didn't need to hide from the world just to keep the Whitebeards safe. The two of them hadn't had the slightest fucking clue what he'd been yelling about before, in that last discussion, and he wished desperately that he'd been able to make them understand. That he'd had _time_.

_A better son_. Pops and the others—Marco, Jozu, Thatch even though he'd barely recovered from Teach's attack—would be coming here, and Ace was honestly half-terrified that they'd arrive in time. He wanted them to be as far away from this giant goddamn trap as they could be, and yet there was no doubt in his mind that they'd chase him to the ends of the ocean.

Ace's head drooped, his hair falling forward where it wasn't stuck to his head by water or drying blood. _But this is it. This is all I can do._

_This is all I am._

_I'm sorry._

Footsteps echoed strangely in the dark, and Ace glanced up automatically as they approached. Maybe it was one last laugh at his expense—one last-second chance for some kind of hope before the jailor crushed him down to nothing.

"...Here he is," said one of the interchangeable guards that patrolled Impel Down, though Ace hadn't heard much from them since arriving. Oh, sure, they dunked him in boiling water and expected him to scream, but that was nothing.

This was worse.

"Vice-Admiral Garp—"

"Please, be careful!"

It was his _grandfather_. Garp the Fist, hero of the Marines and probably the only person who had
ever insisted that the Marines were Ace's future, and reinforced that idea courtesy of the Fist of Love every time he wandered back into East Blue. Like Ace hadn't known since he was five that the only future he'd have with the Marines was "a short one."

One last kick in the gut, then. And here Ace had thought he'd get to march to his death without another lecture on how much of a disappointment he'd been.

The guards drifted away, leaving just the old man sitting in front of the cell.

"This is a fine mess you've gotten yourself into," he began. There was the briefest pause, and then Gramps leaned forward slightly, peering into the cell. "You still alive in there, Ace?"

What a great way to start one of the last days of his life. Still, Ace lifted his head just a bit. The old man deserved that much, even now. "Hey, Gramps…"

Maybe, just maybe, there was one last chance. One more thread to pull before there was no going back—no way out. While Ace was plenty of things—a rogue, a pirate, a disappointment, a worthless bastard—he was no coward. And he could see a tiny glimmer of a hope that somehow, he could keep his family safe. He'd be a coward not to seize it.

Ace would trade his life for theirs in an instant. Anything to stop them from chasing him to their deaths. So he said, in a low voice that barely carried out of the cell, "Kill me now, while there's still time..."

It would be better that way.

But Gramps barely twitched. "'Kill me?'" he repeated, like the idea had been just another harebrained scheme. "Don't get ahead of yourself, now. That won't do any good at this point."

Shit. Shit, shit, Ace thought while his gut churned. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, stinging his injuries for what little pain mattered now. Too late. I'm too late.

"Even if you were to die right now, that wouldn't stop Whitebeard," Gramps said, like Ace didn't know. No one ever attacked a Whitebeard Pirate without facing the consequences. "Nothing will stop him now."

Not the World Government, not the risks of bringing the entire family to Paradise, not Ace's death. Not Teach, not a Tailed Beast—

"We have already angered one of the Emperors," Gramps concluded grimly. Because what else could possibly happen?

Ace bit down on the inside of his cheek, glaring at the floor of the cell. He kept from snapping, barely, but his thoughts twisted in on themselves like a berserk snake. If Teach had just fucking killed me—but no, that'd be too easy. Now they get to use me to try and kill Pops and everyone—they'll walk right into it.

Why does everything I care about get ruined because of me?

"I do wish you and Luffy had become great Marines like I wanted you to..." Gramps said, like Ace had given a reply at all. Or maybe he thought the silence was too long and needed to fill it. Down here, only the screams and moans of the damned ever did anything with the ambiance, so why the fuck not? "To think that you'd do the exact opposite and become pirates!"

Ace didn't reply. There was the lecture he'd been expecting. Just a bit later and with fewer punches
attached. Didn't matter now, not much, but his shoulders hurt a little less as some of the tension left them. This, at least, was familiar. This was as subdued as Gramps ever got.

"Oh, yes," Gramps said, like he'd just remembered something. Like this was just an everyday conversation. "Come to think of it, I told Luffy about his father… He was surprised to learn that he even had one!"

Sounded like Luffy. Sounded just like him.

But Gramps didn't get it. Couldn't. If this was gonna be their last conversation, Ace wanted to at least try to get the old man to understand.

Ace took the deepest breath he could, slowly. When that failed and nearly sent him into a coughing fit, he tried shallow ones instead and hoped it would work.

"It doesn't matter whether…" Shit, he couldn't get enough air. But he had to keep trying. "We know it or not…Luffy and I have the blood of a global-scale criminal running through our veins…"

Ace barely remembered the parts of his childhood when he'd been blissfully ignorant. Not that it would have lasted even if Gramps hadn't told him. "How could we possibly become Marines…?"

The second their bloodlines were discovered, the World Government would have killed him and Luffy out of hand. Luffy was as safe as he could be and still be Luffy, because as long as he was a pirate he was staying out of their hands. It was better that, of the two of them, Ace was the one rotting in prison. Luffy needed to be out there in the world, chasing the dream he'd had since they were kids. It was what he deserved, more than anything.

"But…" Ace began again, through uneven breaths, "I took the name 'Portgas' from my mother… who I owe for my life…" And hadn't that been a pointless trade? Her life for his? Why his mother had thought his life was worth so much, Ace didn't pretend to know. "I don't give a fuck about my useless father… I never met him… Don't owe him anything…"

Ace closed his eyes. The closest Roger had ever gotten to showing he gave a fuck about fathering a child had been long before Ace had been born when he'd asked Gramps to take over, and not long before the Pirate King's death. What could he possibly owe a man who'd given his mother a death sentence and a child neither of them would be around to care for? Nothing at all.

"Well, I suppose that makes sense," Gramps admitted, like he was surprised or something. "That guy being who he was…"

Not yet, Gramps. Haven't said my piece. Drawing a breath that almost seemed to rattle in his chest, Ace said slowly, "And that's why… Gramps…"

A huge hand, extended his way as a peace offering. A deep, rumbling laugh and a voice that said, "Take my mark and become my son!"

"I have only one father…" Ace lifted his head, meeting his grandfather's stoic expression with a bloody grin. "And that father is Whitebeard."

Time passed. Ace didn't have the slightest clue how much time, either, because between the utter lack of natural light and the irregular guard rotations, there wasn't anything to judge time with. Unending hunger pangs didn't help either, because he was almost always hungry anyway and the guards didn't bother providing food to someone who'd be dead before he starved. Or maybe that was his well-practiced cynicism talking.
Oh, and the water droplets *still* hadn't decided to become consistent. Still, Ace tilted his head to one side to see if he couldn't make the water run down his neck a little differently. Just for something to do.

"You're awake," said a voice, and Ace's eyes slid to his left.

Well, that was a sight for sore eyes. Finally, someone Ace could talk to.

The Warlord Jinbe was bound differently than Ace was. Maybe because the wardens feared a fishman's strength differently than that of a human with Devil Fruit powers in the face of sea prism stone, Jinbe had his arms pinned to his stomach by the chains. They'd even had the courtesy to make sure Jinbe's arms were inside of his yukata. Maybe that was what he got out of being a Warlord, because clearly the rest hadn't mattered.

If he was being honest, Ace was a tiny bit jealous—he'd lost feeling in his hands ages ago and, when he got feeling back, immediately wished he hadn't. Between his shoulders, his ribs, and everything else, the idea of moving was a double-edged sword. If only breathing didn't count…

"Alive, too. For now," Ace agreed, his voice cracking from disuse. "You?"

Jinbe sighed. Air hissed faintly through his triangular teeth. "Despite my best efforts, here I am."

Great. Then *something* had gone to hell. This one, even.

And, like everything that seemed like a spark of hope in this pit, it turned out that Jinbe was helpless. Oh, he'd gotten the Sun Pirates and the other people he cared about out of the line of fire—*Unlike me*, Ace thought bitterly—but he'd seen the writing on the wall. Tried to tell the World Government that even if they ordered all seven Warlords to fight the Whitebeards, the Knight of the Sea wouldn't take part. The Marines and the Five Elder Stars, it turned out, didn't like being told "no." So Jinbe got to sit down here and rot, locked away until the Marines got their war with the Whitebeard Pirates. Until Ace's recklessness doomed not just his family, but everyone from Fishman Island to Foodvalten who had ever dared rely on them for protection from the real monsters on the ocean.

Hearing Jinbe say he hadn't given up hope—that he still believed there'd be some kind of *miracle*—just made the cold lead in Ace's gut heavier still.

Once the laughter stopped—because Level Six was so far from empty that it was almost funny—Jinbe shifted his weight as he settled into a more comfortable position. Sure, he could move all of a smidgen in any direction, but Ace recognized the attempt. Ace wouldn't have killed for a chance to move his arms, but the idea floated through his head anyway. Wasn't like there was much else to focus on down here.

His mind wandered, because Jinbe had fallen silent and Ace didn't know what else to do.

"You—you were *trying* to protect us? Y-you wanted to protect one of the Four Emperors? *From* who?"

"I don't know. Maybe someone who doesn't even exist."

Ace let out a faint sigh. *Doubt this is what she meant. But I can see it now.*

"What's on your mind?" Jinbe asked.
Ace didn't lift his head, but he glanced over toward his cellmate anyway. "Someone who got killed helping me…chase a traitor."

Jinbe's eyes narrowed. "Marshall D. Teach."

"Fucker's probably a… Warlord by now." It would be *just like* the World Government to give Teach exactly what he wanted. "Only reason he bothered…taking me alive."

"This person who helped you," Jinbe began slowly, in a low voice that wouldn't carry far out of their cell, if it did at all. "Were you close?"

Ace closed his eyes until they stopped burning. "I was… I wanted her to be one of us. To be our sister…" Breathing still hurt, but it was like Jinbe had said before—his heart ached more than his body ever could. "But fighting Teach on Banaro… I got Kei killed, got Yugito stabbed through the gut…"

*I never should have let them follow me there.*

"Can you tell me what happened?" Jinbe asked. "I won't force you to talk, but here…here, you have the time."

Had too much time, maybe. Too much and too little at the same time.

"We talked, right before the...fight," Ace began, his voice barely reaching Jinbe. "They wanted to take out the whole island…" Ace shook his head slowly, though his shoulders ached to hell and back. Maybe he could get this weight off his back. Maybe Jinbe would know what he should have said or done. "They didn't even understand why it was such a big deal… Not at first."

Kei hadn't been able to meet his eyes, because she caught on first like he'd half-hysterically hoped she would. Yugito just backed off, but he didn't doubt that she'd disagreed with his call. He still didn't know what effect, if any, his little power trip had on how the two of them acted in the fight afterward."

*What if I made them hesitate? What if I—*"

"But you got through to them," Jinbe guessed. When Ace glanced at him, Jinbe leaned forward and said, "I know you, young Ace. And I know the Whitebeard Pirates. You would never allow anyone so callous to take your father's mark or call them your friend."

"Don't know. That was the last… I can't believe that was our last conversation…" Ace closed his eyes briefly, wincing as his ribs twinged. "I just… How couldn't they know? Is that what it means to be a soldier?"

"Sometimes, it seems like it must be," Jinbe said quiet tone. "The Marines who follow Moral Justice sound like they are the closest thing to your friends. They follow the World Government's will, but there is something there a man can respect."

"But they still follow someone's orders," Ace muttered. "Someone… who orders them to do things like sink islands…"

"What is a sword without a hand to direct it?" Jinbe sighed. He shifted his weight again, tilting his head back toward the ceiling. "In absence of another goal or another mission, they chose yours. Don't blame yourself as though your friends couldn't make that choice on their own. You don't need to carry any more regrets."
"They weren't weapons," Ace whispered. "They were never just weapons."

Yugito scolded him when he took unnecessary risks, like that infiltration scheme at G-2. Kei laughed it off, fussing instead over that box of paper. Both of them putting their heads together to save Utakata from his godawful burns, while still afraid he'd wake up and attack them.

"I wish I could have made them understand better or…" Ace let his head hang, his bangs blocking Jinbe from his line of sight. "Maybe understand them more... I don't know."

"In the end, you did help them understand," Jinbe replied. "You let them remember that they were people and not monsters. What happened past that point lies squarely at Teach's feet, not yours." Jinbe's chains clinked together. "I hope it helps you to hear that, even from me."

A low, raspy laugh made it out of Ace's throat before his ribs hurt too much to let him continue. "Yeah, it… It helps, Jinbe. Thank you."

As it was, the two of them lapsed into silence as Ace let Jinbe's words sink in. While he doubted Banaro would hurt less for a while, knowing that someone didn't blame him for those deaths—for the failure, for everything that had come afterward—helped a bit. Not that he'd have long to regret it anyway.

He was just about to open his mouth and tell Jinbe about Luffy—the one bright spot still left in this situation, because Luffy would be well out of the blast radius—when heavy steps echoed across Level Six. Ace's teeth clicked shut around the words, while the strides grew closer and closer. A metallic scraping noise, echoing off the stones and the cells, and everyone on Level Six seemed to have gone silent.

Not good.

The giant hulking bastard who appeared, just out of Jinbe's line of sight, was either from Kuraigana Island or else looked like some kind of Zoan. Ordinary animals didn't get that big or quite that uncanny-looking, even in the Grand Line. The bull-creature didn't get any less creepy as it traveled through each patch of light. And it was carrying a spiked mace the size of a person, which was never a good sign.

It made a snuffling noise when it reached their cell, a large snot bubble stuck to one nostril. Its vacant eyes swung slowly between him and Jinbe, then it made a noise Ace had last heard from Moda's tiny herd of cows. Just bigger, and a lot more menacing. And it was still smart enough to use the keyring on its belt to get the cell door open.

What is this thing?

Jinbe met Ace's questioning gaze, then opened his mouth.

Which was about when it swung its club directly into the side of Jinbe's head. Jinbe couldn't roll with the impact, but he ignored the blood pouring down from his scalp and snarled with all of his teeth bared, right into the bull-shaped bastard's face.

THOOOOOOOM .

The entire prison lurched to one side, throwing the bull Zoan into the wall next to Jinbe's shoulder and bouncing Jinbe's head off the bricks. Ace's shoulders burned, but being so tightly bound to the wall spared him a bonus concussion to go with his other injuries. Outside, dust and the occasional mortar powder cascaded down from the ceiling, followed by a loose brick. Prisoners all across Level Six were swearing and screaming, and one or two of the prisoners were laughing, because
something had happened and no one had anything better to do.

A baby transponder snail, attached to the bull-thing's belt, shouted, "Minotaurus, report to Level Three! And make it snappy, or no Sea King steaks for you!"

"Mwoh?" the bull-thing twisted its huge head around and looked at its belt, though it looked more like it was staring at its own armpit.

"Move it or lose it!"

"Mwoh?!" The creature picked up its club again, stomping out of the cell and slamming the door shut behind it.

"Jinbe, you okay?" Ace asked.

Jinbe twisted his head a bit, as though checking that his neck hadn't been tweaked. Then, "This is nothing."

Well, that was something.

"But what was that… noise?" Jinbe asked, his eyes focusing on the wall the impact had to have come from. The word "noise" did not remotely cover the situation.

It had felt like nothing less than something hitting the outer wall of Impel Down, but nothing was that… big. A Sea King, maybe, since Ace knew Impel Down sat square in the middle of the Calm Belt and for all he knew the creatures were doing a mating dance underwater. But even a Sea King would have either the sense or the navigation ability to avoid hitting a stationary object. The Blugori and the Jailer Beasts ate them, so they had to know to stay away.

Isobu, on the other hand…

"I might have some idea," Ace heard himself say in a bleak voice.

*I'm down here. Come and get me.*

"Not sharing, I take it," Jinbe said, but there was no judgment in his voice.

Ace shook his head. "I… Did I ever tell you about my brother?"

Insofar as he could, Jinbe settled in for story time.
**Mission (Impossible)**

Chapter Summary

Kei: Try to herd cats (or a group that includes at least one cat).

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! You get the chapter about twelve hours early because I work tomorrow.

The songs for this chapter are "Ninmu (Mission)" from the *Naruto Shippūden* Original Soundtrack, and the *Mission Impossible* main theme. You'll...probably be able to tell when the mood shifts from one to the other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*I don't think you understand what "knocking" is for.*

I tested the structure for stability.

*With your forehead. At what Utakata tells me is not a safe speed for ships.*

I tested it thoroughly. Isobu sent me a sensation of pure *smug*, then added, *And I have discovered two additional details.*

…Okay. *What are we working with, here?*

First, *both the material of the Gate of Justice and the Impel Down main structure can serve as adequate locations to place explosive seals.*

*Oh, goodie.* Then we could blow up *everything* once we got Ace out. My long-atrophied morals were already screaming at the thought, while Isobu had never been taught the concept of valuing human life and treasured his ignorance.

Second, jamming or destroying the Gate of Justice will prevent sailing vessels from arriving at Impel Down. While I grimaced at the thought of having to deal with the apparently Marine-based superstructures that we'd passed on our way into this misbegotten overgrown whirlpool, Isobu just said, *The Tarai Current only maintains a triangular circuit between Impel Down, Marineford, and Enies Lobby because there are three functional structures. Without access through this Gate, the Marines will need to sail around their precious oceanic disaster.*

And the sad part was that Isobu was the closest thing we had to an expert opinion. Saiken hadn't cared to learn about the actual makeup of the Grand Line, preferring instead just to travel through it while fussing over Utakata, and the others didn't have any particular Water affinity. Isobu, on the other hand, was the sort of person to follow through when he made vows of vengeance or spite—and in this case, that meant he could read and control most of the water in his immediate area.
The Whitebeards hadn't been able to warn us about the Tarai Current and other fun things in a way that would have actually made us stop. We weren't experts on sailing or navigation, but we were pretty good at being able to break everything we got hands or claws on in blissful ignorance.

*So, we jam it shut. By any means necessary.* There had to be a set of controls around here *somewhere.* I just wasn't sure if any of us would recognize them without a big red button of doom.

That is only the beginning. *Speaking of, have you come up with an approach for the interior? Because Yang Kurama wishes to inform you that a low body-count will be unacceptable.*

*Of course he did.* I pinched the bridge of my nose before back to work on our *actual* plan, while Isobu made his way back up to the surface. I didn't ask him about explosives just yet, because he wouldn't plant them before we were ready to blow this taco stand sky-high.

Whether it was years of reading missions and reports or a distinct role as the informal second-in-command of all of Kirigakure, Utakata found the prisoner transfer paperwork within five minutes of entering the top floor.

Prior to this point, he and Saiken had glued every battleship defending Impel Down—all ten of them—to each other. Then Yang Kurama shoved them all out into the Calm Belt without their sails or any of their transponder snails, which were all under Naruto's care at the moment. While Isobu watched the nearby sea for signs of Sea Kings or other hostiles (and threatened to atomize all of the Marine ships in his mind), the three adult jinchūriki in our group headed into the very top level of Impel Down. Matatabi, meanwhile, sat on the prison's roof and curled into a giant fiery ball, broadcasting a notice-me-not genjutsu on everyone who got too close to the island.

Naruto was with the Tailed Beasts now, scribbling last-minute seals on Impel Down's approximation of a dock. As much as that kid wanted adventure, I had no intention of allowing him to get into the kind of trouble that Kushina wouldn't approve of. Infiltrating a supermax prison was *kind of* on the list of things Kushina would instead kill me for allowing her kid to try. Especially given some of the personnel files Utakata was turning up.

Ah, well. At least we'd managed to hit the entire administrative floor with a series of Water Prisons and basically suffocated everyone into submission. Made the whole infiltration thing a lot easier when everyone was too unconscious to put up a fight or raise an alarm. Isobu's ding-dong-ditch routine had at least gathered most of them into easy reach.

"Well, we have a problem." Yugito pulled a file out of apparently nowhere and slapped it down on a table, frowning. "We missed the warden."

I scanned it with my brain mainly on a different problem. Something, something, nineteen-foot-tall asshole with the Doku Doku no Mi. *Was he a Paramecia or a Logia? I didn't like the idea of fighting another poison-user who seemed to be more dangerous than Sasori, but he wouldn't give us much choice if he wanted this prison intact by the end of things.*

I could only hope that all of us had the same blanket immunity to poison that Isobu had given me. If not, this would be one hell of an unpleasant way to find out.

"Any idea where he is?" I asked, while still digging around for some kind of blueprint. I didn't actually care about how the levels were put together, except to find a way around having to walk through the interestingly-named Hells. Did the staff use elevators or something?

"No idea." Utakata looked down, then kicked one of the guards who'd almost drowned a bit earlier. "Do either one of you know how to conduct a genjutsu interrogation?"
I shuddered inwardly. Utakata was talking about the kind of behavior that my village left to Torture and Interrogation, and for good reason. Out at sea, Isobu crunched a Sea King between his jaws with perhaps more force than strictly necessary.

"It was not a part of my training," Yugito said, unfazed.

"Then we will have to find the warden and deal with him," Utakata muttered, and flipped through intake paperwork again. "Whatever else is down there can't be worse than a man who oozes poison."

Oh, but we had a mess of other descriptions to work from.

Level One: Crimson Hell, where apparently the very plant life was devoted to evolving into razor blades.

Level Two: Wild Beast Hell, because of course there needed to be a minotaur level in a place based on the mythical labyrinth. They hadn't deliberately fed a bunch of Athenians to a particularly nasty monster, but probably only because this planet didn't have an Athens.

Level Three: Starvation Hell, for when just punting people into an existing desert wasn't enough, and the World Government needed to build their own.

Level Four: Blazing Hell. Where the fuck had they gotten enough blood to make a boiling lake?

Level Five: Freezing Hell. Ha-ha, you thought being too hot was bad? Think again.

And that didn't even get into the mounds of reports on at least a hundred different methods of torture inflicted on the prisoners. Flogging, dangling prisoners above the flames of Level Four, letting them get eaten by wild animals, freezing them to death... Some of them might've even deserved extreme punishments, but my brain stalled out when trying to imagine Ace being put through any of it.

It would have been kinder just to hand out summary executions. Which there were no shortage of, either. Warden Magellan's Devil Fruit powers likely made such a process far less expensive than lethal injection, too.

"The good news is that he's only being held until his execution," Utakata said, while I silently freaked out. As I shot a glare at him, Utakata added pointedly, "If they don't plan to keep him here long, then the World Government won't bother with more than the usual precautions. No custom prison cell, for example."

I bit the inside of my cheek. "Do they really need one? Sea prism stone handcuffs could handle Ace's Logia powers, and if not, they could just dunk him in seawater."

Which, given that this facility was located in the middle of the ocean, would not be a difficult process.

"You're asking practical questions of an oceangoing society that nonetheless insists on its greatest soldiers being as buoyant as fishing weights," Utakata said, shaking his head. "No, I imagine they just crammed him somewhere impossible to escape—for him, anyway."

Shinobi were quite a different matter, starting with a lack of compunctions about ruthlessly exploiting said weaknesses without giving up any of our own. Utakata and I, for example, were basically immune to drowning. I, in particular, had enough of a simmer on my temper that I was nearly willing to blow holes in the underwater structure to achieve the result I wanted. A very
unpleasant part of me was looking forward to seeing how well the various Devil Fruit users among
the prison staff would fare against the Coral Palm and Utakata's Giant Water Prison.

It was such a pity that the government torture facility's tendency to inflict pain would mean any
genjutsu we tried to apply en masse would be dispelled almost instantly from the prisoners, who
we couldn't trust. Guess we had to be a bit less subtle and leave fewer prison guards intact.

I might have been reminded that I wasn't a weapon, but there were times when it was useful to
think like both mobile artillery and a soldier. Peacetime-me could take a load off for a while.

"I'll find the lift device after I gather a few more supplies," Yugito said, jamming her set of papers
back into a filing cabinet and idly slamming it shut with a sharp swing of her hip. "If nothing else,
we can drop a small Isobu clone down the shaft to see how far it goes."

I would not object. One would hope they can remain useful, was Isobu's dry reply, though I
repeated it for Yugito without the sass.

She nodded, then said briskly, "In that case, I will return in a moment. Keep searching for
information."

When Yugito left, I glanced at Utakata and his growing pile of transfer paperwork before sighing in
resignation. There were a number of reason I never wanted to be Hokage, and a similar paperwork
gauntlet was one of them. Still, if we were going to get any information about this hellhole of a
prison, the only way to do so would be to roll up our sleeves and keep digging.

Kei? Isobu asked, at the same time I picked up a piece of paper about someone named "Buggy the
Clown."

What is it? Admittedly, my attention was only half on what I was supposed to be doing, since
Utakata was mowing through the files while sitting on one of the unconscious prison workers. It
wasn't like I was really helping in any case, so Isobu was a welcome distraction.

You already know I have been in contact with Shukaku, Isobu said slowly.

I did. But Isobu wouldn't have brought it up unless he was trying to make a point. The slow
creeping feeling of impending doom, of the same stripe I used to feel when my students showed up
for training with glitter in their hair, settled over me. What did you do?

I…may have told Shukaku about the modifications to our mission. Isobu sounded
uncharacteristically hesitant, and I knew instantly there was much more to what he said than just
that. Specifically, of our decision to save Ace from Impel Down.

"Fuck," I said aloud as I banged my head on the wall, and Utakata jerked out of his reading to stare
at me.

"What is it?" he demanded.

And Shukaku told Gaara, who told his captain. For all that they were in the Sabaody
Archipelago, they are now heading this way. At speed.

"We have allies heading this way," I growled.

Utakata got to his feet, dislodging all of the paperwork that had been sitting on his lap. Both of us
were already running out of the office and toward the artificial harbor we'd clogged to the gills
with Saiken's slime. We needed to clear it out if the Straw Hats were going to dock.

Still, Utakata was not any happier with that minimalist explanation. "Who?"

**Specifically, Chōmei is taking the Thousand Sunny and all of the Straw Hat Pirates here,** Isobu admitted, sheepish. I didn't know where the Going Merry had gone if the Straw Hats had a new ship, but clearly some things had changed since the last time I'd been able to personally talk to any of them. **Not what I intended to happen.**

"The Seven-Tails and the One-Tailed Beast," I said for Utakata's benefit, once we'd cleared the trees.

"I'm not sure if that counts as convenient or hideously unlucky when we are trying to be subtle," Utakata muttered, following me.

We darted up the walls and then hurled ourselves across the gap to the outer ring of Impel Down's fortifications. The arcs of our respective jumps put us halfway up the other wall, and we had to dart up and over those too. Whoever had decided on the scale of the prison's design had clearly been thinking of giants, not humans.

Isobu sat just outside the walls, spitting out a series of cat-sized clones for Yugito's use while Naruto clambered up the wall and toward the lounging Yang Kurama, with suspicious lumps in his borrowed jacket. My partner bobbed in the only free patch of sea left after Saiken had gone to work, and Utakata and I dropped from the fortifications like stones to Isobu's shell.

"Isobu informed me of what he's done," Yugito said, and handed me one of the Isobu clones once I'd bounded over to her. "Seeing as our mission may have changed once again, all of us will be carrying these clones to act as transponder snails as a precaution against black snails."

Isobu's clone climbed around in my jacket until it was clinging to my shoulders like a living backpack and then wrapped two of its tails around my waist. The other Isobu clone Yugito was carrying had already attached itself to her, and the last one crawled up Utakata's pant leg to do the same. Isobu coughed, and three more clones slammed into the ground near us.

"Uta, Uta, did something happen?" Saiken asked as he emerged from the ocean like the gargantuan slug he was. It was a little like watching a whale breach, but without crashing back into the water. His voice was a little muffled by the layer of slime pinning his eyestalks to his head, though.

"We're going to need to clear the ocean, Saiken," Utakata said, still eyeing the Isobu clone backpack with some suspicion. "I know you enjoy being faster than Isobu and the others with all the slime, but… Well, we have friends heading here, and we need somewhere for them to put their ship."

"Oh, okay. It's a bit sticky for ships, I guess." Saiken twisted his head around, looking at the warships he'd tangled up before. "Maybe if I just shove it all over there, no one will notice."

And with that, all of the thoroughly disgusting seawater started moving away from Impel Down. Isobu needed to duck under the water to avoid being slimed, and us shinobi retreated to the fortification walls to watch the strangely-textured parts of the ocean flow away and bother someone else. Saiken actually started to hum while the slime moved away.

Yugito looked down at Utakata, then said, "Your Tailed Beast counterpart is considerably less serious than you are."
"And I believe we should clear a landing area now," Matatabi put in, from above us. When we looked up, her lamp-like eyes narrowed as her ears twitched. "I can hear our brother's wings already."

Utakata, Yugito, and I all scrambled up the side of Impel Down's walls, reaching Matatabi's dangling paw just before we hurtled over the crenelations. She shifted her weight, settling herself with her tails wrapped around her feet.

"Ah, the incessant buzzing," Yang Kurama grumbled, flicking an ear. He lounged across the outer wall of the prison, on the opposite side from Matatabi, and looked bored at best. "Another thing I did not miss about his existence."

"I can't hear anything!" Naruto shouted from Kurama's head. Was I seeing things, or was he covered in transponder snails?

"Oh, you will," Yang Kurama told him, and put his hands over his ears. Above my head, so did Matatabi.

So, I have a question, I said silently as Yugito dove into Matatabi's fiery fur and Utakata created a water bubble in his hands. And then crammed it over his ears like a pair of ear protectors.

Ask it, Isobu responded.

Somewhere out there in the bright, cloud-free sky, there was a dark shape. Given the distances involved, there was no way that was any ordinary bird. As I covered my ears and stuck my feet to the masonry with chakra, I asked, What is Chōmei's top speed?

...As strange as it feels to say this, I never asked him. Then Isobu ducked his head underwater at the same time that, out to sea, Saiken sank up to his eyestalks in slime. Here he comes.

The dark shape in the distance resolved itself into the biggest bug in all of existence at a speed that was outright terrifying. Only the armored beetle section of his body was blue, built like a cross between a knight in armor and a rhinoceros beetle. Six spindly legs radiated outward from a strangely humanoid torso, and the lowest two pairs clutched a proportionately-tiny ship in the claw-like ends. The other half of its body swept down into an elongated abdomen resembling a wasp's, with six green-and-orange wings radiated outward from its tip like fan blades. After all that, the plain whiplike tail trailing behind for balance was clearly an afterthought.

Overall, it was amazing that his fly-by didn't throw anyone caught in his wake into next week. Then I remembered that Chōmei, like Shukaku, was probably a Wind-aligned Tailed Beast. If he couldn't control how air moved around him, he probably wouldn't be able to fly with wings that far back on his body.

Now if only he'd somehow packed ear protection for everyone at the landing zone, it would have been a perfect flyover exercise.

Chōmei flew probably another five miles or so around as he tried to shed speed, wings slowing and somehow getting louder as he approached. Maybe it was just that I could hear the individual wing-beats through my hands as he slowed down.

And yet, as Chōmei flew overhead a second time and started to imitate the world's biggest helicopter for the landing—kicking up a hell of a lot of wind, dust, and debris, to the point that Utakata, Yugito, and I all activated V1 cloak just to stay where we were—I looked up. In the midst
of the Tailed Beast's furious wingbeats, a blue-clad shape had nonetheless leapt out of the lion-faced ship in Chōmei's claws.

I had just about enough time to think, *Fucking hell, Luffy!*

And then there was a crater on the front step of the keep we'd just left.

I bunched the chakra tails under my body and threw myself at the inner keep as though on a spring, hitting stone nearly as hard as Luffy had. Ace's little brother had just about ruined the entire concept of stealth forevermore, and I just barely managed to remember to drop the V1 cloak and snatch him up with a Water Dragon Bullet's fangs before he could dash into the prison.

"Hei?" Luffy asked, despite being held upside-down in the air by his ankle. "What are you doing here?"

Given that he'd just survived a hundred-meter drop with no trouble, I chose to cancel the Water Dragon Bullet and drop him on his face when the water exploded into passive liquid once again.

I crossed my arms while Luffy got back to his feet. "I'm here to help break Ace out."

"Eh? But I thought you and Wasabi—"

What.

"Isobu," I corrected automatically, though I boggled internally at Luffy's nickname choices.

"—got lost?" Luffy asked, continuing like he hadn't heard me. He cocked his head to one side.

"...I'd call it more, uh, getting a crew together for the job," I replied, scratching my head. Why did I suddenly feel like I was planning a heist? This wasn't *Ocean's Eleven.* "Yugito, Utakata, and Naruto are...not all joining in, but you're definitely not taking your crew in there alone."

**Matatabi's genjutsu is still active. You have a little time to coordinate.**

*Thank you.* "Let's just get everyone down here so we can figure out who's going where," I suggested, with a wary look directed into the depths of the prison. We didn't want to kill *everyone,* and I still didn't know for sure what long-term effects a Tailed Beast's chakra could have, even in a form as light as genjutsu.

Luffy looked up to where Chōmei was *still* figuring out how to safely lower the ship to water level, then nodded. "Okay. But I'm going in, no matter what."

I did not expect anything less.

It probably went without saying that the Tailed Beasts would need to stay outside of the prison. Aside from Shukaku in sandstorm form, none of them could so much as fit inside the front door. When it came to *weight,* I didn't even want to think about it. There was no way the prison would be able to stand up to a Tailed Beast running around man-made floors. Further, having multiple giant monsters would mean they'd take the brunt of the Marines' inevitable counter-offensive and spare the * Thousand Sunny* from needing to bounce cannonballs back. Since that was apparently a thing ships could do.

The Straw Hat Pirates had picked up four new members since the last time I'd seen them in person.
I finally got a good look at them when the lot of them disembarked.

The first, Nico Robin, was a woman whose Devil Fruit ability was to create limbs in her line of sight. Her composed temperament could be an asset, but I trusted the Straw Hats to have a better idea of what she could do when she got going. I just didn't like the idea of stacking too many sea prism stone weaknesses to any single team. The prison was practically swimming in the stuff.

The second, Franky the cyborg (which still didn't make any sense to me, given local tech levels), had cola-powered super strength. Not knowing how to address that, I didn't. Once again, the Straw Hats had a better idea of what they'd be capable of doing.

And the third was a walking, talking, afro-adorned skeleton who had asked to see Yugito's panties, and had subsequently gotten his skull punched off for the remark. While Usopp helped him look for it, I found out that "Humming" Brook was the Straw Hats' second swordsman and the musician that Luffy had spent so long looking for.

The last was Fū, jinchūriki to Lucky Seven Chōmei. Tiny, green-haired, and orange-eyed, Fū was… Well, I wasn't really sure what I'd expected. Perhaps I'd thought she'd be a bit like Gaara, given how most people in Hidden Villages tended to treat jinchūriki. But no, instead she was more or less a female counterpart of Luffy.

"The outside world is so big," Fū said, grinning widely. "Going back to Takigakure would be so squishy if I tried it now. Or maybe the word is…'tiny'? I don't know. Something like that!"

"It's a familiar feeling, whatever it is," Gaara said quietly. "Keisuke, I think that I should go into the prison."

"Okay," was all I said in response, because hell if I was telling the Straw Hats—any of them—what to do. I'd already realized just from reading newspapers that they tended to move as a single chaotic force of destruction and wouldn't listen to orders even if I was halfway qualified to command them.

"Why does Gaara get to go in when I don't?" Naruto asked, slinging an arm over Gaara's shoulder. He was, as I'd suspected, carrying ten adult transponder snails around. I didn't exactly understand how, given that Naruto was still fairly small, but apparently the creatures didn't slow him down any more than his training weights did.

Unsurprisingly, the Naruto and Gaara were fast friends. Equally unsurprisingly, Fū was included in their group by virtue of being fourteen and therefore the next-youngest of everyone here. Besides possibly Chopper.

I met Naruto's eyes squarely and said, "Because if I did, your mother would kill me."

"Mom's not here," Naruto argued, glaring up at me despite the way his scowl pulled his eyes into his foxlike thinking face. And the way a snail was chewing on his hair. "And it's not like I'm gonna be that much safer outside once those Marine guys start figuring out what we did."

The main risk wouldn't be the Marines, whether from beyond the Gate of Justice or trapped on the battleships. It would be the Tailed Beasts "dealing with" any sign of rebellion.

"Seems to me like the little guy's super determined," said Franky, patting Naruto's head with one massive hand. He practically disappeared under it with only a token protest. Franky then turned his attention to me and added, in a lower tone, "...Sides, Marine battleships these days are no joke."

I sighed. "I suppose I'll be able to keep a better eye on him down there..."
And I'd faced worse. I'd faced worse with fewer escape options before. And if things got too hairy, Naruto could be reverse-summoned out by a protectively-inclined Yang Kurama. I'd love to see anyone attempt to get past him, because there were some kinds of people whose bullheaded determination needed to hit a brick wall.

"Fine," I said grudgingly, and Naruto gave a whoop of joy, springing off Gaara and doing a quick victory lap of our group. "But the extra snails are staying out here!"

"You're a lot less scary than your name makes you sound," Fū commented, hands behind her head. I could feel her chakra circulating around her back, in preparation for our inevitable charge. "We have a bunch of ways out, but we need to knock all the defenses down to get to Ace. So, we will."

"It won't be quite that easy," Zoro said, tying a bandanna around his head. "Never is."

"But none of that matters," Chopper said, in a form that looked approximately like Hulk Hogan crossed with a reindeer. "Because Ace is our friend and Luffy's brother."

"I assure you, whatever human trickery these Marines attempt will not get past us," Matatabi said, with her two tails lashing through the air. "Really, you should have more confidence in our strength by now."

"And I want my shot at that human who burned Uta," Saiken broke in, his fists clenched. "I'll make him sorry he ever met us!"

"Pah, getting involved in human squabbles when your host can't handle himself?" Yang Kurama scoffed. "How undignified of you, Six-Tails."

"Shut up!" Saiken's entire frame shuddered with suppressed anger, sending waves rippling across the Calm Belt. "You're always like this, every time we meet!"

"...It's going to be a fucking massacre if the Marines somehow show up for real. And not for our side," I muttered, my hand over my face while Yang Kurama argued with everyone else. "Can I at least get everyone to agree to picking a combat buddy? Someone who can complement your skills and act as backup."

Everyone looked at each other. The collective reaction I got was along the lines of "Naaaaah."

Look, I tried. But the first step in any plan involving the Straw Hat Pirates was also the first step in not following the plan. Sure, normally the rule of thumb was "no plan survives contact with the enemy," but the Straw Hats were unique because there didn't even have to be an enemy. They just didn't work like that.

Given that all of us jinchūriki were now more than halfway through the bands on our wrist—Yugito and I up to six-and-a-half, and each of the others with up to five-and-a-half numbers revealed—we were probably about as close to combat readiness as we'd get. Utakata and Yugito could both use the complete V2 cloak as well as partial transformations, while Gaara could summon parts of Shukaku as needed from his gourd. Fū could pull off enough of a partial transformation that she could fly on demand, and while Naruto still wasn't old enough to handle more than a one-tailed V1 cloak, he'd gotten an expanded chakra reserve out of the deal.

(And yes, I did get all of them to demonstrate a bit of that power before we dared consider ourselves ready to head in. Somehow, I had wrangled something akin to operational command, and thus needed to be certain.)
We could handle ourselves for the most part. All I could do to add to our repertoire was to give every jinchūriki a free Isobu backpack to keep our communication lines open. There was no way we'd be able to rely on snails inside, but I refused to sacrifice what remaining tactical advantages we had solely because we could power through.

And I very specifically meant the jinchūriki when I thought that. The Straw Hats could not have enough power, even across their entire crew, to tackle Impel Down on their own.

Sure, we didn't know what we'd really be facing farther down into the prison. We had the brief descriptions of each level, half a flashcard of information on some of the staff, and enough determination that I'd have genuinely worried if we were any other group. But as it was, we were probably more of a danger to ourselves than anything in the prison would be.

Ah, well. C'est la vie.

Luffy slammed his fists together, then cracked his knuckles. "Nothing's gonna stop us. Not any Warlord, not the Marines, and not any warden."

This drew a cheer of bloodthirsty enthusiasm from everyone except Yugito, Utakata, and me. Yugito did smile, though, and Utakata briefly closed his visible eye before nodding. We were all in this together.

"By the way, Luffy," I said, before the two of us got started storming the castle. When he turned to me, I had both Ace's hat and his thigh holster in hand, holding them out to him. "These are your brother's. It may be best if you return them to him."

"Huh?" Luffy blinked, tilting his head to one side. "You've been carrying them this whole time, right? Then you should be the one to give them back."

"I was the one who failed to keep him safe," I argued, but quietly. The others were already going on ahead. "It's not my right."

"Ace won't care about that," Luffy said, and it was my turn to stare. "You're here now, and we're here, and we're gonna get him back. Simple." He nodded to himself. "So, let's just do it!"

We were heading into the very jaws of death, and yet…

And yet…

I believed him.

I settled Ace's hat at the back of my neck again and reattached the thigh holster as a sort of improvised belt over the one I was already wearing. Then we walked into the gates of hell as one team bent on utter destruction.

I'd never read Dante's Inferno, or any other book in the Divine Comedy. Closest I'd ever gotten was knowing that Hell was supposed to have circles, and even then I didn't know what they comprised. Thankfully, the information Utataka pulled from the intake office gave us a fairly good idea of what we were in for.

We skipped the sterilization process by virtue of having disabled everyone on the top level ahead of time, because fuck getting chucked into boiling water when half of our party couldn't swim. Besides, we weren't planning on staying long enough to need to go through a wash cycle. Yugito and Usopp took the time to disable half the water mechanisms in the area in case we needed to
come back through after the prison staff had woken up.

Yugito also decided to jam the Gates of Justice closed by sacrificing the katana I had long since lost faith in. With that strip of steel impaling the control panel and Monster Trio attacks destroying any consoles we could find, no one was moving the gigantic contraption anytime soon. Usopp and Naruto rigged the generator powering the control panel (and the prison's ventilation system) with explosive notes in case we needed to break everything on our way out.

And then it was off to the races.

First up, Crimson Hell.

The first level of Impel Down was more or less a forest, but of the sort of cosmic design that could only happen in the Grand Line. The plant life itself was basically a hundred different variations of saw ferns taken up to eleven. The trees' leaves were razor blades, the grass was made of needles like particularly evil Astroturf, and I had no interest in being perforated by either. Worse, the entire place stank of fear, blood, and rot, and every few seconds screams of agony would ring out across the structure.

"Gaara, you're up," said Zoro, eying the "greenery" with a deeply skeptical expression.

Gaara stepped forward, looking placidly out from our landing zone to the depths of the massive, blood-soaked room. Then the gourd on his back started dissolving into free-floating sand, complemented by the subtle shaking below our feet as Gaara eroded away some of the stone beneath the hostile plant life. He'd been creating more sand the hard way since arriving at Impel Down—just enough not to compromise the strength of the structure—and now it was time for the magic carpet ride.

"Desert Suspension," Gaara murmured, as the sand settled underneath our feet. Without either hand seals or even an errant twitch, he lifted our entire group into the air and we were flying off into the depths of the forest.

"People are totally going to take potshots at us," Naruto said, from somewhere around my knee. I'd shoved him toward the middle of the group upon remembering that he couldn't form a V1 cloak on demand, and Gaara's sand shield didn't auto-parry for anyone other than himself.

"I doubt any of the prisoners here would be in any state to attack," said Robin, perfectly serene as we took the Desert Caravan route. "Now, the guards on the other hand…"

As she spoke, Usopp fired two shots into the trees, knocking a pair of guards right down into the… ow. That had to hurt.

"Or the other defenses…"

At that point, a giant spider lunged out of the trees and was promptly nailed in the face by Sanji's foot.

"Robin, can you please stop?" Nami asked, her face a mask of carefully-balanced fear and irritation.

"I just find it nostalgic." Robin smiled. "Don't you?"

"Breaking into a big, scary World Government building to save a friend?" Fū asked, grinning. "Sounds familiar to me!"
Gaara's sand automatically blocked a rifle shot from the front, sending a rippling shockwave harmlessly over our heads. He had the best windshield this world had ever seen, even before Shukaku got involved.

A split second later, Usopp leaned out from behind the shield just far enough to get a shot off with his polearm-sized slingshot, eliciting another shout of pain from the defenders.

And then there was more screaming as someone fell into the vegetation again. Oops.

"Yugito, did you ever manage to find the elevator shaft?" I asked, now that the thought occurred to me once more.

"No, but at this point I doubt it matters," Yugito admitted, shrugging. "We're going to storm directly down the middle, are we not?"

I took stock of our group, the fact that the guards were shooting at us, and the distinct lack of Matatabi's chakra filtering down from above us. Whether because she'd decided the guards couldn't take more without being cooked inside their skins, or something else had come up outside of the prison's walls, I didn't know. Given Yugito's lack of concern, I decided I didn't care either.

Still…

"I'll keep the guards here from following you or reporting in," Gaara said, as we approached the hole in the ground.

His sand flared out around us like a massive wave, throwing literal tons of material around us and into the air. The rest of our group found our collective feet, with Nami stumbling a bit on her heels. While the guards continued to pour shot after shot into the sand shield, it held and let us sort things out in our own time.

"I don't like the idea of leaving friends behind," Luffy objected, crossing his arms.

Zoro and Nami, coming up behind him, smacked him hard enough to make his head rattle like a bobblehead figurine. Zoro punctuated his punch with, "Trust in your crew, Captain."

That was certainly one way to keep the Straw Hats' captain on track. Given that he ignored blunt force anyway, the worse Zoro could do barehanded was knock his hat off. Maybe that was why Luffy didn't react other than to push his hat backward off his head, letting it sit at the nape of his neck by its cord, in a perfect mirror of where I wore Ace's hat.

"We can keep in contact with Isobu's clones," I said, while the aforementioned creatures attached themselves more firmly to the team's jinchūriki members.

Gaara's sat up on his gourd and waved its left tail.

"Th-The Great Captain Usopp will stay with you," Usopp stammerered, even though his knees briefly knocked together from sheer nerves.

"I'll stay here, too," Nami said, sticking the multiple sections of her Clima-Tact staff together.

"Are you sure?" Gaara asked, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked up at his two teammates with wide eyes, as though he'd expected to be left behind with no comment just because he could handle himself.

But these were the Straw Hats.
Nami put her hand on his shoulder. "Of course we're sticking around." With a slightly nervous look on her face, she went on, "Anyway, uh, can you keep the guards from shooting us?"

Gaara nodded. " Easily. Leave the defense to me."

Gaara's sand shot up over our heads, forming a massive dome for just a second. I could feel approximately half of the sand pooling underneath our feet as Gaara took more and more material out of the prison's structure, treating it like any random chunk of earth. From outside the safe darkness of the sand dome, I could hear the sound of glass shattering, stone grinding together, and more than a few of the strange razor-trees exploding into splinters.

In comparison, the bullets hitting the shield sounded like rain in comparison.

That was one hell of a remodeling job.

"All right, one last thing before we head down," I said, while we were contemplating the leap down into Level Two. When I had everyone's attention, I asked, "How many of you can either summon or be reverse-summoned by your partners?"

Utakata and Naruto raised their hands, though Gaara and Fū just looked confused. Utakata had been introduced to the concept through Saiken, and I knew Naruto was still training to be worthy of the toad summon contract as judged by Gamabunta.

And, well, the Straw Hats hadn't seen this before. I didn't ask for their opinions.

As succinctly as I could manage, I explained the concept of summoning, which thankfully everyone in the group was at least vaguely familiar with. Reverse-summoning was the idea of getting yanked to one's partner's location, rather than summoning an animal or spirit to the contract-signer's location. Though I didn't want to think of the possibility, there was a chance that we wouldn't be able to fight our way out of Impel Down. And there was no way in hell I was letting anyone stay behind when there was a simple solution to our tactical mobility limitations.

"I'm sorry that we don't have any time to train with this," I said. Really, I should have made sure we practiced with this before now, but there was no use crying over spilled milk at this point. Spilled blood would be next. "If we need to evacuate everyone at once, it's going to be a scramble. All I can ask is that you do the best you can."

"My easiest route would just be smashing my way out with Nami and Usopp," Gaara said, eying the spot in the sand dome that would lead to the front gates of Impel Down if he shot a sand bullet that way. "We will see you on the outside once our mission is complete."

"And besides, Gaara can, uh, just call Shukaku in if things get scary, right?" Usopp suggested. Then he paused for a fraction of a second before muttering, "Wait, that would make things even more scary…"

Yeah, they'd be fine.

While Sanji delivered a last lecture for Usopp's sake about keeping Nami safe, the rest of us leapt down into Level Two.

"108 Caliber Phoenix!"

"Gum-Gum Bazooka!"
"Strong Right!"

"Clutch!"

"Scale Powder Blizzard!"

"Why do you people call your attacks?" Utakata demanded, while the Straw Hats took a collective boot to the collective faces of the monsters on Level Two.

Sanji took a long, slow drag from his cigarette, then responded with, "Why don't you?"

This, of course, after having kicked a so-called manticore into submission. And literally kicked the asses of about three others.

Really, this hardly seemed fair.

**Resting on your laurels will not get Ace out of there any faster**, Isobu reminded me.

*What's the situation like out there?* I asked, while Sanji and Utakata got along as well as water and a grease fire.

**Thus far, we have discovered that the Marine ships were placed here to guard against an attack by Whitebeard. Saiken heard them panicking that Whitebeard did not attack, and that we did.** Isobu snorted. **So much for their resolve as soldiers.**

*And the guards?* I didn't have much to say about the sheer existential terror Tailed Beasts could invoke in humans that weren't acclimated to their presence. Isobu knew perfectly well what the Marines' problem was.

Actually, now that I thought of it, this was the first time in even our history that so many Tailed Beasts or jinchūriki had been directed at a single target. No village had more than two field-ready jinchūriki at a given time, and no one was generally stupid enough to waste the strategic potential involved by deploying them to the same front. Even knowing that half our number were children, and I couldn't use the full V2 cloak, the aura of concentrated overkill involved had to be palpable to everyone who'd be assigned to try and get past the six Tailed Beasts outside.

**Matatabi says that while the guards are awake due to the disturbances you have created, she has control over all of the adult transponder snails. On the other hand, baby transponder snails have much shorter ranges, and are still active.** Isobu sent me a sensation of something akin to scorn, either at the Marines for using animals in such a way that they were every bit as important to shoot as security cameras or at Matatabi for her squeamishness. I wasn't sure. You should be able to hear them if you use Kuromushi.

*Thanks, Isobu.* "Hey, Naruto, check to see if Kuromushi has anything to say," I suggested.

Aside from tossing a few explosive notes here and there, and picking the occasional lock, Naruto hadn't been doing all that much besides sticking to me like glue. So he jumped on the chance.

"Right!" He rolled up his sleeve and uncovered Kuromushi, who immediately popped up out of its shell and bared its little teeth in a growl. "Hey, Kuromushi, can we listen in on everyone else?"

Kuromushi made a hiss-click noise, then blared, **"IT'S A DISASTER! THE FIRST BREAK-IN IN HISTORY AND IT HAD TO BE A WHOLE GROUP?!"**
"A hundred beri says that's the guards," I said flatly.

"Sucker's bet," Robin commented, while her hands sprouted out of shoulder pads and lapels to choke the various prison guards unconscious.

"Let's see what they have to say, then," Naruto said, holding up the snail.

"The Straw Hat Pirates are invading!" screamed Kuromushi.

"Not just the Straw Hats," Fū said with a wide grin as she buzzed past our heads.

"It's more of a collective affair at this point," Brook remarked, extending one bony finger to point at our...friends.

See, the level known as Wild Beast Hell was indeed built like the Labyrinth of ancient Greece. Every wall we'd passed thus far seemed lined with cells, each containing a couple of inmates cowering in the back because of the dozens of roving monsters patrolling the level. They ranged from manticores to Puzzle Scorpions (whatever the hell those were), to even just loose prisoners, since running for their lives all the time made people fairly desperate. Enough so that clearing the hallway encouraged some of them to emerge from their cells (which Robin had unlocked) and commence a brutal beatdown of the prison guards.

In fact, one of them was desperate enough to join our little band of raiders.

"Isn't this the guy you said got eaten by a crocodile?" Fū asked, pointing at our newest recruit.

"A bananagator," Zoro said, directing his usual scowl at the just-identified Mr. 3, formerly of Baroque Works.

He even had his hair styled into the shape of the number. What the hell.

"Right, that. So why isn't he dead?" She crossed her arms over her chest and her chakra buzzed in agitation. "If you're one of those Broken Works guys, didn't your jerk of a boss try to kill all of you?"

I could only assume she'd gotten the story from Luffy, because that was definitely not the organization's name the last I'd checked. Also, hadn't Fū joined the Straw Hats after they kicked Crocodile's ass? Their stories must have been compelling.

"I believe Crocodile only attempted to kill Mr. 3 and myself, out of those in his employ," was Robin's input. "And if I recall correctly, the bananagator spat him up."

"Yes, well," Mr. 3 muttered, adjusting his badly broken glasses. "I didn't expect to see you here, Miss All-Sunday."

"Nico Robin," she corrected, "since Baroque Works no longer exists."

"That's all well and good, but we need to get to the next level down," Yugito interrupted, before we got even further off-track. "Our options are, once again: the elevator we can't locate, the stairs, or to simply tear a hole through the floor and hope we don't land in a trap."

As if a single trap could hold you.

True.

Kuromushii chose that moment to blare, "WHO THE HELL IS SUPPOSED TO BE ON LEVEL
"TWO?! WHAT HAPPENED TO THE GUARD POST?!!"

I did a quick head-count. And then noticed a giant damned hole in a wall nearby, still filled with billowing brick dust from the initial smashing, which no one else had called out either. There was something to be said for *communication* in a team this large.

I put a hand to my forehead. "Has anyone seen Utakata or Sanji for about five minutes?"

"You called, Kei-ki~?" Aaaand cue the Category 5 Love Hurricane.

Guess that answered that question.

"Sanji, did you find or break anything important?" I asked, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Ah, there was a small group of guards with visual transponder snails networked to the ones on the walls, but they were no match for your white prince!" Sanji swayed in place, clearly unaffected by my indications of annoyance. Then he snapped back to normal to admit, grudgingly, "And I guess that slug-bastard helped, too."

Utakata emerged from the clearly-demolished guard post, shaking dust from his clothes. "The more of these outposts we disable, the less the guards will be able to coordinate. It's just common sense."

"You weren't saying *that* a minute ago," Sanji snapped. "All I heard outta you was 'and this is for…' over and over again."

Utakata ignored him, instead focusing on me. "Yugito and I will take the first attack against whatever monster lives at the end of this level. Unless you have a good argument against it."

"**DEPLOY THE JAILER BEASTS! MINOTAURUS HAS TO BE ON LEVEL THREE, RIGHT?**"

Utakata sighed. "Of course, there are always other options."

Sanji was already running to where *yet another* giant goddamned monster had appeared. This one was a winged lion with a human face—a sphinx, apparently.

He reached it at the same time that Zoro and Luffy did. There was an explosion as all three of the ironically-named Monster Trio (given who else was in our raiding party) launched simultaneous attacks. The result was enough to blow a hole down through Level Two's floor, taking the giant lion-monster with it.

"Three Sword Style Gum-Gum Diable Mouton Jet 600-Caliber Phoenix Cannon!" Fū's eyes shone as she identified the combination technique. "It's just as awesome as Luffy said it would be!"

*What a mouthful.* Sensei's technique naming scheme wasn't *nearly* that complex, and he'd been banned from naming a *lot* of things since I'd known him. Like his own kids.

…Wait, how had Luffy remembered what that technique was even called when he couldn't remember most *people's names*?

Naruto put his hands behind his head, frowning while Kuromushi continued to ramble on with every intercepted snail call it could overhear. He glanced at me, clearly a bit hesitant. "Guess we're going to Level Three. There are going to be more fights, right?"

"Probably," I said, "but don't throw yourself into anything you can't handle."
He looped both arms around my waist. "I'm gonna be okay. You know that."

I nodded, running one hand through his hair. "But it's a big sister's—and a sensei's—job to worry. Let me do that much, at least."

"Fiine," Naruto said in a whiny tone, but it was ruined by his grin a moment later. "You're more of an aunt anyway."

I flicked him in the back of the head before he could make a clean getaway. Then the kids and I headed over to the newest security breach we'd put into Impel Down.

"It feels like it's gonna be hot down there," said Fū, peering down into the giant hole the Straw Hats' Monster Trio had blown in the floor. "Like...a desert?"

"Well, this should be familiar to some of us," Robin commented.

"I've never been in a desert before," Fū mumbled. "And I don't think I wanna try that right now."

"That sounds like a good idea," Robin said, and a hand materialized on Fū's shoulder to pat it.

"Are you staying up here, Robin?" Luffy asked, looking back. "Fū?"

"Yeah, I think we should," Fū replied, flaring her orange wings out again. She grinned widely as she said, "Robin can handle the cages, and I can keep anyone we don't like tied up."

"I'd use even more cola down there," Franky said contemplatively, while Fū landed on his shoulder. "Besides, someone needs to help Robin look after Fū, and a super someone is the best option."

"I can look after myself!" Fū protested instantly, lunging at Franky's hair.

I didn't exactly doubt her. I just worried anyway, since Fū was the third-youngest jinchūriki and by far the most naïve of us. Then again, maybe she'd had a chance to really get her feet under her in the months since landing in the midst of the Straw Hats' adventure. Maybe she'd be able to use V2 to keep everyone safe and not go berserk.

And if not, Robin was a mature sort, and Franky was at least another five years older than she was. Hopefully, the two of them would be able to help Fū keep from getting in over her head.

From the looks of things, half of the Straw Hats had already made their leap of faith into the depths. Only Chopper was still standing at the brim, and given that Chopper was a reindeer I didn't imagine that his heat tolerance had gotten any better. Maybe we ought to leave him up here?

Then Chopper hopped down into the hole.

Or not.

Once more unto the breach, I supposed.

Starvation Hell, aside from the obvious problem presented by being the middle level in a multi-story underwater prison that had no business being so big, was...boring. If I could forgive it for obviously hating human life, anyway.

Alabasta was generally hotter, sandier, and about as full of giant killer creatures. And a minimum of two-thirds of our heist crew had either endured Alabasta or had to train in desert survival at some
point. Utakata probably would have had the hardest time out of us shinobi if he wasn't the host to
the fifth-strongest Tailed Beast, since his hometown wasn't anything like lacking in water. The few
traps left didn't mean much, either.

As for the pirates? Chopper wasn't unconscious, at least, but all that fur had to make this level an
oven for him. Everyone else was dealing with it.

After giving the Level Three guards an epic beatdown—courtesy mainly of the Monster Trio, of
course—we actually did find the stairs. For once. Not that I would have minded blowing a hole
straight down through the prison until we found Ace, but there was such a thing as a small victory
even among a bunch of larger ones. It was similar to the feeling of satisfaction upon, say, finding a
matching pair of shoes in a pile after searching for a while.

The stairs were blocked by…a minotaur.

"I think that's the Minotaurus," Naruto said, from the back of our group. At the same time,
Kuromushi continued to ramble about every snail signal that crossed its range.

The cartoonishly disproportionate creature stood there in the middle of the hall like its feet had
been nailed to the floor. If the creature—assuming that it wasn't a Zoan—hadn't been something
like twenty-five feet tall and clearly built like a brick shithouse, none of us would have hesitated to
knock it into next week. As it was, Yugito was playing rock-paper-scissors with Sanji and Zoro to
see who'd get the first shot at it.

Sure, Luffy was busy hugging someone he referred to as Bon-Bon—yet another attendee in the
Baroque Works reunion—but the rest of us were at least making a show of trying to focus.

"DAMMIT!" said Sanji and Zoro at once, interrupting Luffy and Bon-Bon's heartfelt reunion.

And then Minotaurus got a ballistic Yugito to the face, nails extended.

"I think we're going to have to think about splitting up," Utakata said, while Yugito commenced
the latest beatdown in her V1 cloak. To the backing track of extreme violence, he went on, "While
some of us can fold space-time to end up back outside of the prison, the longer we can maintain
chaos the longer we have to escape."

Naruto made a show of looking around, then tugged Utakata's sleeve. When the adult jinchūriki
looked down, he said brightly, "I can make things explode!"

Utakata, who was not fooled by Naruto's "innocent little kid" act, frowned at him. "Has anyone
ever told you that you're too young to have that as your first option?"

"You want a distraction," Naruto replied, unfazed by Utakata's disapproval. "I can be really
distracting. Anyway, most of my explosives aren't that big."

"I have the ones that are," I said, so Utakata could turn some of that glare on me.

Instead, he just sighed. "I can't decide if you're a bad influence of some kind, or if you're just
enabling his destructive tendencies."

Naruto grinned widely. "Come on, Uta, live a little. Explosions are cool!"

"More like hot," I put in, solely to be a bit annoying.

Utakata threw his hands in the air and walked off. "I can't work like this."
Yugito, who had wrestled Minotaurus's club out of its hand, swung the spiked monster of a weapon directly into the beast's gut as the prisoners nearby managed a ragged cheer.

*Wham!*

Aaaand then into its head.

Naruto bounced in place without taking much notice of the violence, then said, "So, Level Four is up next. Are we ready?"

"Considering that Level Four is even hotter than Level Three? Maybe we should think about *not* all jumping in," Yugito said as she walked back over to us, still carrying the Minotaurus's massive mace over her shoulder. The beast lay unconscious or dead behind her. "Further, the next level contains Warden Magellan's office. Most of us will not be able to fight him effectively."

Behind her, prisoners were starting to peek out from behind unconscious beasts and destroyed scenery. Unless I was lip-reading incorrectly—which was quite possible—they were saying things like "That's her!" and "Our great goddess has arrived!" and "Kitty!"

That last speaker was probably going to get Minotaurus's mace in the face on Yugito's next backswing.

"Pardon my saying so, young lady, but you seem to be implying that you still can," said Brook, and I still wasn't sure how a skeleton was walking and talking. He didn't have *lungs*.

"Utakata will last longer than most," Yugito said, in the tone of someone stating an absolute fact. "Even if he fails to subdue or kill him, we can both be retrieved by Saiken and Matatabi at a moment's notice." She stared directly into my eyes, and I suppressed the urge to look away. "It's more important that we complete our mission than do so as one mob."

"You're staying here?" I asked.

Yugito glanced back over her shoulder, to where Minotaurus was staggering back to its feet. "Mn, yes. I think so."

She turned to face the beast with the club still in her hand, swinging it to smack solidly into her left palm as though it was just a baseball bat. Her slow strides back toward the probable-Zoan were backed by the sounds of yet more faint, exhausted cheering from the prisoners in the nearby cages.

"Our goddess is here!"

"We're saaaaved!"

"Kitty!"

Once again, I would not have wanted to be the guy who thought that last line was a good one. Because, to be frank, Yugito wouldn't be busy with Minotaurus forever. And now they were *audible*.

"The rest of you should be able to get past while Magellan is distracted," Utakata said, not minding being volunteered. Perhaps he viewed it as practice for facing Akainu again?

Sanji scowled, then stepped forward to reinforce Yugito's attack run. "Not all of us. I can't leave a beautiful woman to face a monster alone."
Even if Yugito could turn Minotaurus into a bunch of steaks faster than Sanji could? I had no doubt that Yugito, between her jinchūriki power and willingness to set everything else on fire, was perfectly capable of soloing this floor.

"I won't say no, but be careful," Yugito said to Sanji, her tone just a touch more concerned than usual. At the same time, though, her hand on the club burst into a flame that traveled up the spikes until it looked even deadlier than before.

"Thank you, but you've heard the phrase 'If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen,' right?" Sanji asked.

Yugito nodded slowly.

"I don't have any problem with heat, in any sense of the word," Sanji replied, and his foot caught fire as he drew it back to aim right for Minotaurus's face. At the same time, so did the cigarette dangling from his mouth. "I'd call us a match made in hell, wouldn't you?"

And here I thought I was the only one making that many puns about it.

Yugito just sighed, perhaps too used to me and entirely sick of it. "Utakata, Kei, just go. Find Ace."

We did leave, since there wasn't much else to do, but not before Utakata pulled me aside to suggest a countermeasure for any traps lying in wait for us. And it was an angle of attack that no one without his durability would think about.

The stairs were trapped, in a way.

It seemed like the entire prison garrison was out in force, trying to kill or subdue us just as we were trying to do the same to them. The group mostly consisted of mooks with spears, which Luffy and Zoro made short work of. Chopper hung back, nearly insensate in the heat, and both Mr. 3 and Bon-Bon had been drafted into our group for the sake of compensating for the environmental bullshit we needed to put up with.

That didn't mean that they refrained from using whatever they had on hand to make sure the guards stayed down. And if the two former Baroque Works agents were a bit less merciful than the Straw Hats, I didn't consider that a problem worth mentioning.

Naruto and I barely had to do more than kick a few people because, as soon as Magellan emerged, the party got started for real.

Utakata, in V1, dove down from the lip of the pseudo-volcano on Level Three on the power of his explosive chakra alone. Looping his red chakra tails around the lip of the structure to control his descent, he was already rushing to engage the nearest opponent that the Straw Hats hadn't dropped. In his case, that meant the greatcoat-wearing Warden Magellan on the scaffolding near the other wall. By the time Utakata actually reached him and met an oncoming wave of poison, he was well into V2 cloak.

Utakata plowed straight through the wave of viscous purple liquid, followed it all the way to the source, and bowled Magellan into the floor. The scaffolding popped loose from the wall and screaming steel followed them down.

"I already know I should be immune to poison, but be careful," Utakata had told me, in a low, conspiratorial tone. "None of you need to be caught in the backwash of either his poison or mine. Just complete the mission."
Good luck, I thought, while Utakata did his best to bring the house down. Prisoners and guards like scattered in the wake of the two poisonous titans doing battle.

Luck is for those who cannot manage on skill, Isobu put in. Utakata will be fine.

Sure, Utakata was dwarfed by the warden even if he was channeling enough chakra to lose the ability to speak in favor of a low, bass growl. But I wouldn't have put money on Magellan.

In the meantime, the Jailer Beasts were still up and meandering their way over from the other set of stairs. The three of them were just as disproportionate as their counterpart one floor above us, and I had no doubt at all that they were probably about as durable. If Minotaurus could survive Yugito working it over with its own club, I needed to pick a less friendly option to make sure its comrades stayed down.

"Naruto, get ready," I called out, and then I kicked off the stairs with Isobu's chakra bubbling up out of my coils.

I launched straight into a V1 cloak, then smashed into the rightmost Jailer Beast—a zebra the size of a giant—in a bastardized version of Isobu's Shadow Stroke. It was a little like being an Akimichi, only I was in total control of the demonic Zorb and didn't need kunai to form wicked spikes. Given the Jailer Beasts' weapons and the relatively smooth floor of Level Four, the spikes were both poetic and practical.

The hit toppled all three of the Jailer Beasts like dominos, sending the guards into a panic that was not helped by the pink dominatrix lady screaming at everyone.

While they slowly got to their feet, Naruto dashed up and cupped his hands over my left one while I concentrated with my right and one of Isobu's chakra tails. Naruto didn't need to be in V1 to be so close to me, thanks to whatever resistance he had to Yang Kurama's chakra, and I tossed him a quick grin as he formed a Rasengan for me.

I still wasn't as quick on the draw with my left hand, not even for the Rasengan, but Naruto was always eager to help.

Naruto's Shadow Clone poofed away just as I brought all three attacks up and basked in their strength for just a second. I'd been holding back for a very long time. While this still wasn't my maximum strength, it felt a lot closer than what I'd been playing with before. Even against Teach.

"What are those supposed to be? Lamps?" asked one of the prison guards.

I smiled unpleasantly. Just because the Rasengan glowed didn't meant that was all it did.

The Jailer Beasts got to their feet. The zebra's vacant eyes snapped back to focus as well as a creature with such a wide field of vision could, and it lifted its club before charging straight at me.

Big Ball Rasengan, I thought as I ducked the initial swing and drove the left Rasengan into my opponent's solar plexus from below

It was a perfect shot. The zebra took the spinning orb of chakra directly in the stomach, which carried it backward at a forty-five degree angle that quickly turned into an arc for the opposite wall.

His comrades got the right and the tail-balanced Rasengan slammed into their throat (the rhinoceros) and groin (the koala) hard enough to blast all them to the opposite side of Level Four and into their previously-launched buddy. The stonework probably looked like absolute hell
afterward, as though someone had dragged a backhoe along it, but that was all three of our "biggest" roadblocks subdued. Temporarily.

What was Utakata doing on the ceiling? He wasn't Spider-Man, and Magellan could still aim fairly high.

Utakata and Saiken want me to tell you that Magellan's poison is having no effect. He can hold this position as long as you need him to.

Then that works.

From the sound of explosions and something dripping down the stones in the distance, Magellan was still putting up a fight despite the V2 jinchūriki taking potshots at him. There was no doubt he was tougher than the average staff member around here.

Still, we weren't home free just yet.

"Mmmmm, that's enough!" The aforementioned pink dominatrix lady finally decided to get off her ass and fight us, apparently. "You've all been so, so naughty! Take your punishment! Mistress Sadi demands it!"

"Sadi…" I blinked. As in "sadism?"

But no one had time for my musings, it seemed.

"Gum-Gum Gatling!" was Luffy's response to this argument. His skin darkened to pink as his heart hammered blood through his body in a pace no ordinary human would have been able to take. His fists flew fast enough that I could see where the technique had gotten its name, but it wasn't enough.

The woman dodged reflexively, cartwheeling across the floor and ducking past each hit that cratered the ground behind her. Her whip cracked, drawing a bloody line across Luffy's knuckles as he retracted his arms. Blood shot from the cuts, which made no sense at all until I remembered that there had to be a drawback to using his physiology that way.

Brook yanked Luffy back, snagging his bony fingers in Luffy's vest collar. The nine-foot skeleton had one hell of a wingspan on him, and was probably the only person who could have made that call fast enough.

Immediately after, Naruto joined in, dogpiling him with clones wielding improvised bandages. Chopper hadn't been dealing with the heat well, but Naruto could act in his stead at least some of the time. At least in this capacity, and while his other clones lobbed explosive seals (attached to rocks) everywhere across the immediate area, buying us a bit of time.

"108 Caliber Phoenix!" Zoro shouted (somehow), slicing through the dominatrix's whip like nothing. Though the snap-back on the leather caught Zoro in the face, I had no doubt he'd been put through worse.

"Rude!" the dominatrix replied, yanking her half-length weapon back before Zoro could turn it into scraps.

"Screw you, lady!" Naruto snapped, and I swore I saw a red gleam in his eyes for just a second. "Take your animal-abusing crap and go to hell!"

That was… Uh. Not what I would have concluded. Given the outfit, the whip was probably more
Fuck it. I wasn't explaining *that* to anyone, even under threat of torture. Kushina would eat my soul with a side of rice.

And that was about when one of those loose bombs exploded under the woman's feet, blowing a heel off her shoe. Then Zoro's next whirlwind of sword shenanigans ripped straight through her whip and launched her into a wall that had already taken multiple Jailer Beasts, and the collapse of the bricks was pretty much inevitable.

I clapped my hands, startling the Straw Hats still frozen in something akin to pure, distilled awkward and shock. Except Zoro. "Okay, Level Five right the fuck now. Utakata can handle himself."

Luffy hadn't even been surprised by any of what had happened, despite the mass of bandages around his hands. I wasn't sure he noticed innuendo in the slightest. "Let's go! Ace is still waiting for us!"

And off we went, leaving one of our own to handle the heat.

Level Five, like Level Four, posed a problem. Not because it was too hot, of course. Rather…

"It feels like there's a Winter Island past here," Chopper said, placing a hoof against the iced-over door. He'd recovered admirably quickly once we were out of the glorified oven one floor up. "I'll be fine, but we don't have enough winter clothes for everyone to go past this door. Anyone who isn't protected would succumb to hypothermia within half an hour."

And the Straw Hats were all dressed for a tropical archipelago, not a walk-in freezer. I wasn't much better, of course, but chakra circulation could get me past most of what my Drum Island gear couldn't. So much for survivalist paranoia being useless, huh?

Naruto helped me unseal as much of my winter clothes as I could find.

"How long do you think this might take?" Zoro asked, sheathing all three of his swords. It was a bit obvious that he wasn't going to be coming along into the arctic environment.

"Given Ace's vivre card, it shouldn't be more than an hour," I said, as I piled my Drum Island winter gear back on. I'd never thought I'd need it again after Drum, but the world had a way of rewarding those who were prepared. That, and Ace had bought the gear for me, and I'd always been taught never to toss a gift. "The levels aren't so big. And once we break Ace out, he might be able to neutralize the ambient temperature."

"Ace can?" Luffy asked, as I unrolled the scroll still further. With a series of pops, the scroll coughed up Ace's coat from Drum as well.

"It didn't snow on Drum the day we were there," I said, and offered Luffy the coat. There was no way in hell this kid would be leaving the end of the rescue mission to me and Chopper. Not after coming this far. "Here, wear this while we're down there."

Luffy didn't fight me on it, perhaps remembering some other bad encounter with cold that had him curbing his enthusiasm, and with some distant apprehension I noticed that his frame hadn't filled out enough to fully fit the coat. He was a pirate, yes, but he was also a kid and—

*Ah, fuck it.* We'd come this far already. Pity I didn't have winter boots for him, though.
Then we just had to decide who would stay and who would go. Neither option was really safe, but at least the dangers of Level Four were known, and a fighter from our side was the biggest threat in that giant room. And any group with a jinchūriki had an instant way out, if they needed it.

"Naruto," I began, but he was already shaking his head.

"I know I'm not going, Kei-sensei. You don't have to say it." Naruto stuck his hands out and wiggled his fingers, showing off his total lack of gloves, coats, or other suitable clothes. Besides that, he didn't have a biofeedback technique of any kind without accessing Yang Kurama's chakra. His expression was slightly sheepish. "If I'm not outfitted for the mission, I can't go, right?"

"Right," I said, and patted his hair. Then I picked up the Isobu clone that I'd had to set on the floor, letting it cling to my coat instead of trying to fit underneath it. "Keep the others updated on the enemy movements. Don't let yourself get caught. And if you have to, grab the Straw Hats and ditch us."

Naruto didn't flinch. "You're only saying that because you know you're going with Luffy, and you don't lose."

"You got it, Naruto," I said, smiling faintly.

"Good luck, all right?" Holding the enemy to a standstill was probably the worst role in any combat situation. No one ever knew when relief would be coming, or if it would arrive at all. And yet I wasn't volunteering myself for it because I knew I was one of the best strategic withdrawal options we had.

…Now I knew how Obito felt whenever he had to stay in reserve during this kind of operation.

Brook raised a hand and ran a finger along the frost-encumbered door. "I do believe this door would be giving me goosebumps…if I had any skin!" The skeleton grinned. "Yohohoho! Skull joke!"

I felt a smile threatening to creep onto my face, and Luffy's snickering got louder.

To make a long story short, Brook ended up on the Away Team along with the recent addition of Mr. 2 Bon Clay (who wanted to head into Level Five for his own reasons). With the five of us all venturing into Freezing Hell, I...really hoped we'd find Ace and just get out. We'd been avoiding the real hazards of each of the levels in here by virtue of sheer power or taking advantage of convenient biological quirks.

…We were still doing that, in fact. Chopper had even turned into a full reindeer (with pants) to complete the transition to tundra travel mode.

"Luffy, let's use your vivre card," I said, as Zoro and Mr. 3 pried open the doors leading into what might as well have been Niflheim. "I doubt anything else works down here."

Luffy fished around in the band of his hat for a moment or two, and then extracted the piece of paper. It sat flat on his palm for a moment, looking a little singed at the edges, before starting to move insistently forward.

Highly creepy, but I'd take what I could get.

"That way!" Luffy said cheerfully despite the cold blasting out from Level Five, and we set off.
Well, well, well. Hello "Butterfly Effect," my old friend. The timeline here's totally borked thanks to Tailed Beasts.

Also, should I write Yugito and Utakata POV sections? I sort of have the basic framework for...one of those, and the other is a bit up in the air, but I also want to know if those scenes should be set in this chapter, or in a different one. Actually, what kinds of bonus scenes/alternate POVs are you readers most interested in seeing? (No guarantees, but they could go on the List.)
Level Five was, true to its "Freezing Hell" moniker, cold enough to give the Land of Snow a run for its money. I'd never been to the Land of Snow personally, though some of Kakashi's ANBU missions (that I wasn't supposed to know about) had taken him out there more than once. What little I was allowed to learn about the country painted a picture of endless snowfields, mountains, intermittent tundra, and a shinobi population that was all too well-adapted for their environment. Their chakra armor ran off of high levels of ambient energy, making them effectively immune to the cold and annoyingly hard to kill unless the cores on the suits were cracked first. That was the extent of my knowledge.

I honestly could have done with some highly illegal chakra-fueled snowsuits of some kind, because even my Drum Island gear was deeply insufficient for this kind of chill. It seeped straight through the thick fabric and fur like seawater, numbing my extremities and raising goosebumps everywhere else. Chopper's thick coat of fur kept him safe from the worst of it, to the point that I was jealous.

"It's so cold!" Luffy complained, shivering and hopping from foot to foot. With the straw sandals he tended to wear, it was no wonder. A doctor would have probably been surprised to learn he could still feel his toes.

"Just don't touch anything made of metal, Luffy," Chopper suggested, nudging his captain forward as we trudged through the snow. "And don't complain about how cold it is."

Luffy frowned abruptly, still rubbing his upper arms with both hands. "It's…not cold. It's not cold. It's not cold." He took a deep breath of the freezing air, then shouted, "It's not cold!"

I didn't want to ask where the mantra had come from. There was a subtle extra weight in Luffy's words that worried me, but there were so many worries jockeying for position in my head already that I didn't have time to dwell on it.

"It's not cold at all!" Brook agreed, as though weighing less than a hundred pounds despite being nine feet tall didn't give him a ridiculous advantage during snow travel. Same thing went for his total lack of flesh, what with being a skeleton and everything.

"Un, deux, trois! It's not cold!" added the newest addition to the adventuring party.
Mr. 2 Bon Clay, who also had a much less clunky name that Luffy didn't remember (and it was certainly not "Bon-Bon"), was probably the second-weirdest addition to our party if I didn't count myself. Or Brook. Or… What the hell, we were all weird. Luffy's friend's tendency to pirouette everywhere had thrown me off, though, and so did the fact that he declared us friends when I fished out a jacket for him to borrow for the trip into wintery hell. It wasn't even my jacket—somehow, I'd acquired Yugito's while frantically packing for this particular adventure—but that didn't seem to deter him.

I was never going to get used to pirate behavior.

"Chopper," I began, while the rest of our party continued to try and shout about how not cold it was, "can you track things by scent when it's this cold out? If you have a sample like this hat?"

"Of course I can." Chopper twisted his neck around to look at me, then asked, "But how long have you been carrying Ace's hat?"

"A few days, by now," I admitted, as I took it off and held it out for him to sniff. "And I've been underwater while carrying it a couple of times."

"Then it might not work," Chopper said. Still, he stepped closer and pressed his blue nose against the material, frowning in concentration. After a few careful whiffs, he just shook his head. "I'm sorry, all I'm getting is saltwater and your scent."

Of course it wasn't that easy. "Drat. Thanks for trying anyway."

"I remember Ace's scent from Alabasta, though," Chopper went on, and lifted his head as he pawed at the ground with one hoof, testing the depth of the snow. "It's cold, but I should still be able to smell him if he's on this level. It's not nearly as big as Drum was."

That was not a good sign, but I didn't know enough about how scent behaved in the cold to make any sort of argument against Chopper's assessment. Nor did I know how sharp Chopper's nose was. Maybe Ace just hadn't been brought in this way? There was still an elevator we'd never really located…

I pressed my cold-cracked lips together, then just sighed. "Thanks for trying, Chopper. We'll just see what happens as we get farther in."

In fact, it just got colder. As we approached the structures toward what looked like the middle of the level, I got the distinct impression that the prisoners on this level were kept in the literal least hospitable part of it. Sure, the cells opened with relatively little effort, but in a gulag what did it really matter that they were free to wander? That just meant they were allowed to die in the snowfield. Given that the ambient temperatures were well below the tolerance of any surveillance snail I'd ever heard of, it wasn't like the staff could or cared to monitor anything down here. They probably didn't even know when inmates died.

Luffy kept his brother's vivre card in hand as we went, though I wondered if he knew how to really navigate with it more than once. He frowned like a thunderstorm as we trekked onward, crossing the meager stone structures and the central tower courtyard more than once.

And we also attracted a few unfriendly eyes along the way. Out of us, Bon-Bon was the only one wearing the Impel Down striped outfit in any capacity, so the rest of us stood out like sore thumbs. Not that most of us cared, mind. The inmates were unilaterally affected by the cold, while only half of our group was. While being unsubtle wasn't a great advantage, we had enough others that we could afford it.
"Does anyone want to try asking for directions?" I asked finally, when we looped around the tower for the fifth time. I'd also stubbed my toe on what passed for food down here—a half-frozen block of something that might've been gruel once upon a time.

I was done with the "aimless wandering" part of the program.

"I've been trying to locate Ace's scent when we pass by the cells," Chopper said, after kicking an inmate in the face with his rear hooves. Really, given the local conditions, I wasn't surprised that they were trying to eat him. I just wished they'd do it later, when we weren't trying to concentrate.

I stomped on the inmate for good measure, eliciting a groan of pain from him and the sound of shattering icicles. Must've had a full beard of them. To Chopper, I prompted, "And?"

"And nothing. It's like he was never here." Chopper turned and nudged Brook's leg with his antlers. "Brook, can you see anyone in the upper cell block who isn't too frozen to talk?"

"I can't, and I can't even say it's because I don't have eyes!" Brook's lack of a cheery follow-up laugh at his own joke didn't fill me with confidence.

"Why don't we just ask this weird guy, then?" Luffy asked, squatting next to the guy I was still using as a footstool. "Hey, weird guy, do you know where Iva or Ace are?"

I still didn't know who Emporio Ivankov was, but Bon-Bon described him—her?—as more or less the greatest person in the history of the world. Assuming that we found Ivankov, I was curious to see how Ivankov compared to Whitebeard, who was the only other person my traveling companions seemed to put on a pedestal. And even then, that was Ace and the Whitebeard Pirates for the most part. Luffy couldn't remember the man's name.

But hey, if Bon-Bon wanted to find Iva, then he and Ace were coming along for our grand escape.

His response, somewhat muffled by the snow, was, "Go…to…h-hell."

I dug my heel into his back. "Answer the captain's question. And this time, be polite."

"Th-the forest…"

"I smell wolves out there," Chopper said, and though he seemed the slightest bit nervous, he didn't waver. "Not people."

"Wolves aren't that tough," Luffy replied, shooting back to his feet. "We're still trying to find the right spot, but if we get some wolf meat along the way, it'll still be fine."

"And the wolves are probably gonna try to eat Chopper and Brook, not to mention us," I said since, well. Reindeer and a skeleton. Not much of a logical leap there. But instead of belaboring that point, I just changed the topic with, "Check the card again, Luffy."

Luffy blinked, holding up the slightly-scorched paper again. It wriggled around in his palm, then seemed to twist at a strange angle. "Ah! It's not pointing toward the forest!" As I stepped back, Luffy hauled the frozen inmate to his feet and said, "Hey, old guy, your directions are bad. Give us better ones!"

But alas, the prisoner had fainted. Or else died. I wasn't sure I cared which. As it was, we left the guy inside one of the cells and had to hope for the best.

Bon-Bon spun in place as we regrouped, more to avoid the cold than because he wanted to. I swore
I saw him flip between faces as he spun, fussing. "Now how are we going to find Portgas D. Ace and Emporio Ivankov?!"

"This will work! Ace said so!" Luffy held the vivre card out, stretching his hand this way and that despite the cold. His face fell all of a sudden. "It's not... Ah, why does the mystery paper keep not wanting to point to Ace?!"

As Luffy's palm and the vivre card shot past my face again, I sighed. "Luffy, stop moving the card around for a second."

Luffy froze. "Why?"

"I want to see what angle we're being told to follow." I held out my hand, taking hold of Luffy's wrist. "Now, concentrate. Tell me when the card is pulling the hardest."

Luffy nodded, and I slowly changed the angle of his hand manually, because he'd proven that his focus for this kind of task was incredibly short. When I had his arm at about a forty-five degree angle, he said, "There!" and I stopped.

"There?" Bon-Bon pirouetted closer, then peered at the card. "Straw Hat, why would the vivre card pull strongest at that angle?"

"It's a mystery," Luffy said, though he didn't move his hand.

"Actually, it means we need to head down." I frowned, free hand on one hip before I let go of Luffy's wrist and mirrored with my other hand. Then I sighed again when a cynical thought came to mind, a bit overdue. "Of course. What kind of self-respecting corrupt government lists all the levels in their supermax prison? There was always going to be some pit too deep to dredge out."

Chopper cocked his head to one side, pawing at the snow in a nervous gesture. "So Ace really isn't on this level. But what about Ivankov?"

"I have no idea." Ivankov could have been literally anywhere, and without a vivre card for him there was no way to be sure.

"Why don't we ask this gentleman, then?" Brook asked, and the rest of us blinked at him.

Then we blinked at the seven-foot-tall man in a perfect split-toned fur coat that matched his hairstyle, down to the even split between the orange and white halves of the clover-like pompadour. He even had a wine glass in hand in a level where nearly every other available liquid was doing time as a solid. But he wasn't wearing the Impel Down prisoner uniform or any regalia that made me associate him with the staff, insofar as I could recognize the latter. After all, Magellan employed a pink dominatrix. Uniforms were only for the fodder.

"Ah! An orange person!" Luffy tucked the vivre card away in his hat's band again, then waved his arms. "Hey, hey, can you help us find Iva and Ace?"

Behind his shades, I wasn't sure what our newest friend was thinking. Or if he was our newest friend at all. But all he said was, "Follow me."

The Straw Hats and Bon-Bon, of course, jumped on the opportunity. I hung back, eyes narrowed against both the glare of the snowfield and in deep suspicion. I would still follow them, of course, but I didn't plan on taking my hand off my katana for the rest of the trip.

Again, Magellan employed a pink dominatrix. I still wasn't sure what part of that idea I found most
objectionable.

Other than threatening everyone with death? She did seem sadistic.

*You've been quiet lately,* I commented, rather than addressing that statement directly. I didn't want to have to explain BDSM the way that woman seemed to pursue it. *What's going on up there?*

**Shukaku has pinned down Kizaru and the Warlord Kuma at Sabaody Archipelago.** Isobu sent me a vague impression of the distances involved, as assessed by his bond to his sandiest sibling.

It was well outside of the Tarai Current, but that could only assure us of so much. Kizaru was the guy who could turn into *light,* right?

Isobu didn't wait for a reply. **But so far, Kuromushi has heard nothing from Aokiji or Akainu. They may be headed our way.**

*And that'd be Ice Capades and Utakata's next punching bag.* I frowned, recalling Fū and Gaara's story about being nearly frozen solid when the Straw Hats had encountered Aokiji before reaching Water 7. The youngest of the Marine Admirals was nothing to scoff at, but I was fairly certain his abilities would run directly up against Matatabi's and suffer for it. Akainu would take at least as severe of a beating if Saiken wanted to run him through the wringer. *Put Matatabi on it, unless one of the others wants first shot at him for some reason. You or Saiken get Akainu. I don't even know if they'll show up, but...*

**Better safe than sorry, particularly now.**

I nodded silently, while my group charged on ahead.

Isobu's clone clambered up on my back until it could see over my shoulder, keeping its tails mostly wrapped around my waist otherwise. **You have not located Ace, yet?**

*Not yet,* I told him, *but we will soon enough.*

**Find him and get out of there. The longer you stay in this metal box, the more I feel the need to tear into it.** He paused, and his clone's grip tightened on my shoulders as he thought of another detail to inform me of. **Thus far, Yugito has Level Three under control, while Fū and Gaara have secured Levels Two and One. Utakata is still fighting the warden, but the floor is effectively ours. Naruto continues to hold the stairwell. Get out soon.**

I only had to extend my chakra sense upward to confirm what Isobu was telling me. Utakata and Yugito's immense chakra signatures were still going strong, bouncing from point to point on Level Three and Four and never giving an inch in the face of a concerted counterattack. Matatabi and Saiken must have been focusing their attention on their partners, too, or else they wouldn't know when they had to stage a rescue in one form or another. And the others were hardly facing resistance worth noting.

Still, we needed to make this quick.

"Hei, are you following us?" Luffy called back.

"Sure thing, Luffy. I'm just going a bit slower," I said, forcing cheer into my voice.

Nothing else for it, I supposed. We were off to see the wizard.
The orange creamsicle person turned out to be named Inazuma. Ducking down into some kind of horribly iced-over basement, our new party of six trekked down into the sewers below Level Five. Once we left the apparent permafrost layer behind, the stone tunnels below were cold but manageable. Without gigantic fans making wind whip across our souls, the chill was just that. And the further down we went, the less it mattered.

After a certain point, we started to hear…music. A little further down the winding tunnels, the faint echo of many conversations became audible under the dulcet tones of what sounded like electric guitars. Which I had not heard for well over twenty years, because my hometown didn't have the technology for them. And neither should this place—especially not in the middle of the local equivalent of Alcatraz.

Am I hallucinating?

You are not under a genjutsu, was all Isobu said. Terribly helpful.

"Can we go faster?" Chopper asked, now in his smallest form instead of his full reindeer one. "If Ace or Ivankov need medical attention, we need to get there as soon as possible."

"Ivankov is not in danger," replied Inazuma, not missing a beat.

Fine, then.

"Bon-Bon," I said, while we were still following Inazuma, "it sounds like you're going to be able to meet your idol. But if this takes too long, I'm not sure what I'm going to have to do."

The first idea that came to mind involved breaking the floor like the Straw Hats' Monster Trio had done three floors above us. Not exactly a winning strategy for minimizing casualties.

"I'm sure Queen Ivankov will be able to help us find Straw Hat's brother," Bon-Bon replied, somehow keeping up with our walking pace despite moving on the points of his toes. Wherever he'd learned to be a ballerina clearly made their trainees' feet into solid steel. "Queen Ivankov is the greatest okama the world over! He's the legendary miracle worker!"

I blinked, then had to just shrug. Far be it from me to keep people from idolizing others. I'd withhold judgment until I met the guy. But if he really could help us, then I could accept anything. "If you say so. I guess if there's someone who'd know about an extra level in Impel Down, it's someone who set up shop in the basement."

"Exactly!" And Bon-Bon did a little twirl, again.

"Luffy, what are we going to do if Ivankov can't help us find Ace?" Chopper asked, as Inazuma strode on ahead.

"We'll go back to following the vivre card and breaking things until we find him," Luffy said, as Inazuma stopped in the middle of a dead end.

Nice to know he was apparently a mind reader. Then again, perhaps I'd lost enough subtlety that it was obvious even to the perpetually-unobservant Luffy. The simplest answer, however, was simply that strange minds thought alike.

Before any of us could protest, Inazuma raised his hands ahead of him and did…something. I saw scissors the size of swords pop out of his sleeves and flash once, slicing through a stone wall as though it was made of mere paper. There was a tunnel beyond it, of a different style than anything
else in Impel Down thus far, and Inazuma beckoned to us. "This way, please."

And once we were all in the tunnel, it closed behind us like origami.

The music was louder on this end, too.

Inazuma led us wordlessly into a hidden chamber, through another maze of corridors and repurposed sewers. The chamber was loud, populated, and completely at odds with everything else I'd seen in Impel Down thus far.

Despite wearing shinobi mesh armor for most of my life, I had honestly never seen so many sets of fishnet stockings in one place before. The crowd of people in the massive cavernous room nearly all wore fishnets with either briefs or booty shorts, and many of them had somehow acquired pumps, boots, and other forms of high-heeled shoes. Some were seated at low, round tables that reminded me of the ones in fancy hotels or restaurants a literal lifetime ago, of the sort that had its own house band. A club? Everyone had full plates of food or mugs of beer or both, and they smiled and laughed in the midst of their many conversations. The lights were low here not because of a lack of power or care, but instead because that was what clubs were like. It was downright surreal.

Given the sheer misery I'd been seeing ever since our assault on Impel Down began, the place stood out all the more as a…hm. A diamond in the rough, perhaps. Whatever the exact term, I automatically respected this place and its proprietor. Carving a slice of heaven out of hell couldn't have been an easy feat.

"Food!" was Luffy's succinct response to this display.

I automatically grabbed him, pinning his arms to his sides rather than letting him live up to his reputation as a bottomless pit.

It probably would have been more energy-efficient to tie him in a knot or two, but the idea occurred to me only after a pair of stage lights illuminated a ten-foot-tall afro-sporting figure on the catwalk at the opposite end of the chamber. By that point, all of us were more or less hypnotized by the proceedings, and as the crowd around us started cheering.

One thing I'd noticed over time, among the various people who were far larger than anyone back home, was that their physical proportions tended to be unusual. Other than Whitebeard, who was just plain big, they tended to have features like larger or smaller hands or torsos, or large feet, or something else that just didn't quite work according to what my medical training told me about human anatomy. Most of the time, it just inspired a momentary double-take, and then I wrote the observation off as just something that happened in this world.

True to this trend, the person on stage had a head-to-torso ratio I'd last seen on a pair of twin witches that ran a bathhouse for spirits. In a movie. That, combined with the pink bodysuit and knee-high boots, the purple afro and the plush-looking crown, meant that whoever-they-were cut a distinct, flamboyant, and unmistakeable figure.

Honestly, the Wizard of Oz comparisons just kept coming. Pity about the lack of a yellow brick road, but I wasn't willing to speculate too hard on what they might've had to use to make such a thing down here.

"So you're the little pirate crew making such a racket in the upper levels," purred probably-Ivankov from the stage, into a stand microphone. "I'm starting to like your style."

"I like our style, too!" Luffy replied, as I finally let go of him now that he'd been distracted from
food.

"Mmmfufufu…" A performer to the core, almost-certainly-Ivankov still didn't turn to face us as he laughed.

Well, at least it wasn't Orochimaru's laugh. I had a bit of a knee-jerk reaction to that noise, even after everything else I'd been through before and since meeting him.

As definitely-Ivankov shook his hips onstage to the sound of the opening electric guitar riff (which still confused me for half a dozen reasons), I tapped Bon-Bon's shoulder and whispered, "I think we've found Emporio Ivankov."

"You do?" Bon-Bon's eyes snapped to the stage again, as though riveted there. Given that he didn't need an answer, I remained silent. Even when he side-hugged me out of sheer emotion, dragging Brook into things with his other arm.

And then Ivankov's stage show started, which distracted everyone enough that I forgot to start throwing elbows.

I think Kokuō told me of small animals strutting like this on land, Isobu commented, but I do not believe this is intended as a mating dance.

Thank you for that mental image. I sighed internally. Still, Isobu wouldn't have said something just to distract me. So, how is everyone else doing?

Thus far, Aokiji and Akainu have not made any appearances in Kuromushi's range. Isobu gave me the impression he was tilting his head to one side, thinking. But we have started to hear whispers from pirate crews, or so the Straw Hats think. One would assume they would be more intelligent than to deliberately sail into this deathtrap, but I already know that is faulty thinking.

It's an understatement for everyone in here. I glanced up at the ceiling as the stage lights continued to flash. So, any idea what crews might be involved?

Fū and Gaara are discussing the Heart Pirates, but I do not think they are the crew operating in this area. Naruto is badgering them for stories.

Remind me to do that sometime.

Discuss the Heart Pirates?

Badger people for stories, I told Isobu with a grimace. I'm getting sick of how much goes on without me knowing up from down. And we've been out of News Coo range for more than a week, so hell if I know what's going on now.

You may need to fix that, then.

The problem with zoning out to talk to Isobu right when something was happening was that I couldn't recall a damn thing afterward beyond sketchy details. Ergo, that Ivankov was indeed the purple afro guy, that his power over hormones was completely brain-breaking, and that he had absolutely no interest in going any deeper into Impel Down when he already had a perfect position to do whatever he needed to. Later, I was surprised I'd gotten that much.

And that was about when I came back to the conversation, after Bon-Bon had finally put me down
"Kei, are you all right?" Chopper asked, tugging on my pant leg. When I looked down, he said, "You stopped responding to anything."

"I'm fine, Chopper," I said, after cycling my chakra through my body again just to make sure nothing had fallen asleep while I was checking in. "Isobu and I just have an... unusual form of mental communication. And I guess he didn't want me to see Ivankov's show."

Chopper blinked. "But why not? He has a really interesting Devil Fruit power, and Inazuma doesn't mind being a woman at all."

"I have no idea." And I'd need to ask Ivankov later if his ability to change a person's physical form was permanent or not. I could think of a few people who'd be interested in that. Regardless, I coughed to clear my throat and said, "Anyway, what's going on?"

"—Even so, the big man's still waiting things out." Ivankov crossed his arms, still smiling and perhaps a bit smug. "Of course I'm referring to my comrade, the leader of all Revolutionaries in the world."

Luffy, Brook, and Bon-Bon were staring openly.

I blinked. This is the person Naruto said got arrested and chucked into Impel Down? He has to be. And yet the sheer coincidence...

I feel as though someone's uncanny luck has rubbed off on us.

"You may know him," Ivankov continued dramatically, raising his voice to a new level of smug, "as Dragon!"

Chopper put a hoof against his face.

I was too busy staring. "Dragon" was his actual name? Naruto had been completely on the money, then. I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or find the person who'd named the guy and shake their hand. As it was, I did neither.

"Oh, you're talking about my dad," said Luffy, as completely unable to read the atmosphere as ever, and I stared at him.

Chopper hit himself in the face with his hoof. Twice.

What.

This is starting to remind me of that story you me told about that other Naruto.

I thought it over. A cheerful, charismatic rookie with a penchant for certain ornamentation and a massive appetite, ridiculous combat ability or style, and the power to charm Tailed Beasts. Also, the son of a notorious killer or hero. Add in the combination of potential and ambition, all aimed toward being the best of the entire world at... something, and you got both Naruto and Luffy.

I hate my life.

Ivankov didn't appear to notice me joining Chopper in the facepalm competition. Instead, he whirled around dramatically, making his fishnet cloak flare out. "Yes, that's the plan. When your dad makes a move with that army of his, then I can do some maneuvering of my own." He put a
hand on his hip. "Think of it as my grand comeback tour."

"...He does know that this isn't so much a break-in as a rampage, right?" I whispered to Inazuma.

Inazuma glanced at me, then nodded.

"Good. Yugito would be pissed if no one acknowledged that part."

"If I escaped now, I'd just end up on a sea of wanted lists," Ivankov concluded. And then stopped.

And blinked.

Luffy didn't so much as twitch.

And then the penny dropped.

"D-D-D-DAD?!" Ivankov stammered, as two and two made four.

Luffy continued staring.

And then, as though they were converted to an eldritch chorus, every single non-Straw Hat, non-me person in the chamber shrieked, "DRAGON'S YOUR DAD?!"

Ivankov hurled himself backward, smashing into a wall afro-first and cratering it quite thoroughly as Chopper and I winced. Even if he had quite a bit of body mass to absorb the impact, that could easily bruise. "Your...your dear papa..." Ivankov slid to the floor. "And I never knew..."

He looked about as cognizant as I'd felt a few minutes ago. Which, given how Isobu's conversations were distracting as all hell, did not bode well. Oh dear.

And then Ivankov face-planted on the floor.

He really did have a knack for drama.

Brook tapped my shoulder. "What is a Revolutionary?"

I shrugged. Naruto was the one who had spent time with them, not me. "I don't know for sure. Naruto said their goal was basically to tear down the World Government."

"Their leader is considered the World's Most Dangerous Criminal," Chopper provided, from about knee-height on me and ankle-height on Brook.

...Why could I hear the capital letters there? And really, those kinds of monikers got handed out like candy by the World Government, so I was kinda going to take that with a whole truckload of salt.

"D-d-don't be ridiculous!" Ivankov tried to snap at Luffy, once he'd gotten to his feet again.

"Dragon doesn't have any children! That's just crazy talk."

Luffy crossed his arms, then tilted his head to one side. "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything." Head tilt going the other way. "But Grandpa didn't keep it a secret." It was like watching a metronome at work. "I don't really know that much about him. It's not like I've ever seen his face before."

"WHAAAAAT?!" Ivankov shrieked in disbelief. And then he froze. "Wait, please tell me where you came from?"
"East Blue," was Luffy's nonchalant response.

And then Ivankov was off to anime-flashback-land. Oooookay then.

I'd had enough of this detour. The idea of allying with the Revolutionaries was tempting for about five seconds, since they were about the only faction who would benefit wholeheartedly from the mess being made of Impel Down. Ultimately, though, finding allies down here was more of a hindrance than a help because of the way we'd decided to pursue this plan of attack. Between Utakata still beating Magellan into the ground and the Straw Hats still holding the other floors, we hardly needed more people to look after. The plan was much less complicated when our only goal had been to find Ace and get him out, and let the rest of this place burn.

Or drown, really.

I stepped forward, feeling my eyes start to itch with Isobu's chakra and turn gold.

"We don't need your help," I said, while Ivankov recovered. Ivankov's heavily painted eyes shot in my direction for an instant, while multiple trains of thought jockeyed for priority in his head. Perhaps I could hijack one. "The only reason we're here is because Bon-Bon wanted to meet you, because you're his hero. And because we don't know exactly where it'll be safe to enter Level Six."

And because Naruto would probably be pissed if it turned out we killed a bunch of Revolutionaries by accident when he owed them his life. At some point, I would get the whole story out of him, and then know for certain how callous I was being at this exact moment.

But that was for the future.

"There isn't a safe, conventional, undetectable route," said someone, and I squashed down the tiny urge to quail at having acquired an audience. There were too many eyes on me, and when I was channeling Isobu's chakra, any lingering traces of fear turned into aggression.

"If you don't want to help us reach Ace, then we won't demand it," I went on as I forced myself to bow to Ivankov, showing sincerity and keeping myself contained, "but consider this fair warning that you will need to evacuate. None of us want to see the Revolutionaries suffer for the World Government's actions."

"Oh, so that's your serious face," Luffy said, nodding to himself. "Right! Iva, help me find out where Ace is, and we'll smash our way straight to him! You can just do whatever you have to!"

I wasn't sure what Ivankov saw in our expressions, but he didn't miss a beat. He flung out one arm, like a commanding king. "Inazuma, help our guests find the entrance to Level Six while we prepare for our exodus. It's time for action!"

"Right away," Inazuma said, bowing without disturbing the wineglass.

"It would be helpful if you could reinforce the Straw Hats on Level Five's stairs," I suggested, before everyone could get to gung-ho about storming the next level down. "Level Six… By the time we leave there, Impel Down will be sinking if anyone so much as dares to put up a fight. I'm done playing."

"Not without me, you won't!" Luffy said, holding out his hand to stop me. "We do this together!"

Brook and Chopper raised their arms along with the Revolutionaries (both in fishnets and not) and Bon-Bon as they all gave a shout of agreement.
"GUM-GUM BAZOOKA!"

"BIG BALL RASENGAN!"

What could I say? Luffy was insidious.

There were no direct passages to Level Six from Level Five-Point-Five. The tunnels ran all over the rest of the prison, up through walls and support structures all the way through Level One, but Ivankov had never seen the need for a Level Six passageway. The prisoners in Newkama Land could even get current newspapers from the trash on the upper levels, and most of them had also recovered their clothes. It was all thanks to the dozens of bolt holes and pathways hidden here and there across the prison. But Level Six just wasn't in Ivankov's plans. Its prisoners tended to be too violent, notorious, or who-even-knew-what-else for recruitment.

So Luffy and I took a page out of the Raikage's book. Doors were for people who didn't understand that the shortest path between two points was a straight line, no matter what had to be busted down to make way. Like the Fire Temple monks said, "Where no opportunity lies, make one."

Or something like that. My brother was the one who'd actually visited long enough to pick up philosophy.

Luffy ran on ahead while I...dealt with the occupant of the cell we'd just remodeled. With my Rasengan already having punched a hole through the front of the cell, it wasn't like anyone could stop him, or me. And as much as Luffy was going to raise hell by running around, I had no more interest in loose ends than ever.

The prison staff has noticed that Level Six has been breached.

What are they going to do about it?

Precious little. They cannot access the stairs with Naruto's group in the way, and passing through Level Four at this moment would be fatal. There was an elevation device, but Utakata accidentally destroyed it. Isobu's massive chakra signature sat just beyond the external wall, nearly level with Luffy and me, and I did not want to know what he was planning to do if all other escape routes were compromised.

So much for Yugito's search. Using the new corpse as a footstool, I climbed over the blown-out cell door and into Level Six. Isobu, are there any self-destruction options for the Warden or other staff members to use in case of a breakout?

I do not know. No one has mentioned such a thing on any of the baby transponder snails, or at least not in a way that Kuromushi can detect.

All right. Then we just have to get this done fast. Then I devoted my attention to looking around.

Level Six was honestly more in line with what I'd expected of the "giant underwater prison" part of how people described Impel Down. It was made of granite with sea prism stone accents, iron and steel for flavor, and the pervasive aura of evil that really ought to have accompanied the entire place. The level was dark, despite some effort made at providing rather terrible ambient lighting via lamps and torches, and every inch of the place that wasn't a pathway belonged to a hundred different cells.

And some of the cells were fucking huge. There were vast dark shapes moving in some of them, and suddenly I was very glad that my entire combat role was based on giving me the strength to
punch well above my literal weight class. Luffy probably didn't even notice.

*It occurs to me just now that I never did figure out what made that giant footprint back on our first island.*

**I would hazard a guess that your answer is "giants."**

*I hate it when I'm right just because the universe likes irony,* I thought, and jumped down from our starting cell to the floor far below to join Luffy.

"This place is huge!" Luffy complained, standing in the middle of the pathway between the seemingly endless cells. "It's going to take forever to find Ace."

"Luffy, vivre card!" I barked out, making him snap his hand back to his hat's band. Honestly, the number of reminders this kid needed…

"Right!" And lo, we were on our way again.

The problem with vivre cards was that they didn't compensate for walls. The best we could do was run around the cells of the various inmates who neither deserved to be freed nor were worth killing. And given Luffy's desperation to *finally* find Ace again, I didn't have to cut all that much off my non-modified speed to give him a modest lead. Even if the kid hadn't already been a one-person wrecking crew, it was quite clear that once we were so close to our goal, the gloves came off.

It made cannoning into the few guards and running them into the floor before they could call for help a lot easier.

Along the way, Isobu was able to provide status updates.

**The prison is undergoing a full-scale riot. Yugito's position has become the rallying point for a new cult, and Fū's group has subdued all hostile prisoners as well as the beasts. Gaara, likewise, has somehow recruited Level One prisoners to the cause.** Isobu paused, thinking that over, then added, **Or at the least, Level One prisoners are more interested in escaping than fighting us.**

*And Utakata?* I asked, as Luffy slammed a guard into a cell wall so hard that there were two imprints. One of them was his fist in the stone. The other wasn't a good idea to contemplate on a full stomach, though I doubted Luffy noticed.

**Currently, Utakata is attempting to drown the warden in the lake of boiling blood, with Saiken's advice,** Isobu said, as though commenting on the weather. He only sounded annoyed that it had taken them that long to remember that blood was mostly water and that Devil Fruit users couldn't swim. While I was busy kicking a guard into a cell and shutting the door behind him, he continued blandly, **Everything else on Level Four is either unconscious or dead due to the combined influence of their chakra and the warden's poisons, even disregarding genuine misdirected attacks. Some prisoners may have escaped into Level Three, for all the good that does them.**

*The effect's not airborne, is it?* Shit, and I'd left Naruto *downhill* of all that—

**Not to my knowledge, else Level Three would be depopulated. Nor is it easily spreading toward Level Five—our friends are safe, particularly after closing the Level Four doors.**

Isobu sent me a thoughtful-sounding noise, then he said, **That said, I will tell Saiken to clear a**
Marine ship. It seems that you are leaving with more than a few tagalongs.

*And leaving behind a whole bunch of corpses,* I thought with a grimace.

Not that I especially *cared* for every person in Impel Down as an individual—I would have been a hopelessly naïve bleeding heart if I did—but I was going to be responsible for those deaths. Yugito might have come to this place without my prompting, since she knew Ace, but Utakata wouldn't have bothered. And I was still leading this mission in some way, even this late in the game. Those lives and the utter ruin brought to this place? My responsibility, in whole or in major part. Even Luffy's crew would never have made it here in time to participate if not for my link to Isobu, and Isobu's to Shukaku, and Shukaku's proximity to Chōmei and thus an actual *method* to get to Impel Down.

I still wouldn't have made another choice, other than to prevent Ace from being captured in the first place.

My thoughts were punctuated repeatedly by noise while Luffy and I ran on, because the surveillance transponder snails on Level Six just kept sending warning after warning. Not that they were being heeded fast enough.

"Was that a woman?"

"Come here, girlie! I can show—"

"Get back here, you fucking—"

"Who's that brat?"

"Hey, bitch, get yourself a real—"

Oh, and catcalling. To various degrees of blatant sexism. There was something darkly hilarious about how some of the only people able to tell I was a woman at first glance were all *lifers* in a *supermax*. Seriously, what the fuck?

If I hadn't been on a mission to rescue someone from the depths of this hellhole, I probably would have poked my head in exactly long enough to hear that kind of bullshit and then punch a hole through a vital wall with a bomb. Given the prevalence of sea prism stone, no Devil Fruit powers could provide a last-minute save down here. And it would serve all of them right.

But there were more important concerns.

Luffy and I dashed through Level Six, checking the vivre card at my insistence whenever we hit an intersection. After the third time, Luffy didn't bother being his version of subtle at all. Though we still smacked into and trampled guards with the same frequency as we had before, from that point on, our progress was punctuated by Luffy shouting for his brother. If the prisoners had any doubts about our goal, that little tidbit dispelled them.

This, of course, resulted in still *more* unhelpful commentary.

"Long way to come for a booty call!"

"Hah, and with just enough time left for a kiss goodbye!"

I heaved a sigh as we finally hit the fifth blind corner, and subsequently punched the guards out. While wiping blood off my hands and onto a guard's uniform, I complained, "If the others didn't
need him, I'd have picked Chopper to come along. This feels like we're going in circles."

"We can't be going in circles! There are too many corners!" Luffy insisted.

I paused. He wasn't… *wrong*. Then I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Luffy, card."

He held out his hand, and Ace's vivre card was still the same size as before. The edges were a little fried, but at least it hadn't learned to spontaneously combust, right? Dammit, I wished I'd gotten a better explanation of how these things worked.

"It says… go this way!" And he was off again.

But the eleventh time was indeed the charm.

Luffy led the way through another hall with cells stacked high on both sides, complete with a giant-sized cell at the back. "AAAAAAAAACE! ACE, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

And out of the cell on the end, approximately the size of a modest house, a familiar voice said in a breathless tone, "It's impossible, but…"

"I told you miracles could still happen," rumbled a much deeper voice.

"Yeah… You did." A crackly, disused laugh followed before dying in a ragged gasp. Then, "You… were right, Jinbe."

Luffy actually ran past the correct cell, snagging a stone lip on his way with rubbery fingers and then rocketing right back to where he'd lost track of things. I confirmed it was the right stop when he smacked into the bars and bounced off, but didn't run onward. To his credit, he was on his feet again by the time I took my first look into the cell, from a bit farther back.

The first thing I noticed, thanks to proximity and size, was a slightly rounded hulking shape sitting just against the right wall. Though I'd pushed Isobu's chakra back for the sake of my endurance not being overridden by dependence on Tailed Beast chakra, I could still make out a huge fishman in the cell, dressed in a red kimono and covered from shoulders to webbed feet in heavy chains. He looked back at me, more surprised than hostile despite the blood still seeping down his face, and I dismissed his presence entirely as a concern.

"Ace," Luffy repeated, hanging onto the bars of the cell though I could see his muscles tremble from touching sea prism stone directly. "Ace, I found you!"

Ace looked up when I was still a bit out of view, and my eyes immediately itched as I reflexively pulled on Isobu's chakra even more than before.

As much as I'd overused the phrase recently, my initial assessment was still that Ace looked like hell. His ankles and wrists were chained, using the same battleship-grade chains that were on the fishman. His arms had been pulled back into what was possibly the least comfortable orientation possible, with only two links between his wrists and the wall. Either a head or shoulder-wound (or both) left blood dripping down and onto the floor, pooling around his legs.

My hand found the bar that ran across the cell, about at waist height, and I closed my fingers around it. I met the fishman's eyes again, and he didn't flinch.

Good for him.

"Luffy… What are you doing here?" Ace asked, his voice still far weaker than I was used to.
"We're here to rescue you!" Luffy replied, grinning widely. "Even if we had to fight the entire prison!"

"…What? Who's 'we'?"

Ace's voice still sounded off, from disuse or pain. But I couldn't do anything about that from the outside of the cell, and neither could Luffy.

"We brought everyone!" Luffy said, while I kept silent.

I elected to focus instead on how to break into a sea prism stone cage without hurting any of the occupants. I'd gotten more practice suppressing both my chakra and Isobu's in the last few months than I had in the past ten years before that. Tightening my control and preventing our power from just radiating outward and being wasted had never been so important before now.

This far, and no farther. I refuse to lose control.

I walked slowly forward along the front of the cell, my hand encased in bubbling orange-red energy and then shifting to deep blood-red as Isobu's chakra cloaked my arm to my shoulder and didn't let go. I dragged my hand along the cage as I went, my new scales making faint scraping sounds.

"Kei?" I heard Ace ask, but it was as though his voice was coming from underwater. Tone and pitch warped into nearly meaningless data.

"Luffy, stand back."

As soon as he obeyed my Isobu-enhanced voice, the way was open. I yanked on what I could still manage of the V2 cloak, barely keeping it away from my head and left shoulder while the rest of it anchored me to the floor for balance. And my hand tightened on a joint between the vertical and horizontal sea prism stone bars, just to the left of the door's hinges.

Sea prism stone didn't have any give, and I'd never figured out if it was just something coating metal or if it was magic in its own right. Or if my coral could mimic its most useful properties. But when practically percolating in rage and Isobu's chakra, all that really mattered was that the stone around it wasn't strong enough to hang on.

The granite became powder. The front of the cage was liberated from its anchor points. I staggered for a second as the intact sea prism stone and its weight shifted my center of balance on the backswing.

Then I planted my back foot and twisted, flinging the entire setup at the massive cell across the way. The thunderous crash sent a shockwave across the prison that was followed by unnerving silence from the nearest fifteen or so cells. The rest hadn't been close enough to see what had happened, and were demanding answers in increasingly anxious voices. Even the occupants of the aforementioned cell seemed to have flinched back, though the sea prism stone structure wasn't large enough to threaten them.

"What happened?" demanded someone from the next cell, whose request went ignored.

I powered down to nothing again, careful to pull all of my and Isobu's chakra back inside my coils and tamp down on any last-second flares, then followed Luffy into the cell as the dust settled.

"ACE!" Luffy shouted joyfully, and latched onto his brother like a limpet. He was at least careful to avoid open wounds, but Ace still let out a tiny gasp of pain when Luffy's all-encompassing hug
put pressure on his ribs. "Ah! You're hurt. And this is..." Luffy touched the chains, frowning, and then withdrew his hands with a grunt and a *snap* as they returned to normal shape. "It's that sea-stone stuff. And we don't have a key for this one."

"Hah," Ace managed, though his breathing hadn't evened out again. There was a mass of bruising along his ribs and stomach that I eyed with deep suspicion, but there was nothing any of us could do about it for now. "Nothing but the best for me."

"It's not a good look for you," I remarked quietly, while inspecting one of the chain-ports. I still wasn't sure why this much sea prism stone was being used in a set of chains when no one native to this world could break *any* amount of it, but I didn't intend to break this. Didn't need to. "Let's get you out of here."

I could feel Ace's eyes on me, and I didn't know if I wanted to meet them.

"Kei?" Ace asked, and I found myself looking down toward his face. From his end, the angle looked somewhat uncomfortable, but I was only focusing on that so I didn't think of any head wounds Ace might have had that were definitely going untreated down here. And the second he saw my glowing Isobu-like eyes, he went on, "I... I thought you were dead. Is Yugito...?"

"All of us are alive and well," I replied. I flicked my gaze pointedly toward the ceiling, then said in a somewhat wry voice, "Yugito and Utakata are helping cause trouble on the upper levels. And the others are all over the place."

Ace's shoulders sagged in relief. "That's..."

"A miracle?" the fishman in the other corner prompted, now openly amused.

"Already gave you credit for that one," Ace told him, while I reached down to poke him in the forehead. "What?"

"Introductions," I said, before turning my attention back to the shackle. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh," Ace said, though the idea still seemed to take a second or two to percolate. He'd had a lot of shocks in the past week, so I didn't blame him. "Luffy, Kei, that's Jinbe. Jinbe, these two are Luffy and Kei."

I gave a little nod toward the just-identified Jinbe, then got to work puzzling over the actual problem.

Naruto, being an enterprising young man with more than a handful of horrible role models (of which I was just one), was a fair hand with a set of lockpicks. He could even make his own. Upon realizing that our mission was to break someone out of prison, he presented Yugito, Utakata, and me with our own sets after a day or two of work. Yugito had handed hers off to Nami while citing her nails as the ultimate skeleton key, much to the confusion of the Straw Hats' navigator, but I still had mine.

The locks themselves couldn't even pretend to be any *good*. Mass-production was the only way to have enough sea prism stone cuffs for all the inmates, and I'd mastered all of the Academy's lessons on sneaky skills long ago. Hell, that was half the reason that shinobi villages all had more exotic security methods than mere mechanical locks. I considered it a form of environmental pressure toward more and more specialized adaptations.

In short order, the cuff popped open and Ace was able to relax his left shoulder for the first time since being effectively nailed to the wall. I didn't know how long that had been, but it was already
"Next one," Ace suggested, even as Luffy grabbed his forearm and started inspecting him for any hidden injuries that the angle hadn't made obvious. Besides his wrist being rubbed raw, anyway.

"Chopper's gonna need to look at this, Ace," Luffy said, while I stepped around him to follow through on the request. "He's gonna be the best doctor in the world, and Sunny has a lot of stuff to help him with that."

"I've had worse," Ace scoffed, but without much feeling. Instead, he reached forward with his free arm and hugged Luffy around his skinnier shoulders. "How'd you even end up down here, Luffy?"

"We knocked the front door down and started fighting everyone," Luffy said, in a tone that made the unspoken "duh" louder than he could have otherwise. He hugged Ace back, careful not to touch any injuries this time. "Our whole crew is here and fighting the whole prison at once. And we're winning!"

Ace gave me an incredulous look over Luffy's shoulder.

I just nodded, and Ace's eyebrows shot toward his hairline when that hit home. His mouth was half-open to protest, but Luffy cut him off with an epic retelling of the descent through Impel Down, hitting most of the highlights I remembered. Thus, I tuned him out.

"—And then Yugi played rock-paper-scissors with Sanji and Zoro—"

"Yugito did? Are we talking about the same person?"

That said, whenever I found the one who'd worked Ace and Jinbe over with a spiked club, I'd spend a bit of time practicing my ability to tear human faces off underlying bone. The skill could still use some polishing.

And then the fourth chain finally fell open, allowing Ace to finally stand up again with his brother's hand still on his arm. After a brief sigh of pure relief, he stepped forward and grabbed me in a quick hug.

"Thanks for coming after me," Ace whispered to the top of my head, before letting go.

I rested one hand against his unbloodied shoulder and spoke softly, with real warmth breaking through my mission persona. "No problem. I know you'd do the same for me."

Though I hope you'll never, ever have to.

The very tips of Ace's ears darkened, and he turned his face away before he said in a slightly choked voice, "Get Jinbe loose, too. Please."

Jinbe had stayed silent and patient the entire time I'd been undoing locks and Luffy had been bouncing in place. And now he inclined his head as far as he could with the chains trapping him against the wall, and said, "Greetings. I'd bow, but I'm a bit tied up at the moment."

"You've got that right," I said, as I checked my lockpicks for integrity once again (ironically enough). "So, what are you in for?"

"Disobeying orders," Jinbe replied, shaking his head slightly. "I have to say, it's nice to finally meet the people young Ace has been speaking about so much."
"I hope we made a decent secondhand impression," I said, while inspecting the first lock.

Behind me, the rest of the cell glowed orange as Ace checked to see if he'd shrugged off the sea prism stone's effects.

"You're fire again!" Luffy enthused.

"Yep!"

"Your first impression was most impressive, too. Most people wouldn't be willing or able to come this far into Impel Down, to say nothing of demolishing the front of this cage," Jinbe said, as I undid the lock for his left wrist cuff. "Did Whitebeard send you?"

About that… "I think the closest I got to permission was when his division commanders gave us directions," I admitted, reaching for the next shackle. As I started to twist the tumblers around, I went on quietly, "I'm not a Whitebeard Pirate, so they can't give me orders."

"Sure you aren't," Ace piped up, and I steadfastly ignored him. Free from his shackles, he was clearly feeling better if he could make jokes like that. "Didn't you get that jacket from Izo?"

Unbeknownst to me, yes.

"I see. Whichever it is, thank you." Jinbe's wrists didn't have the same marks as Ace's did. How long had he been down here? Or was it a question of fishmen having different anatomy than humans did? "With any luck, the World Government won't get the war they've been pushing for."

"A war… Oh, because of Captain Whitebeard." When the first ankle cuff finally popped open, I sat back for a second so Jinbe could flex his joints, and looked over my shoulder.

Ace had Luffy in a headlock, of course. Insofar as it mattered to a boy entirely made of rubber.

"That young man is one of Whitebeard's sons," Jinbe explained patiently as I got to work on the last cuff. Perhaps he thought I hadn't displayed enough knowledge with my remark. "I know the old captain very well. There's no way he wouldn't retaliate for what the World Government has done to one of his children, no matter the risk." He glanced up at the ceiling of the cell—or what remained of it—and sighed. "If I'd been faster, I could have done more than just protest being called to fight under the World Government's banner."

"Then you'd be dead instead of down here with us, Jinbe," Ace reminded him. When I turned to give him my best blank expression, he added, "Jinbe's the only half-decent Warlord out there. The two of us fought for five days straight and we're both still here. Can't expect that out of any of the others."

"...Huh," I said, and then the last cuff clanked to the floor. I mentally revised what "endurance" meant to these people once again, because I was fairly sure the Third Raikage died of chakra exhaustion after three days.

"A Warlord? Really?" Luffy asked, darting over to Jinbe as the fishman finally got to his feet as well. "I fought two Warlords. Am I gonna have to fight you?"

"No, Straw Hat," Jinbe replied.

Luffy nodded seriously. "That's good, then."

"I'm surprised you didn't notice our neighbor, Luffy," Ace said, idly jabbing a finger over his
shoulder. "But then, Croc's been pretty quiet…"

"Eh?! Crocodile's here?" Luffy immediately stretched his neck out like…uh, some animal that didn't exist, peering around the corner of the cell and into the next one. Then the rest of him followed.

Ace trailed along afterward, waving at the unseen cell block neighbor. "Hey, Croc, what were you saying earlier about silver medalists? 'Cause to me it looks like you're coming up short all over again."

There was a metallic clang as something slammed into the sea prism stone front of the cage, while Luffy complained about Crocodile shouting at them.

I just sighed, but Jinbe's wry smile kept me from making it too heartfelt. It still worried me a little that there was blood running down his head, but I'd never been able to restock on medical supplies. I'd even forgotten to ask Chopper.

Still, our little group made it out into the main floor without anything being destroyed. The random chatter from the inmates was beginning to form a dull background roar as multiple parties demanded to know what the hell had happened, and one of the voices from that mess had been the one in the next cell.

I strode around the corner to inspect the neighboring jailbird.

Crocodile, the former Warlord that Luffy had faced in Alabasta, turned out to be the kind of man I would have pegged as a misplaced gangster. He had a scar wider than Iruka's running across his grayish face, and the scowling mouth below it was nearly as broad. While he wore the striped Impel Down uniform like almost everyone else down here, his ankles and wrists were chained together with enough links to still allow him to garrote someone with them, in a massive security oversight. Sure, one hand was a golden prosthetic hook rather than a flesh-and-blood appendage, but that was just window dressing.

I got a thoroughly assessing look in return, as though he viewed me as a threat despite being almost two and a half feet shorter and apparently unarmed.

Smart man.

"You're the brains of this operation, aren't you?" Crocodile asked, but it wasn't much of a question from his tone.

"I also go by Kei," I responded, staring back. "Did you want something?"

"Straight to the point, huh?" A faintly amused smile spread across his face again. "Fine then. I won't mince words." He lifted his hand and his hook, palm up. "Let me out of here. I'll make it worth your while."

"And what do I need from you?" I asked in a mild voice, only briefly glancing at the cuff around his right wrist. Looked like another mass-produced job, which wouldn't take any time at all to open.

"You aren't seriously considering this, are you?" Ace demanded, one hand landing heavily on my shoulder. "Kei, he's the type who'd go after Pops if we gave him half a chance."

Luffy skipped the intermediate point and just shouted directly at Crocodile. "Don't screw with us! You're that bastard who tore up Vivi's whole country!"
I glanced at Jinbe, who was the only person who hadn't said anything thus far, and he asked, "What are you thinking, Kei?" The lack of accusation in his tone was refreshing, really.

"I'm past anything to do with Alabasta, Straw Hat. It's old news," Crocodile told Luffy, looking bored. Then his gaze snapped back to me. "I could open a hole in the ceiling for our escape. You do need to get out, don't you?"

"Pass," I said flatly. While Crocodile's expression turned into a faint frown, which was the only indication he was at all taken aback by the remark, I elaborated a bit, "I already have an exit plan that doesn't depend on a Warlord. Try again."

"It sounds like you want to be convinced," Crocodile commented, radiating an aura of pure smug. Ace bristled, flames crawling along his shoulders in a protective surge. "She's one of us, Croc, not —"

"I just ripped a sea prism stone cage apart bare-handed, and prior to that, I helped organize an invasion of Impel Down to rescue a Whitebeard," I reminded everyone, somewhat annoyed. To Crocodile, I just said, "I don't have a good record with Warlords, either. I'm not sure I shouldn't add to it."

"Oh? Do tell." Crocodile's expression was a bit more cautious. Sea prism stone was supposed to be the next best thing to indestructible, and he didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know that trivializing Impel Down's most comprehensive security measure was not supposed to happen. Particularly not casually.

And besides that, he was quick enough on the uptake to know when he was playing with fire in a literal and figurative sense, even without Ace imitating a furnace at my side. To my front and left, Luffy made a show of cracking his knuckles, but in both cases I was sure they weren't necessary for Croc to get the message.

But just for a final touch, my eyes glowed harshly enough to supplement the lamps. "The last Warlord to cross me vanished without a trace."

"Kei—" Ace began, before his brain caught up with his mouth and his realization quieted him. I didn't want to discuss what had happened with Teach just yet, so I let him draw whatever conclusions he liked. I needed my mission persona too much to give an inch.

"Without a trace, hm… You must have gotten all of him, then. His crew and…" Crocodile paused as he weighed his options, then said, "But perhaps the World Government will find my Devil Fruit after you leave me to die, like they've probably found his."

What? "…I don't follow. You already ate it."

"Didn't you know?" Crocodile leaned forward, so his face was nearly even with mine. "Devil Fruits reincarnate when the user dies. Usually onto the nearest fruit of the same type. The World Government has a grove or two for catching them."

So Teach's Yami Yami no Mi could be…

My eye-glow died down as I turned to my resident expert on Devil Fruits. "Ace, is that true?"

Ace grimaced, but he nodded anyway. "Yeah, it is. Croc's Devil Fruit could end up anywhere."

I returned my attention to Crocodile. "Aside from your rap sheet and the powers from the Suna
Suna no Mi, what do you have to offer me?"

Inwardly, however, I was in a much less composed mood. *Motherfucker. I need to track down the Yami Yami no Mi now. I hope Thatch remembers what kind of fruit it was…*

**This is similar to what happens when a jinchūriki is killed. Only Devil Fruits have no will of their own.**

*And it's probably instantaneous…*

"Hm…" Crocodile tilted his head slowly to one side. "Though the idea of taking Whitebeard's head still appeals to me, you've made your position clear enough. You have my full cooperation as long as the situation is… Unresolved. A war sounds like a good use of my power in the meantime." He grinned. "Or maybe ten years of World Government information works a bit better for a woman like you?"

*If it did, I wouldn't still be sitting on a goddamn filing cabinet full of the stuff. Ivankov will make more use of both than I ever will, but even so… If that was the strongest card Crocodile could think of, then this was pointless. "Bye, then."*

"Where are you going?" Crocodile demanded, the veneer of politeness shattering entirely. He tried and failed to loom over me, growling, "Answer me!"

"You're hostile to the Whitebeard Pirates, you don't have anything to offer the breakout effort that we can't pull off ourselves, I don't need information, and I don't trust you," I replied, then turned to Ace and his widening grin of slightly evil glee.

"What?" he asked defensively under my gaze, while Crocodile sputtered in impotent rage. "I knew you'd come through."

"This isn't the end of this!" Croc snarled, while we darted away and into the darkness of Level Six. "I can leave any time I—"

Whatever. Not our problem.

"Kei," Ace asked, while we made our way past more familiar cells, "is that my hat?"

"Here," I said, and unhooked the hat from around my neck. I held it out. "I got your holster too. And the dagger."

Ace took the hat, immediately situating it back in its rightful spot on his head. And then he winced at the contact with whatever scalp injuries he'd acquired, settling for hanging it by its cord like I'd been doing. As soon as he did, I handed over the other two items immediately.

I could see a hundred questions forming behind Ace's eyes from this reminder, and we really didn't have time for them. Especially when Isobu's subsonic growl finally echoed through my mind.

*Status update*, I thought, bringing my hand to my temple. Distantly, I heard myself say, "Sorry, Ace, hang on a second."

**Yugito has stopped fighting, Isobu began, and begun organizing a mass egress to Level Two.**

*What changed?*

She has subdued the level, and having as many bodies in her cult as she does will make it
difficult for the remaining guards to pinpoint any one escapee. Isobu paused for a split second, then added, Likewise, Gaara has secured Level One and Fū's group finished with Level Two. Level Four belongs to us by default, as does Five—though through the Revolutionaries. Each position is asking for the next step in the plan.

Then it's time to leave. We've accomplished our mission from this end. All that's left is the loose ends. I snapped my fingers, drawing the group's attention back to me. I didn't think Ace's had ever left.

"You spaced out again," he said, crossing his arms over his chest despite his injuries. "Isobu?"

I nodded. "All of the teams have accomplished their goals. We're done here."

"We need to get Iva and Bon-Bon and everyone else out, though," Luffy put in. "Wasabi doesn't get to sink this place with us still in here!"

I would not, Isobu corrected, though no one else could hear him. Though I will certainly sink this place after you leave.

That is so not the point. Regardless, I gave the order that our friends had been waiting on. Transmit to all clones: We're leaving. I don't care how many tagalongs we have, but have Saiken keep at least one battleship for the Marines. And find a snail.

May I ask why?

We're going to need some way to deal with the public fallout. Might as well be on our terms.

Some of the prisoners on Level Six may have shouted for us to let them out of their cells. But we were already running.

While Luffy had no head for directions, the rest of us could follow the trail of damage Luffy and I left in our wake the first time through, as though they were breadcrumbs. As we ran, I made sure to watch Ace and Jinbe for any sign of weakness, but either they were too stubborn to let anything show or they really hadn't been badly hurt. The hecklers from before tried to start up again, but a massive burst of Ace's fire silenced the more cowardly of them, and scorched the rest into screaming.

When I looked askance at him, he just said, "They need to watch their mouths."

I rolled my eyes. Everyone down here would die anyway, so I didn't see the point.

We reached the cell Luffy and I had breached in order to enter Level Six, and Inazuma was there waiting for us. As we climbed over the blasted stone and maybe the corpse we'd left behind earlier, he said, "Queen Ivankov has completed the evacuation of Level Five-Point-Five."

"Then let's GOOOO!" Luffy cheered as he bounced forward, which kept Ace from reflexively immolating Inazuma for popping up out of nowhere.

Once we were through the hole, I stopped exactly long enough to watch Inazuma rearrange the cell wall we'd busted through, with his strange scissor powers, and then we were off. While the evidence of our passage was still obvious on the outside, Inazuma was still obligated to make some attempt at stealth. Unlike the rest of us, apparently.

I approved.
Ivankov has something interesting to report regarding Crocodile. It turns out that he did, in fact, have blackmail on your new "friend," though it hardly matters now, Isobu said, as we dashed through the sewers and crawl-spaces to Level Five. And Utakata says he will be leaving Impel Down immediately to limit the chances of exposing the group to Magellan's poisons. The sea should be able to dilute them.

And the lake of blood won't work. As the first traces of cold started leaking through the walls, I just sighed internally, then said, Tell him to go ahead. The rest of us will be fine.

There will be a delay around the Level Five-slash-Four staircase, though. Naruto only just got the new plan and is trying to herd the group with Shadow Clones.

Acceptable, I thought, then glanced toward the front of our pack of escapees where Inazuma led the way. Ivankov's people know ways to all the other levels through the tunnels. Check and see if we can't find a way to get out while avoiding Level Four and the contamination.

Isobu went silent, conferring with his clones, the people with his clones, and his fellow Tailed Beasts. I didn't interrupt, concentrating instead on the people running alongside me in the immediate area.

"How did you even get here?" Ace asked Luffy, between somewhat-uneven breaths.

I made a mental note to have Chopper and Ivankov check on him if I could, because I sure as hell couldn't do anything.

"Shumai heard from Wasabi that you got caught and stuck in here, so Coconut picked up Sunny and we flew all the way here from, um…" Luffy paused, clearly not certain of the name of his crew's last populated location. "Shabondy? Salisbury? The bubble place!"

"Sabaody?" Ace guessed. When Luffy nodded, he said, "That's a long way from here. And you flew?"

"Yeah! Coconut has these big orange wings!" Luffy said, which didn't help.

Ace looked at me for confirmation and in basically total confusion.

"'Wasabi' is what he calls Isobu," I said, holding my hands up helplessly. "And I'm pretty sure 'Coconut' is Chōmei, the Seven-Tails."

"He's big and green!" Luffy added. "And blue and orange, and he says 'lucky' a lot."

"And he's a rhinoceros beetle the size of Isobu," I put in, when Ace looked even more confused and Jinbe seemed like he wanted to ask a question. Then Ace's eyes widened. "Yeah. He's the partner to 'Silkworm' Fū, who's been on Luffy's crew since…" I trailed off uncertainly.

"We went to a Sky Island and that Enel bastard was throwing lightning at Coconut all the time, and he was a jerk and made Conis cry," Luffy explained, which was no help at all. "So I beat him up."

"Since then," I concluded, though that really sounded like an adventure I needed to hear about. Isobu had mentioned a Sky Island before, but it still seemed impossible.

"And Hatchan and Hatchan's friend met us right before the bubble island, and we had to break up a slave auction," Luffy went on, while Ace and Jinbe looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "One of those Celestial Dragons tried to buy Camie and shot Hatchan, so I beat him up, too."
Rayleigh was looking after them when we left."

Ace choked, Jinbe stared, and I could have sworn that Inazuma flashed a smile for a split second. Luffy just grinned, oblivious to everyone else's reactions.

"So, Kizaru was there because he was chasing you?" I asked, for clarity's sake. "I'd wondered why Shukaku was dealing with an admiral at all, but since I think Sabaody and Marineford are pretty close…"

"Maybe!" Luffy didn't seem bothered, at least. Behind him, Ace kinda looked like he wanted to literally twist his brother into a knot and wrap him in bubble wrap for the rest of his life. "Shumai said he'd distract the monkey guy so we could get away, and Gaara said he's still there when I asked last time. He might still be there when we get back!"

"Like hell you're going back there!" Ace snapped, and for a second I was almost certain he would strangle Luffy before we got out of Impel Down.

**Akainu has changed heading**, Isobu reported, cutting across my thoughts like a sword. **Marineford is abandoning the fight against Shukaku in favor of stopping a mass breakout from Impel Down.**

"Took them long enough," I said, as the rest of my group wondered who the hell I was talking to. Therefore, I repeated Isobu's words for their benefit.

"Akainu..." Jinbe's teeth gave him a ferocious scowl, and he made use of that gift. Thankfully, he saved it for the Marine instead of wondering who Isobu was or how I could contact him. "So the World Government has finally decided to cut their losses."

I grimaced at the thought of the impending shitstorm, but said to Jinbe, "There's a plan in place to confront Akainu if we have to."

**Twelve percent of a plan is not a plan.**

*Five Tailed Beasts is, though.* And a giant inoperable gate sitting squarely in his way would be sure to help.

…**You are not wrong, at least while Saiken is among us.**

"And probably Kizaru, if they're giving up on fighting at Sabaody," Ace guessed, while Inazuma checked our way forward and briefly drifted out of sight. "Shukaku probably can't swim any better than before, so if the Marines are really heading here, he's stuck."

"What's that mean?" Luffy asked, blinking.

"It means we chose a good time to leave." I bit the edge of my thumb, thinking quickly. "Even if the Marines can get past the Gate of Justice—which is iffy—they're not getting through the squad posted outside. Still, they are all Logia users, right?"

Inazuma, having reappeared, nodded.

"So I'm thinking we're gonna caught up in a battle of long-range bombardment at best, and Impel Down isn't as solid as an island," I concluded grimly.

"Too bad for them that we're getting out whether they want us to or not," Ace said. "Preferably *before* they get here."
Showtime, then. Above our heads, chakra signatures re-positioned themselves well outside of Impel Down. I felt Fū land where Chōmei was hovering, rather than anywhere near the last location of the Thousand Sunny, but Gaara was in the right spot. Utakata was closer to the Gate of Justice, while Yugito was making her way through the prison the long way.

**Naruto is gathering the Revolutionaries for a single trip. He has enough clones to link the entire group together.** Isobu flicked a tail, and Yang Kurama's chakra started to move in response. **They will land on Yang Kurama's back, but he wants them on the battleships as quickly as possible. I will go make sure they do not all drown.**

_Good_, I thought, just as Naruto's chakra vanished from Level Five with a _pop_. I waited for a tense ten-count, just to be sure everyone had landed, then asked, _And a head count?_

**We have everyone we care about, and some we do not.** Isobu's massive chakra shot toward the surface of the ocean, abandoning the five of us just for a second to get a better position. We'd leave the instant I was sure half my group wouldn't instantly drown.

Then I finally directed my attention to my companions. "We're the last ones. Everyone, you'll need to be in contact with me for this to work."

Ace, who had actually been through this process before, paled noticeably. "This shit again?"

"Yes, because it's the fastest way out. No more stairs or running, just us on the outside of this pit." I held my hand out more insistently. "Hurry up."

Luffy latched onto me immediately like a rubbery limpet, and Jinbe rested one massive hand on my shoulder. Inazuma hesitated, then grabbed my other hand.

Ace, however, took a deep breath. Then another. Jeez, was this process really that unpleasant? "… I'm ready."

I quirked one eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Hell no," Ace said, shuddering theatrically for a second. Then he met my eyes, a weak smile on his face. "But I trust you." With that, he grabbed Luffy's flailing arm in one hand and mine with the other.

I grinned.

**Reverse Summoning Jutsu.**

Chapter End Notes

I wrestled with the idea that the characters could take Croc with them, but in the end it came down to in-character pragmatism over a potential time bomb of a teammate. Crocodile was never gonna contribute that much to this version of the Impel Down Arc anyway, especially with Gaara right there.

Goodness gracious I hope everyone is still in character during all this. I keep agonizing over minor sentences and one-liners and flailing at my keyboard.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Observe the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, everyone! Work kicked my ass this week, so the required edits weren't completed until like twenty minutes ago.

The title from this chapter is "Odds Are" by Barenaked Ladies, because it's an uptempo song with dark lyrics. Fun times.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isobu's Reverse Summoning Jutsu took us outside of the prison in a single mind-bending leap through space-time, and the four of us in my group landed in his hand some fifty feet away from the front gates of Impel Down. Isobu, it seemed, had managed to not just get to the surface in time to accommodate us, but also put himself in the best position to help anyone still stuck in the prison. Sure, he probably didn't care about most of them, but Gaara was already making a sand bridge stretching from the Thousand Sunny back toward the prison. Seemed like Chōmei had managed to get the ship clear after all.

There were no takers, but that was a minor detail. I could see Fū flying Franky and Robin back over to their ship, so the situation was proceeding as planned.

"The sun is much brighter after so much time spent in the dark," Jinbe commented, leaning back to take in the bright, clear sky. This happened to put his back in contact with Isobu's thumb, but neither party minded much.

He was probably the only person under twenty feet tall who was that composed, and not just because of the giant monsters.

I didn't have a particularly close view of anyone except Inazuma, Jinbe, Luffy, and Ace from my vantage point on Isobu's upturned, armored palm, but I couldn't imagine that anyone's physiology had taken the altitude change and space-time ninjutsu all that well. Add in the possibility of chakra poisoning because the Tailed Beasts had been the ones to call two of our larger constituent groups to the surface, and you got a bit of a mess.

"Disgusting! I will throw all of you into the ocean!" Yang Kurama roared in the not-so-great distance.

Like I said.

Ace leaned over the gap between Isobu's thumb and forefinger and dry-heaved, while Luffy just drooped across the rest of Isobu's fingers and made miserable noises while his body took on the
approximate consistency of an overcooked noodle. Luffy's reaction was familiar if I pretended he wasn't made of rubber, but Ace's ragged, empty coughing told me that the guards—and Teach before them—hadn't bothered to feed him.

I bit the inside of my cheek and tried to rouse Luffy, stowing rage-filled thoughts for later.

"That sucked exactly as much as last time," Ace groaned at last, rolling until he was flat on his back in the middle of Isobu's palm, with Luffy draped across his stomach a second later.

His brother looked just as miserable, his eyes almost rolled up in his head. "Uuuuugh. Make everything stop spinning…"

"Queen Ivankov would be our best bet to deal with this issue," Inazuma said quietly, pushing his sunglasses more firmly onto his face. "Unless you had another option?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't bring any candied ginger. We didn't stop at any islands," I admitted, slumped against Isobu's bent pinky. "Not since Water 7."

After the week I'd had, where a lack of sleep and inconsistent food intake due to stress marked the majority of the experience, I wasn't feeling all that great myself. I'd be able to fight, but Sensei would've probably told me to sit out a mission if I looked like this back home. Rin definitely would have dragged me to a clinic session to make sure I hadn't caught some kind of horrendous disease. In both cases, I'd deserve that concern and need to take it on the chin. Here, I couldn't.

Nonetheless, it was honestly amazing that I'd been able to snap all of the pieces back together and form a coherent battle plan out of the mess. And carry it out.

**Are you well, Kei?** Isobu asked in a tiny whisper of his real voice.

"I… I think I'm down to sixty to seventy percent of where I should be," I admitted, getting to my feet again with only the slightest stumble in my step. "But I can still fight if I have to. I need to check on everyone who can't."

The lines around Isobu's eye deepened as he mimicked the eye-smile Kakashi was really more known for, but Isobu couldn't do it the way humans did with his mouth for more than a few reasons. **Good.** In a more brisk tone, he added, **We have some stragglers in the prison who cannot seem to decide if they want to come with us or die. They likely find our features… intimidating. You should assist Yugito in forcing them to make a decision.**

I shaded my eyes and peered off toward the prison, where a crowd had gathered. From the stripes, most of the people in the milling-around camp were the inmates we had sort of rescued as collateral…er, something. There had to be a term for the opposite of collateral damage, but I was too keyed up from adrenaline to think of it.

"Fringe benefit?" Isobu guessed. He huffed, nearly blowing all four of us off his hand, then said, **Though we hardly need this many extra mouths to feed. And there is no guarantee they are any more trustworthy than Crocodile.**

"Wasabiiii," Luffy whined, before I could take off toward my new interim goal, "why're you talking without using your mouth? None of us can hear you when you do that!"

Isobu's eye narrowed. **You do like having eardrums, correct?**

"Luffy, don't push him," Ace said, still lying down. He had his hat over his face in an attempt to
"Can you understand him?" Jinbe asked, looking from us to the giant face still staring down at us.

"If he bothers to talk, sure," Ace responded, while Isobu made a scoffing noise. "Otherwise, he just talks to Kei and uses her as a mouthpiece."

**I will move this group to the Sunny**, Isobu said, before I could ask. We weren't accomplishing anything like this.

I gave my little group a last considering glance—and though Jinbe looked a bit shaken by the realization that three of us were communicating with Isobu, Inazuma, Luffy, and Ace were fine—then leapt down to the calm sea from Isobu's hand. Once again, people needed to play to their strengths, and mine was apparently "being scary." As soon as I was on the water, Isobu swept his three tails in an arc and turned toward the Straw Hats' ship.

The Calm Belt really did deserve its name, because the water was no more dangerous than any lake in Konoha as I ran across. Sure, Sea Kings were probably a hazard for normal people, but Isobu had a way of being… strict with them that tended to dissuade repeat offenders. And first offenders. And theoretical ones, too.

I made it to the front gates of Impel Down without so much as a vague sign of any problems. In fact, as I got closer, I started to hear the sounds of…cheering?

"Get out of my way, dammit!" Yugito yowled, from somewhere among the thirty-strong throng.

The next thing any of us knew, the prisoners had hoisted Yugito up into an impromptu crowd surfing session. Given that I'd never attended a concert in either lifetime, and due to Isobu's lack of experience with "celebrity" as both a word and a concept in any non-ninja sense, it wasn't that surprising he'd identified Yugito's followers as a cult. Upon actually seeing their scruffy, joyous features and the general cheer, the revised word that would do a better job to explain their behavior was "groupies."

I leaned against a slightly scorched part of the inner wall, unsure if I was allowed to interfere. On one hand, there was very little chance anyone in that crowd could pose a threat to Yugito. On the other… Well, perhaps this was a bit embarrassing?

"You've saved us all, Yugi-baby!" Sanji cheered, while the other resident kunoichi turned steadily redder. He was in a full swoon, minus the optional detail of passing out artistically.

"We're free!"

"Thank you so much!"

"You truly are a goddess among women!"

"Did you see what she did to that cow-bastard?!"

"Hip-hip, hooray!"

"Put me down already!" Yugito's foot met someone's face, and a man collapsed in a brief burst of blood from a crushed nose.

...Seemed like she was handling things all right. Maybe I ought to stay back to avoid the inevitable beatdown?
"Her anger is awe-inspiring!" Dammit, Sanji. "She could crush me under her heel anytime!"

"Damn straight!"

"Oh, I get it! Because she's wearing heels?" Smack. "Ow!"

Double dammit. I reached into my pockets for my small(er) explosive tags, preparing to clear the crowd out before the Admirals showed up in the middle of this improvised parade and killed us all.

_FWOOOOOSH_. In a thick column directly around Yugito, the air exploded into blue-black fire high enough to clear the walls around Impel Down. The force of the sudden pressure change swatted the crowd to the ground as though Matatabi herself had stuck a paw into the mosh pit.

…I missed my cue.

The flames swirled away, leaving Yugito standing in the middle of a circular scorch-mark with only Sanji still on his feet in any sense. Even he was a bit singed, because Yugito's fire jutsu ran on different rules than anything native to this world.

Yugito, on the other hand, strolled forward and into the crowd in a deliberately casual manner. She flexed her fingers as her nails extended as far as a tiger's would, and the crowd parted before her as though she was still aflame. Sanji wavered in her wake, while Yugito reached into the mass of her followers and yanked a man out of the group with her claws in his collar, so she could loom over him. As one of the smaller prisoners, Yugito didn't have to strain in the slightest to manhandle him.

"Cease celebrating this _instant_," Yugito said in a voice as sharp as I'd ever heard from her. Her gleaming eyes shifted from the man's profusely sweating face to mine, over his forehead, as she went on in a more conversational tone, "That is why you are here, right?"

I nodded. "Isobu says your group's the last one out. And Saiken's getting you a ship." I waved a hand, searching for a word and failing to find it, before saying, "And we probably don't want to be here when Impel Down goes boom."

"Very well," Yugito said, and idly dropped the prisoner on his ass. To the group at large, she snapped, "What are you waiting for? Do you _want_ to die?"

Conveniently enough, Saiken _finally_ got the battleship close enough for Yugito's groupies to make their way onboard within a few seconds of stampeding. Enough of them were former pirates that she could leave the ship to them once the initial panic about Saiken was over. When offered the chance to board, Yugito dismissed them with a cool, "I need to speak with Kei. Goddess business."

"Seriously?" I asked, while the pirates waved back to us with handkerchiefs flailing. I didn't even know where they'd gotten them, since most of the appropriate theatrical supplies were in the hands of the Newkamas.

"Not especially," Yugito said, her frigid expression fading. Her brows furrowed as she asked, "How was your section of the mission?"

I shrugged. "It could've been worse. Ace is with Isobu, heading for the _Sunny_, and none of our group got hurt aside from the usual summoning sickness."

"I'm not sure that's what that is," Yugito murmured, eyeing Sanji, who was still next to us. "Incidentally, Sanji, you were helpful."

"For you, Yugi-baby, I'd do anything!" Sanji swooned at the lukewarm compliment.
Yugito wrinkled her nose. "How about you save your breath and never call me that again?" Before Sanji could protest, she added, "Let's just leave before the others become impatient. I could give you a quick lift."

"No need, Yugi—Yugito," Sanji said with only a slight stumble, after taking a long drag on his cigarette. Sanji sank into a brief crouch, then leapt off the path as though he was a born shinobi. I felt the air shift around us, and then Sanji was on an arc toward the just-departed groupie ship.

"...Huh." Yugito tilted her head to one side, looking thoughtful. "That was higher than Level Three's ceiling."

"Maybe," I said, since it wasn't like I'd spent much time there. I reached out and clasped Yugito's shoulder. "You should check in with Ace when you have a chance. I'm not sure he believed me when I said everyone was all right."

Yugito's eyes darted out to sea. And then she vanished in a burst of ninja speed and flame.

At some point, she will realize she does not need to pretend not to care, Isobu said, while I started pacing the length of the gate.

I'm honestly not sure if I should look forward to it or not, I admitted as I planted a total of thirty footprint-laid explosives. I probably only needed fifteen to twenty, but we were all ready to overkill the shit out of this place. What was one more drop in the bucket?

Once I finished, I ran across the waves to the Thousand Sunny to get clear.

Aside from the Straw Hats, there were also a couple of "new" faces in the form of Bon-Bon, Mr. 3 (who hadn't elected to join the Revolutionaries so far), and...a guy with blue hair and a huge red nose. I wasn't sure when he'd shown up, but with more than fifty escapees to keep track of, I elected not to worry about it. Especially while they were all reeling.

Well, except for Naruto, Gaara, Yugito, Fū, and I. While Utakata was nowhere in sight, I could still sense him. I chalked the problem up to chakra systems and shrugged.

Out of all the Straw Hats, Chopper recovered first from being put through the space-time wringer, shaking from head to hoof and making all of his fur poof out. "That was...something." He put a hoof to his forehead, then staggered to the side of the ship. Isobu lurked just off the bow, his mostly-underwater form utterly dwarfing the Sunny and indeed, every other ship. "Kei, did you notice any symptoms after that...space-time displacement?"

I ran a hand through my hair and nodded to Chopper, because this was entirely too much for one day. Or week. Or fucking month. Better that someone else do the thinking for a bit. "For me, my ears popped thanks to the pressure change. That's it."

Chopper nodded to himself. "Then maybe the altitude difference is what's causing this."

"Kei-girl, I'm told you have some idea what is affecting everyone?" Ivankov called down from the battleship on our other side, while Isobu dove back underwater again.

"It's probably something called chakra poisoning." I shouted back, picking my way across the deck and avoiding the sprawled-out Straw Hats. "Or at least I think it is. The energy I use causes symptoms similar to motion sickness at low intensity."

Ivankov tapped his worryingly-pointy fingers against his chin, then leapt down to the Sunny's deck.
from the battleship despite the shouts of protest from the other Newkama residents (or at least those who had recovered). As he did, I belatedly realized that his fingers had transformed into hypodermic needle-points. And that his head had somehow gotten proportionately even bigger, though he was still the same height.

"And what does it do at high intensity?" Ivankov asked, while I backed up a step or two to give him some room.

"If I start doing the glowy-eyes thing, I can melt human flesh at a touch," I told him. I scratched the back of my neck while Ivankov produced the largest thoughtful frown I had ever seen. "Bon-Bon says you're a miracle worker, and between your Devil Fruit power and your intelligence, I'm sure you have a better idea of what's happening than I do."

"Oh, you're adorable when you think you can flatter me into helping," Ivankov replied, patting my head like I was a particularly clever dog. "Lucky for you and all of these pirates, you're already doing more than I can repay by breaking Impel Down."

"Don't you mean breaking into Impel Down?" Chopper asked, as his crewmates started to rouse themselves.

"Not…quite," I mumbled, a little embarrassed of my vehemence in hindsight. While I still didn't have any problem with dropping as many explosives as I could make into Level Six, this was going to mean a lot of deaths. "I'm pretty sure Utakata killed Magellan, even if that wasn't our goal, and Isobu…well, the Tailed Beasts want to make things final."

We will still have plenty of time for all of you to get away, and for the admirals to find the prison sinking. Isobu couldn't smile or smirk or even make most subtle expressions with his somewhat fixed features, but I nonetheless got the impression that he was eagerly anticipating the looks of horror on the Marines' faces.

"Nonetheless, Kei-girl, you're mistaken," Ivankov said, after eying the now-distant prison with a touch of trepidation. "It's called 'the bends,' dear. Or decompression sickness to the medical community at large."

Behind him on the Newkama ship, I swore I saw (the currently female) Inazuma give a little victorious grin.

I paused, my mouth slightly open and one finger extended. Then, sheepishly, I said, "I'll admit I never thought of that."

"I think I'd feel better if I could examine everyone," Chopper said, clicking his hooves together for a second. "It never hurts to be sure."

And then a medical frenzy ensued, because Ivankov's needle-fingers were terrifyingly quick on the draw. They also got results far faster than any ordinary treatment, because Devil Fruit powers were, as always, total bullshit. He made the average medic-nin look like a chump.

Sure, most everyone had needle-marks at the end of it, but at least they weren't going to suffer a random air-clot. Or whatever the technical term was.

I looked around at the deck of the Sunny, as Sanji clambered back to his feet and swayed for a second, then trooped into the depths of the ship and presumably to the kitchen. Zoro, meanwhile, seemed to decide that the best way to solve the problem was by compounding it with alcohol poisoning, and acquired an entire jug of sake that had apparently been pulled from nowhere.
I bit my lip, still not sure if I trusted Ivankov's verdict all the way. Then again, radiation exposure was treated with vodka in some extremely…low-budget areas. Or maybe I was stretching that metaphor too far.

Luffy sat up from the spot where Isobu had presumably dumped the both of them, elbowing Ace in the gut as he did so (“Oof! Luffy!”), and wobbled for a second like a bobblehead. Then he straightened his hat atop his head and said, "Iva, we're gonna run from the admirals. Are you gonna come with us?"

"You can't tow a ship while using the boost," Franky informed Luffy, from the ground. Given that so much of him was metal, I had honestly expected him to suffer a bit _less_ from the chakra poisoning symptoms, but apparently my hypothesis was unfounded. "Especially not a bigger one."

"Uuuuugh, you flashy bastard!" groaned the guy who looked like a clown. Unless my eyes were deceiving me, the guy was literally in _pieces_ on the deck. I half-wanted to ask, but instead just let him talk. "After that crazy trip, you think we're going to be able to stand _another_ flashy plan?"

Luffy blinked. "Eh? Buggy, when did you get here?"

"YOU'RE JUST NOW NOTICING??" demanded the rest of his crew. Gaara did not, because he had slightly more dignity than that, but it appeared that no one else had noticed the stealthy clown. Or cared to point him out.

_That_ idea bothered me about as much as it could, but I'd reached a previously unknown threshold of being _Done_ with things. The idea of a clown ninja couldn't do more than irk me.

"Give me a few seconds to check my charts," Nami said, shoving herself to her feet. She swayed alarmingly, only be caught by a pair of disembodied arms. "Thanks, Robin."

"It was nothing," Robin replied, her actual hands occupied pressing against her temples to stave off the headache and nausea that affected everyone. Still, she pasted a smile to her face. "I'll…I'll join you in a moment, Nami."

"I wouldn't head down yet if I were you," I said, before the Straw Hats could take off. "You'll miss the light show."

I got a couple of stares, including one from the hollow-eyed Brook that was more baffling than anything because he was _still_ a skeleton. Sure, the Straw Hats were used to Tailed Beasts, but I had to imagine that over-reliance on any one crew member felt strange to them. Or maybe all of this was too much high-level crap for them to deal with easily.

**What technical terminology,** Isobu said dryly.

*Give me a break here.*

My gaze skittered off to the side, where Isobu's profile was still lurking ominously beneath us. "The others want to cut loose a bit."

Luffy, surprisingly, grasped my half-articulated thought first. "Oh, I get it! With Coconut—"

**Chōmei,** Isobu corrected silently, surging away from our ride as the Calm Belt began to rumble. **I almost give up on my own name with this human.**

I could feel Saiken and Isobu's chakra at the heart of the storm, pushing the ships we actually cared about (and the one occupied by Marines) away from the soon-to-be ground zero. Yang
Kurama had climbed onto the prison while the rest of us were talking, joining Matatabi and the hovering Chomei in the new target area.

They'd be fine. No one else would.

"—and Wasabi, we can get wind and a current!" Luffy grinned widely, despite still looking a bit pale as the ship shot along the sea at Isobu's direction. While his crew was openly uneasy, he rambled on, "Okay, everyone, let's get everything together—"

And I'd presumed wrong. Luffy didn't know what was going to happen.

Utakata arrived on the Sunny with a splash, landing next to me and cutting off whatever Luffy had been about to say with his entrance. Likewise, Yugito appeared as though from nowhere and leaned against the railing, her eyes on our partners as they sized up their stationary target. Naruto, overhead in the ship's rigging, spoke softly with Gaara and Fū, but they wouldn't miss this view.

Ace's voice reached my ears at the same time his hand landed between me and Yugito. "Kei, what's—?"

One instant, all of the available Tailed Beasts were eying the prison structure like a juicy piece of meat, and then each of them opened their mouths if they had them. All of them formed the signature titanic black spheres in front of their heads, gathering red and blue energy as they sought the correct mix of Yin and Yang chakra. Across the sea, tiny voices shrieked as the pressure changed yet again, and my ears popped as the Tailed Beast Bombs got bigger and bigger as more chakra swirled into the storm of power.

"The Tailed Beast Bomb is the strongest attack they have," I heard myself say as Ace sucked in a breath on reflex. It didn't take a chakra sensor to know that shit was going down.

"Then that's—" Ace began.

Utakata, channeling enough of Saiken's chakra to briefly flare with reddish-orange light, formed a series of water bubble shields over the ships just before the bombs detonated.

The Tailed Beast Bombs made my spiteful little explosive seals look like party favors.

There was no sound at first. Isobu's last shove had moved our group almost ten miles away from Impel Down and out of the Tarai Current's range, so we saw the flash and the expanding sphere of brilliant golden light before either the sound or the impending wave hit us. The shock rippled over our bubble shield, momentarily blotting out the sun as the impact wave crashed over us to no effect.

When we emerged in the light again, it was because the sea was gone. Abandoned fish of a dozen weight classes flopped around, bereft of their defense against gravity, on the ocean floor. Two Sea Kings, a whale or two, sharks of several types… And most of all, the bare stone, sand, silt, and mud that no pirate would have ever have a clear view of again. A huge bowl-shaped crater had been carved out of the sea floor, centered on what used to be Impel Down, the sea still in the process of closing over that wound and the catastrophic pressure bubble from the initial blast. Even the Gate of Justice sat with its base exposed to the air for the first time since its presumed construction.

Aside from the still-hovering Chōmei, all of our partners lounged on the bare seafloor, watching the water rush back in toward them.

"Fuck," Ace whispered, staring wide-eyed at the carnage.
While we were safe in Utakata's Saiken-derived bubble shield, nothing else had been.

The silence lasted long past the moment when the seas were calm again.

Utakata didn't let the shields drop until Saiken rejoined us, towing Yang Kurama and Matatabi in their usual travel bubbles. They popped as easily as mere soap once he decided to stop reinforcing them, all in a row.

"You had Saiken save a battleship for the Marines," Utakata said into the moment of pure shock, clearly not caring. "What did you want to say?"

"At this point, I'm not sure it matters," Yugito replied, turning to look over her shoulder at the stunned pirates, prisoners, and Revolutionaries. The Marines barely factored into things.

We had witnesses now.

By the light of all our burning bridges—

"THE NIGHTMARE IS OVER!"

—Eh?

While I stared in abject confusion, a wild cheer went up among the former Impel Down prisoners, even as the more distant Marines screeched in horror. Gaara and Yugito had both startled badly at that first round of non-explosive noise, unused to positive reinforcement of this kind, while Utakata rubbed his temples and backed up automatically. Fū danced through the air on orange wings, laughing her head off while Naruto dangled from her arms. And as though drawn in by the energy, the visible Straw Hats had joined an impromptu dance party on deck.

"Are they in shock?" Yugito asked, her tone somewhat strangled.

This did not compute. Our team had just killed a fuckton of people—

"Impel Down was hell," Jinbe said, drawing Yugito's attention to him. "To see it destroyed… I imagine some of the people here have been dreaming of that ending for years." He twisted his head a bit to the left, looking toward the Tailed Beasts, then added, "I think those five may find themselves worshipped as the saviors of pirates everywhere."

"We weren't aiming to save pirates everywhere," Yugito replied. She turned to the still-gaping Ace and said in a lower voice, "We only wanted to save one."

Before Ace could pick his jaw up off the deck to respond to Yugito's uncharacteristically heartfelt contribution, Yugito disappeared with the Body Flicker technique and a cloud of chakra smoke. Her chakra fizzed with embarrassment even two floors away, while I bit down on the urge to snicker.

"Cat got your tongue?" I teased.

Ace shut his mouth with a snap, then grumbled, "You need new material."

"So, you're Luffy's big brother?" Naruto asked, while helping the Straw Hats batten down the hatches or something. There were a few naval terms I still didn't understand and didn't dare use aloud for fear of embarrassing everyone. Nevertheless, this unspecified ship task put him in the rigging above Ace's head, and upside-down to boot.
"You got it, kid," Ace said, and then winced as Chopper started applying what smelled like antiseptic to the half-dozen shallow wounds that made Ace look like a murder victim. There was a lot of dried blood. "Naruto, right?"

"Yep! Namikaze Naruto," Naruto replied, still dangling. "And you're the guy Kei-sensei wanted to break out of prison."

"Naruto," I began, and then remembered that it wasn't as though Kushina went by that name here. Or ever. And unlike at home, her clan name was the one that he'd have to worry about handing out. Somewhat lamely, I just waved a hand and he went back to talking.

"That place was freaky," Naruto went on, pulling a frown. "I mean, me and Old Man Yang went to a few different islands for missions and saw a lot of crazy things, but there were all kinds of weird stuff in there in one spot. But once Kei-sensei got us in, it wasn't that tough. Razor plants and indoor deserts are small-time." He twisted and said, "The desert wasn't that bad, though. I told you about that, right, Gaara?"

Some ten feet away, Gaara shrugged. "Alabasta was likely hotter. Even if that heat came from boiling blood."

Naruto nodded. "See? No big deal!"

"Can't argue with confidence like that," Ace agreed, while Naruto bobbed in place. Ace reached out carefully, still mindful of Chopper's work, and poked at Naruto's goggles. "Where'd you get the stylish gear, Naruto?"

Naruto somehow managed to make even shrugging boisterous. "I don't remember the island's name, but they got ordered special since I passed all my tests. It's kinda nice to have something to wear on my forehead again, and they're even orange!"

"Orange is the best," Ace said, and won himself a friend for life.

With one last grin, Naruto flung himself out of the rigging and bounced over to Gaara. Just a little less literally than Luffy would have.

There was a brief moment of silence, filled only by faint background conversation and Luffy's cheerful cackling from the figurehead. And the rush of waves and wind, of course.

"I'm…not sure if I should be more or less worried that you let Luffy come along, or that you let three kids into Impel Down," I said, once he was sure the kids were out of earshot. While Chopper carefully wound bandages around his head, causing him to briefly wince, Ace had a moment to school his thoughts into some kind of order.

"Naruto is the youngest jinchūriki. He's stronger than he seems, and it's my responsibility to look after him," I said, though it wasn't really an explanation. Certainly not a good one. With a sigh, I sat down on the lawn next to Ace and Chopper, balancing my head in one upraised hand. "As for the other two…"

Meanwhile, Gaara and Fū flew Naruto over to the Revolutionaries' ship for a mysterious reason I was willing to bet had something to do with Kuromushi. For all that our factions were all doing different things and had disparate goals, we seemed to get along just fine.

The kids were going to be all right.

"The other two are a part of Luffy's crew," I concluded, as though nothing more needed to be said.
Chopper tied off the bandages, then proceeded to Ace's shoulder and neck.

Ace slowly let his gaze shift from the tiny gaggle of adventurous jinchūriki already making a mess of the Revolutionaries' ship, across the crowded deck of the Thousand Sunny and the Straw Hats at work, and then leaned back to look at Luffy. Then he said, "None of them would let you leave them behind, would they?"

"No," I replied, running my free hand over my face. "I was already heading in, but involving this many people? Saving this many people? Really, any attempt at stealth was doomed the second your brother got involved. And he had the right to make that choice for himself."

"And we had the choice to follow him," Chopper said, pressing one hoof against Ace's tattooed bicep. "Gaara and Fū are Straw Hat Pirates, just like us. We got involved because our captain needed us for once, instead of the other way around."

Ace's gaze softened, perhaps more than it had since Alabasta. "Thanks for looking out for Luffy. You're definitely the best crew for him."

If Chopper hadn't had fur, he would have been blushing. Of that, I was sure. His eyes watered, then he said in a flustered tone, "D-don't think that makes me happy, jerk! We're just doing what any crew would do!"

Ace smiled, but there was a touch of bitterness in it. "Not all of them." He lifted both of his arms, as best he could, and let Chopper reach his ribs. "Anyway, let's finish up here. I've gotta talk to Kei for a bit."

In the end, Chopper diagnosed Ace with internal bruising, a couple of cracked ribs along with a broken one, surface lacerations, and one hell of a near-miss when it came to his neck. This, on top of his Luffy-like metabolism not really getting enough fuel for the past few days, led to Chopper declaring that Ace should rest, dammit. Relatively few people were injured in the escape, and so Chopper moved on to the next patient on his mental roster. Whether he disappeared into the ship to help Sanji or get more supplies, I didn't know.

I just knew that Ace and I needed to talk.

By mutual, silent agreement, we decided not to hold our conversation in the open. Quite aside from the sheer number of people, neither of us were interested in having to rehash everything that had happened over the past week. Especially when the people on this ship were some of the ones most likely to interrupt or introduce tangents—or at least, unrelated ones.

We headed into the Sunny, taking note of how different the ship was from the Going Merry. Far larger, for one, and equipped with everything the Straw Hats wanted or needed. I passed a fully stocked infirmary, dining hall, and several other vital features of a ship like this one, following some unknown urge down the stairs and into the ship proper.

I stopped when I reached a room with dim lighting, more curious than anything. Pushing the door more firmly open revealed a room that, for the purpose of a quiet conversation, was perfect.

It was more of a lounge than anything, with leather seats running around the outside edge of the room like in a sit-down restaurant. There was a fully stocked bar, complete with liquors I couldn't recognize, and the second-brightest glow in the room came from a back-lit aquarium that spanned the entire back wall. A number of fish lurked in it, and a particularly fat one of some variety seemed to have Yugito's name on it.
She sat at one of the chairs at the central column, eying the fish. She gave us both a cursory glance when we entered the room, but turned away rather than sparking up a conversation.

Good enough. She could choose to get involved when she wished.

"So, who talks first?" Ace asked, picking a spot at the bar with as much of a casual air as he could manage when looking like a two-bit mummy. It might've worked if his eyes weren't a bit wild around the edges. "Do I talk first, or…?"

"I'm sorry," I said, ignoring Ace's nervous rambling. It was the least I could do.

"Wha—?" I appeared to have stumped him. His eyebrows drew together, then he asked in utter bafflement, "The hell are you apologizing for?"

"Banaro, mainly," I admitted, fixing my gaze on the available bottles. I couldn't get drunk, or even be affected by alcohol, but I liked looking at the designs.

A flicker of motion out of the corner of my eye drew my attention back to Ace, who'd flung his less-injured arm over his face. "You can't be serious."

"Of course I am," I told him, drawing one knee up to my chest and draping my arm across it. "That battle went from 'cakewalk' to 'catastrophe,' and I didn't react in time. After Yugito had to retreat, I was your only backup on the island."

I felt Yugito's chakra coil in on itself, and when I let my gaze shift for a second, she was looking even more pointedly at the fish.

"Once again, I can take care of myself," Ace replied, annoyed enough to sit up fully. Then he remembered the exact sequence of events that had brought us here to the Thousand Sunny, and to him wearing more cloth than he had in the entire time I'd known him. Grudgingly, he admitted, "Mostly."

"You're both forgetting someone," Yugito said, from her spot across the room. When we both looked at her, she turned her head slightly and said, "Utakata woke up on Banaro and went berserk. Without me, handling him fell to you." To Ace, she added, "And I didn't realize my tactics could adversely affect you. That was my mistake."

"Uh…thanks?" was Ace's somewhat confused response. When that got him a set of narrowed eyes, he said, "I mean, thanks. For the apology."

"Learn some restraint," Yugito told him in a flat tone, and then she got to her feet and walked over. Drawing level with us, she grasped my shoulder reassuringly.

Her expression was far softer than I'd seen in some time. In fact, I'd only seen the briefest flash when she'd realized that my group had gotten out of Impel Down unscathed, with everyone I'd wanted to pull out of there (plus a few more). It was the same gentle look she'd used with Ace half an hour ago, before running away.

Yugito hugged me, with one arm, and let go almost instantly after I attempted to return it. Before either Ace or I could call her on the previous incident or on this one, she swept Ace into a much less hesitant embrace. Given that he was sitting down, Yugito's arms easily wrapped around his shoulders and neck, and his arms automatically gripped her waist after a split second's baffled pause.

This also meant that Ace's cheek was pressed directly into Yugito's chest.
I very pointedly said *absolutely nothing*.

"And take care of yourself better," Yugito admonished gently as she let go, and Ace seemed totally unable to meet her eyes.

Then she vanished in a burst of ninja speed.

Ace and I looked at each other.

"First: We never speak of this again," Ace said, coughing awkwardly. His entire face was red. "Second: What the hell?!"

"You missed a few things while you were gone," I said, grinning crookedly. "And by the way, your nose is bleeding."

Ace swiped hastily at his face with the bandages attached to his left wrist, only to realize that the linen came away clean. "Hey!"

"Just teasing," I assured him, while he huffed indignantly and slumped against the bar. *Psych!*

"Aren't you *cheery* today," Ace grumbled, while his skin tone returned slowly to some semblance of normal. He paused for a second, then blinked. "Hey, wasn't she wearing your clothes?"

"Yeah," I said with a shrug. "There was too much blood in her best set to wash it all out, so I let her have mine." When I caught Ace's expression falling, I deployed a conversational parachute with, "Besides, despite Izo's best efforts, she fills them out better than I do. Don't you agree?"

Ace coughed again, his gaze darting from my chest toward a perfectly boring spot of the aquarium glass. Opposite him, an empty-eyed fish burbled back. Given the fish's lack of capacity for suggestive comments, it probably was a better friend at the moment than I was. At least for the time being.

"All right, look," Ace said, when I failed to come up with anything else to say in the lull, "Can I ask you something?"

Hoo boy. Few pleasant conversations started out like that. Still, I said, "Sure."

"There was…something. Something bothering me," Ace admitted slowly, frowning as he forced the words out. He sighed. "I don't get it. Why would the Tailed Beasts destroy Impel Down? Nothing there could hurt any of them, and…"

*Oh.*

"I didn't hear any of you ask them to flatten the place, which I know doesn't mean you didn't, but if they decided on their own," Ace said in a rush, catching my expression, "then I don't see *why*. I barely talked to Saiken or Matatabi, and I'd never met two of their brothers…"

*Oh, Ace.*

"I was…I was honestly…half-hoping Isobu was going to end it all when we heard him hit the wall," Ace shook his head as words failed him, biting his lip.

"Isobu wouldn't have done that with you still inside," I told him, "but I'm not sure you'd understand why."

"Try to sum it up for me."
I bit down on the urge to sigh, trying to figure out how to explain any of the myriad issues that the past week had brought to the forefront of my mind. Obito's "death," any of my brother's injuries, the oath I'd made to protect Naruto on the night he was born, and half a dozen other memories all came to mind, but all they told me was that I was a mess. Isobu felt the effects of those scars through me even if he didn't care independently, and would take them seriously. And most of all, Ace's last shouted conversation between Yugito, me, and him had left such a deep mark that I needed to establish the sheer scale involved in our combined view.

Best to start with the big thing, then. Ace was still concentrating on Isobu, who rarely spoke directly to him. "The last thing you said before we went to Banaro was in our shouting match, right?"

Ace nodded, though he remained in a slumped position. "Right."

"You know how long it took you to decide Isobu and the others were people worthy of respect?" I asked. Before Ace could do more than open his mouth to answer, I said grimly, "You treated him like a person within half a minute of meeting him."

"Yeah, but—" Ace tried to interrupt, perhaps to downplay his opinion and its worth.

I cut him off again, extending one finger and pressing it against his forehead. "People back home still haven't figured that out, and it's been over a thousand fucking years."

"I…" Ace imitated the fish he'd been staring at earlier, then fell silent for a few seconds. "It… I didn't think it was that special?"

And that was the important part, Isobu said. While Saiken bobbed next to him in the ocean, Isobu explained, If we had thought the words were empty reassurance, nothing would have come of them. But we heard his words and all agreed to help.

I hadn't gotten that particular memo at the time, but in hindsight, it explained Yang Kurama's bizarre cooperative mood fairly well. The Tailed Beasts had so rarely been able to work together—or willing to—that there had to have been some common drive to unite them, beyond their atrophied sibling bond.

I repeated the gist of things for Ace's ears, because it looked like he needed to hear it.

Ace closed his eyes, as though the words physically weighed on him. When he finally spoke, his voice almost sounded like it was coming from a hidden core inside of him, something that neither Isobu nor I had ever heard even if the words were strangely practiced. "So you're saying… You're saying they wanted me to live? That hearing that made them feel a little better?"

"Of course," I said firmly, though I hid my alarm well. What had happened to make Ace dig up that kind of thing? What context was I missing?

"…So. What happened after Banaro?" Ace asked, because of course he did.

Anything to end the awkward moment, I supposed.

Still. I chose to let the topic lie because he clearly wanted to, and moved on. I had a few things to get off my chest anyway.

"Before or after I thought you'd been killed and spent half an hour in shock?" I grumbled, mashing my face into my hand. I wasn't proud of my behavior then. Even if Ace had died, I'd thought I still remembered how to subsume grief into fuel for rage. Apparently not.
Something strange crossed Ace's face. Like disbelief, but deeper. "Start where you have to?"

"Well," I began, holding up my hand and counting down on my fingers. "First, I had to finish panicking, since the tracker I put on you didn't work for about half an hour after that. Then Isobu told me the Moby Dick was calling us." At this, Ace winced. "So I fumbled my way through that conversation, and Kushina interrupted the call."

"The same one who's with the Red Hair Pirates?" Ace asked, blinking. "How the hell…?"

I nodded, still counting down. "Funnily enough, Shanks was there to warn us about Teach. So when Kushina found the tracker I left with the ship—don't ask—she barged right in." I shook my head. "And to make a long, pathetic story short, I found out you weren't dead at about the same time I was about to have to tell Thatch and Kushina what the hell had happened at Banaro."

Ace was staring at me.

"It was a bad day," I said, because that…about summed it up. In the least adequate way possible.

"Sorry for causing you that much trouble," Ace responded, half on automatic. It sounded rehearsed, but I'd seen Ace bounce back to that type of behavior with Isobu. It was, at least partly, what he did when other options failed him.

"None of that was your fault," I assured him. "And Utakata, Yugito and I learned a few life lessons"—mainly involving coordinated ambushes—"while we went after Teach."

"And you killed him." Ace's expression was totally unreadable, and so I hesitated.

I'd set up the situation for Teach to die, regardless of if I won a fight or not. On a ship, the sea lurked just under the boards no matter which way he turned. With Saiken still hopping mad about Akainu, I hardly needed to point before he'd set up another World Government lackey to die as an appetizer. Yugito's injured pride (and well-hidden heart), Matatabi's frustration, and both Isobu's and my grudges took care of the rest.

"…Yes," I said finally. I still wasn't sure how he'd react to that little detail. "I lost my temper, and then Isobu got him. Teach only got to be a Warlord for a few hours."

To my surprise, Ace just huffed and rolled his eyes. "Damn. I guess I lost to that turtle after all."

_I got very little satisfaction from the experience_, Isobu put in. _Other than the surety of knowing an enemy was dead, we were too preoccupied with your safety to bother celebrating._

I repeated that sentiment to Ace, over Isobu's embarrassed grumbling.

Ace covered his surprise fairly well with a teasing, "Aw, so he _does_ care."

But I could see the tips of his ears turn faintly red, and Ace averted his gaze after a second or two. He didn't turn his face away quite enough to hide his slight smile. Though I still didn't have any real idea of what Ace's past had been like before he joined the Whitebeard Pirates, aside from what hints I could glean from his interactions with others, I got the impression that he was still unused to honest concern from other people.

And then his head dropped onto the bar.

I caught him before he could slide off the barstool and onto the floor, since it seemed that this wasn't one of the episodes where his muscles completely locked up. Looking around for a second,
decided the booth seats weren't suitable. It would be best to get him to the infirmary one floor up the stairs, but I wasn't sure how to easily do so without aggravating his injuries.

Conveniently enough, Jinbe walked through the double doors right after I completed that thought. "Oh, I didn't think anyone else would be here."

"Yugito just left," I offered, "and I need to get Ace to the infirmary."

"I was just there. Can I be of any help?" Jinbe asked. Come to think of it, he was wearing a different-patterned kimono than he had been earlier, and his head and shoulders were about as heavily bandaged as Ace's were.

Well, he was bigger than I was and probably wouldn't even notice Ace's dead weight. My limbs, on the other hand, wanted to turn into jelly. "Please."

Ace let out a loud snore as Jinbe picked him up as though he was a child. Without so much as wincing as a result of his injuries, the resident (former?) Warlord strode out of the room with me trotting at his heels. We went up the stairs, passed the kitchen (and I was fairly certain Ace's nose twitched), and ended up sort of pausing for a moment.

The infirmary was not really designed with someone Jinbe's size in mind.

"You're back already?" Chopper asked, angling his head back and taking in Jinbe's appearance. Then he noticed Ace. "Ah! He passed out?"

Jinbe and I were going to leave Ace to be fussed over by the Straw Hats' resident doctor, because frankly this kind of thing was beyond both of our skills. I heard the word "concussion" and idly corrected it with "probably narcolepsy," but that was the sum total of my contribution.

"Kei, hang on for a second!" Chopper said, before I could make good on my escape. "Have you been eating and sleeping properly?"

Oh, no. Not the medic problem again.

"Uh." I perhaps hesitated for a bit too long, unlike when I'd run from Janey on the Moby Dick. Instead, Chopper turned his big, worried eyes on me, and I caved. I was a complete sucker, whether they were anthropomorphic reindeer or cute dogs. "No, I guess not."

Chopper guided me to the exam table, while Ace continued to snore on the bed. "Describe how you're feeling right now, please?"

Jinbe made his escape.

I ended up falling asleep in the infirmary and waking up sometime closer to sunset than noon. At some point, someone (probably Chopper) had left a blanket over my shoulders. I pushed it aside gently, folding it up to leave at the foot of the empty exam bed, and then got to my feet. My stomach gave a mighty growl as soon as I found my center of gravity again, and I cracked my jaw while I did a quick self-exam.

For a start, I had enough chakra back to take on Impel Down again, if it hadn't already been permanently dealt with. Thanks to my bond with Isobu, any minor aches and pains had been healed, and my only real complaint was that I was finally, ravenously hungry for the first time in days. After eating like a bird for most of that, it wasn't really a surprise.
I rubbed my eyes, clearing sleep dust, and looked outside through the porthole window.

*Hell of a fog,* I commented to Isobu.

**My doing. The island does not generate worthwhile mist on its own.**

*Thanks.* I paused for a second, then asked, *There aren't any people here, are there?*

**Just us, thus far. The crews are still deciding where to go next.**

**And the pursuit?**

**The admirals never had our trail. Of course, turning the Tarai Current against them was only a minor contribution to the general confusion.**

I smiled unpleasantly. *Of course. And I'm sure the crater had nothing to do with it.*

**Perish the thought.**

My stomach growled again. With that contribution to the discussion taken care of, I headed to the kitchen to see what was available. Given Ace and Luffy's presence on board the *Sunny,* I was only cautiously optimistic that there would be anything.

"You're awake, Kei-ki?" Sanji asked when I wandered in, while he was washing dishes.

"Probably," I said, rolling my shoulder until it popped. Just to be sure I was fully recovered. "And I feel like I haven't eaten since…yesterday."

The expression on his face was best described as "aghast." "I'll get something for you right away, Kei-ki! Just one moment."

Sanji darted to the fridge, which had a padlock that put everything I'd seen in Impel Down to shame. Since he'd vacated the sink, I shrugged to myself and pushed up my sleeves to continue where he'd left off. It was really the least I could do.

"Did I miss the dinner rush?" I asked, while Sanji carried an armful of vegetables to his freshly-scrubbed cutting board.

"Not at all! But I could never let someone go hungry," Sanji replied. Then he realized what I was doing. "You don't need to help with those. You're a guest."

"I need to keep my hands busy," I told him. Even if that meant being up to my elbows in soapy water instead of, say, sparring with Zoro or working on fūinjutsu. Or something else. "Besides, I'm sure that you have better things to work on than getting prune hands."

"Doesn't mean a beautiful woman should do it for me," Sanji said, chewing on his cigarette as he expertly julienned an entire cabbage. "But at the same time, with with our captain and his brother…" Sanji bit down on the cigarette. "No one goes hungry on my watch."

"That's very generous of you. And besides, you don't wanna see what happens when I try to cook," I joked, though in truth I was at least passable. I'd somehow managed to keep myself and Hayate alive through our mid-teens, after all. As I started piling up dishes on the nearby rack to dry, I asked, "Did any of you get hurt in there?"

Sanji kept from swooning, barely. "That's—ahem, uh, it's kind of you to worry, but none of us were
hurt.” He was nearly trembling from the suppressed urge to go totally gaga. "Let me just finish this ___."

Once he had a chance to turn his attention back to the stove, vegetables in hand, I finished with the dishes and let it all dry. Still, we'd need the soapy water later, so I held off from pulling the plug as I dried my hands. "So, what are you making?"

"Just a vegetable stir-fry," Sanji admitted, while the stove flashed and oil sizzled. "I hope that sounds good?"

Hell, my mouth was already watering. I wanted food.

By the time Sanji put the dish in front of me, I fell on it with gusto that would have at least surprised people who hadn't already been familiar with Ace and Luffy. Despite the lack of chopsticks, I was really too hungry to be fussy about implements. As I expected from Sanji, the vegetables were perfectly crunchy and the lingering sauce at the bottom of the dish was great. Sure, I was eating too fast to taste any kind of subtle flavors, but I didn't care much. It really hit the spot, despite the lack of meat (and I knew exactly where that had gone).

Sanji just chuckled before heading back into the kitchen proper to finish cleaning up.

I did not lick the plate. But it was a close thing.

"We're not in danger of running out of food, are we?" I asked, as I somewhat sheepishly returned my dish and cutlery to the sink.

"I would say yes, but Isobu dragged a Sea King to shore earlier," Sanji replied. "We're probably fine for a few days, Kei-ki. In fact, I need to get back to supervising that before that cabbage-headed moron does something to ruin it."

Thank you, I told Isobu, while Sanji shooed me out of the kitchen.

It was no trouble. That was the first of the creatures to attack me in days, so it was clearly volunteering.

I bit down on a dry chuckle, and as such, I heard the first few uncoordinated thuds of Sanji hitting Category Five Love Hurricane mode. And then, "Kei-ki is so kind and great and beautiful!"

I vacated the premises very quickly after that.

While I was up and about, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. The sounds of the various former prisoners at work emanated from an open porthole that faced the island, but I didn't feel like joining in even if I could hear Naruto and Luffy's respective gleeful cackles. They'd be fine. If they weren't, there were plenty of other people who could solve that situation, given that every other chakra signature besides mine was also on the island.

Maybe it was time I just spent some of my concern on myself, at least for a bit.

With that in mind, I picked up a spare set of clothes from the storage chest I'd left in Isobu's stomach and headed to shore to see what I'd missed.

The last I'd seen of Ace, he had conked out in front of me and spent the rest of the time snoozing until I'd taken a nap myself. I didn't have the means to track him down the same way I would most of my other companions, but a quick question aimed at a random former prisoner—a Newkama, going by the fishnets—pointed me in the right direction in short order.
At first, I couldn't see much at all. I knew the sea had been in relatively plain view before, past Isobu's mist, but Shukaku had erected a massive sand barrier to create a sheltered cove that hid any evidence of the pirates' presence. With Isobu's coral forming a waterproof base for him to build from, the Sunny and the stolen battleships had effectively disappeared. I could feel the other Tailed Beasts loitering around the island, including the ever-glowing Matatabi, but clearly precautions had been taken.

I found Ace with Luffy and Naruto, sitting on a chunk of beachhead in the midst of the mist. Naruto, like at Impel Down, had multiple snails climbing on him as well as around him on the sand. Aside from Komushi, he had four more Marine snails and an apparently wild one, and one of them was making a concerted effort to eat Luffy's hat from the top of his head. While Luffy sat up and talked nearly as much as Naruto would, keeping his hat out of the snail's reach by blind luck alone, Ace was lying flat on the sand with a contented smile on his face.

"Having fun?" I asked by way of greeting as I sat down near them.

"Kei-sensei, I named all of them!" Naruto said, holding up one with a checker-patterned shell and holding it in my face. "See, this one is Aomushi!"

Luffy, however, had other ideas. "No, it's Lion Bear Tiger—"

"It's not!" Naruto argued instantly, scrunching up his face.

...Well, its flesh was blue, at least. Sky-blue, even. Past that, no comment. I gently eased the snail back into his grip to put the animal between the two shōnen protagonists, then asked, "So, has anyone actually made any calls on them?"

"No," said Luffy. He tilted his head to his side, then asked, "Why?"

"We could call the Whitebeards to let them know we all survived," I said in a voice drier than Alabasta.

"They'll find out from the papers," Ace muttered, and I fought down the urge to grab his earlobe and tell him to stop being a brat.

"If you're worried they'll scream the island down, how much worse do you think it'll be if you don't call them?" I wanted to know. While Ace raised an eyebrow, I went on, "Because last I checked, Impel Down was garrisoned like it was because they thought the Whitebeards would smash them otherwise. And the day before we hit the place, Marco said they needed a few days to get everything together."

"Oh, so they'll be really pissed off now if they don't hear from anyone," Luffy said, nodding to himself. "Makes sense."

"Therefore, we are calling them now," I said to Ace, because he dragged his heels worse than anyone I'd ever met with regard to snail calls.

…There were so many things wrong with that thought.

Ace pouted at me, though perhaps not as effectively as his brother could have. Nevertheless, I had won our little battle of wills by being a nag.

"Oh, oh, tell me the number," Naruto volunteered, retrieving Komushi from his back. "Mom told me about some of them, and I wanna hear this!"
I recited the relevant eight-digit code as Ace finally sat up stiffly, due to his bandages. While Naruto and Luffy fidgeted in place, I sat crisscross on the sand and settled in as the snail started making noises akin to a dial tone. Komushi, far too used to this particular routine, bobbed its eyestalks in time with its noises.

Then it opened its mouth, saying in Thatch's voice and with a tone of forced cheer, "This is the Moby Dick, but you probably already—oh, to hell with it. Kei, did you find Ace?!"

One of these days, they'd find someone more composed to man the comms room. I genuinely hoped that day never arrived, even as Komushi started to bite its lip in a clear imitation of Thatch's expression. Somewhere past him, the sound of several people shouting at once dominated the background noise, as did the sound of rushing footsteps. On our end, the mist muffled most background sound and light, but we could still hear people complaining about shore work in the afternoon gloom nonetheless.

"Present and accounted for," Ace replied with a cheeky grin, while Thatch's expression crumpled. Upon seeing this, Ace swapped tack immediately. "Wait, shit—"

But it was too late.

"YOU ORANGE-HATTED PYROMANIAC JACKASS!!" Thatch roared, causing Naruto and me to reel back from the snail to protect our hearing. While Luffy and Ace winced, Thatch shouted, "Do you have any idea how worried we were?!"

"Someone get Thatch away from the snail before he strangles it," suggested someone, who sounded like they did not want to be volunteered for the job.

"Thatch, hand over the snail," said Marco's voice with just the thinnest strand of patience left.

"YOU CAN HAVE IT BACK OVER MY DEAD BODY," was the response.

"Thatch, everyone's all right," I tried to assure him, while the argument went on in the background. From the sounds of things, at least one punch was thrown and a brawl might've kicked up, but Thatch seemed to retain control of the snail. "We got Ace out with no trouble."

"But... Didn't you just tear a hole in Impel Down?" asked Jozu.

Aaaaaand I realized belatedly that going incommunicado when I'd ordered it meant that the Whitebeard Pirates didn't know what we'd planned to do, much less what we'd actually done.

Ace and I exchanged looks over the snail, while Naruto trembled with suppressed laughter. Luffy, likewise, started to snicker openly.

"Uh, sure. Tore right through it," Ace said unconvincingly.

There was another pause.

Janey's voice piped up next, drawing a shudder from Ace and me at the same moment. "...Kei, what did you do?"

"...Nothing Captain Whitebeard wouldn't have," I replied after another moment's pause, while Naruto keeled over and into my lap, shaking with near-uncontrollable laughter.

"You hesitated," Thatch said in an accusing tone.
Vista broke in with a frantic, "And do you have any idea how long that list is? That's not very reassuring!"

"Pfft, no!" Naruto cackled, "Kei-sensei did something way better!"

"Who's that?"

"Is that a kid?"

"We fought all the way down all six levels!" Luffy declared. "There was no way I was gonna leave Ace in a place like that, and neither would anyone in my crew!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, while Ace lunged across the snail and tackled Luffy to the ground to put him in a headlock. It seemed that Ace's half-dormant big brother instincts were kicking into high gear at the reminder of the ludicrous risks Luffy thought were no big deal. Or perhaps he thought of them as always acceptable for his precious people.

"And then we blew up Impel Down," Naruto added, grinning at the terrible wordplay. Rolling over so he could put his weight on his elbow, Naruto allowed me to set him back on the ground. "There's a big hole in the ocean floor where it used to be, so no one's ever gonna be stuck there again."

Several different voices said, "What."

I dropped my hand onto Naruto's head and started ruffling his hair a bit too quickly to be comfortable. "You just had to say it, didn't you?"

"But Kei-sensei, you were so cool!" Naruto protested.

"It also represented the utter destruction of one of only three Marine strongholds important enough to have Gates of Justice attached," I told Naruto, trying to pretend I wouldn't have a headache by the end of this conversation. "It's not meant to be something you use as a joke."

Haruta said, "No, see, speaking as a pirate? It is absolutely something to joke about and put on a wanted poster. It's both awesome and hilarious."

"You're not helping, Haruta," Ace complained theatrically. After a brief pause to think it over, he admitted, "...Though it was pretty fuckin' cool."

"Hei pulled the whole front of the cage off!" Luffy said, "And we beat up a whole bunch of guards and stuff before that, since if we'd gone through an outside wall everyone would've drowned and half of us wouldn't have been able to fight."

"We seem to be a bit overdue on introductions. Who are these children?" Izo's voice asked.

"Well, one of them calls Kei 'Kei-sensei,' so..." Thatch puzzled for a bit, then continued, "One of her students? But how did they find each other out here?"

Ace blinked. "Did we forget that part?"

"I call Kei-sensei that because she's a teacher, not because she's my teacher," Naruto said. "I'm Namikaze Naruto, from Konoha! You're those pirates who wanted to hit Impel Down first, right? Well, we beat you to it!"

Half a dozen introductions ensued, until…
"My name is Monkey D. Luffy," said Ace's younger brother, "and I'm gonna be the next Pirate King!" He leaned forward with a grin, continuing, "I have to fight all the Emperors if I'm gonna reach my dream, so don't take it too hard if I have to beat you guys, too!"

"Luffy!" Ace scolded, but a bit too late.

"Isn't that the Straw Hat kid?"

"Ace's little brother! I remember him!"

"Hey, that should make him our brother too, right?"

And while his fellow commanders and crewmates dissolved into an entirely separate conversation, Ace groaned aloud. "Dammit, Luffy."

"If you wanted a controlled conversation, you should have kicked these two off the call," I told him.

"I know, I know," Ace grumbled. "And I don't see you volunteering to do it."

I shrugged.

Any further conversation on our part was postponed for a while, because a familiar rumbling laugh burst from Komushi's mouth. The snail's features took on a more weathered look, and though it couldn't shift its face enough to mimic Whitebeard's iconic facial hair, it sure tried.

"It's good to hear from you and know you're both safe," Whitebeard said in a soft voice, at least for him. "Are you all right, my son?"

"Hey, Pops," Ace said, his voice coming out a weaker than before, due to a lump in his throat. "We're—I guess I got a few scrapes, but we're all okay. But Thatch probably told you already."

"I heard Thatch say it, but I wanted to hear it from you," Whitebeard said. The old man chuckled warmly. "And now that I have, I know I feel better. It's been too long since your family heard your voice, even over another snail call."

A raucous series of shouted agreements followed, too many to individually identify. Ace wasn't wearing his hat, so he couldn't hide his watering eyes at all. Instead, he covered his mouth with one hand as Luffy looped his arms around his brother three times and did his best to win some kind of award at hugging. Naruto, after a second's thought, climbed over me and joined in while paying just as much careful attention to avoiding Ace's remaining injuries as Luffy did.

"It's okay to cry when you're happy," Naruto said, as Luffy's hand did another loop and pinned him in place.

"Everyone loves you, Ace!" Luffy told him, and if his semi-permanent grin had gone a little wobbly, that was fine. "And I'm gonna keep reminding you until you don't forget it anymore."

I reached over and tried to pull Ace into a side-hug, but, given that he was already effectively pinned by two younger boys and their combined weight, it was probably not one of my more brilliant ideas. Ace toppled with a choked-up laugh, and the entire group sprawled across my lap like they didn't weigh some three hundred pounds grouped together like that.

Could I have dislodged them? Sure. But between carding my fingers through Naruto's hair and murmuring gentle reassurances to Ace while Luffy took care of the louder, more enthusiastic
version, I was content.

"We'll see you again at Fishman Island. Take care of yourselves until then," Whitebeard said, and signed off with a click.

It was not a good day to be a Marine. More specifically, it was a terrible day to be the Fleet Admiral or anyone near him.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'IMPEL DOWN IS GONE'?!" Sengoku roared into the receiver attached to a cowering snail. "We stationed ten battleships around it! Even if the Whitebeard Pirates brought everything to attack, they should have at least managed a distress call!"

"The Whitebeards never showed," was the ragged response from Vice Admiral Onigumo.

As one of the few officers above captain rank who hadn't needed his jaw wired shut after being attacked by an unknown group, Sengoku was inclined to trust him. But still…

"Continue your report," Sengoku said, keeping his voice level through sheer force of will.

The only positive aspect of this situation was that Garp had finally found a situation too serious to laugh at. Hundreds of men were dead or presumed so, with the site itself reduced to a crater the likes of which hadn't existed except in the form of Enies Lobby prior to this afternoon. The Gate of Justice had been permanently disfigured, showing new cracks from the seam outward, and several Marine battleships had just vanished in the wake of the attack. Oh, the men were all there, but bedraggled and defeated and oftentimes injured. Some of them had been trembling in shock, and those that were couldn't be convinced to speak.

It was a nightmare.

"At thirteen hundred hours, the fleet came under attack by an unknown force," Onigumo said, his voice still cracking from weariness. "A giant monster appeared from nowhere and trapped our ships before we could respond, and none of our attacks had any effect."

"A Sea King?" Vice-Admiral Tsuru asked, frowning.

"No Sea King I've ever met could spit acid or invulnerable slime," Onigumo said, and the snail grimaced. "It was a sea slug, but in the same weight classification as a Sea King. Worse, it wasn't alone. There were five animals of the same size, total, but… I can't explain it, sir. They felt wrong."

"Describe the feeling, vice admiral," Sengoku ordered. He didn't have time for pointless wavering like this.

"They were sizing us up," said a new voice. Going by the faraway tone, this was one of the men who'd been shaking himself to pieces earlier. "It was like… like they were thinking. And they were angrier at us than any animal's ever been at a human."

"The fox-shaped one talked, commodore. Everyone knows they were intelligent. Just look at the damage on the Gate of Justice!" snarled Onigumo, while the snail turned red. "Sir, it felt like they were using haki. The level of coordination was as unreal as the destruction they caused afterward."

"And what about the reports we've had of humans attacking?" Sengoku heard himself say, past the throbbing rage-induced headache pounding at his temples.
"We saw two directly." Onigumo paused, and the snail's eyes darted around in a mirror of the vice admiral's expression. "One was a man with black hair over one eye. I can get the men to come up with a description."

As though that didn't describe possibly millions of people across the damned globe!

"One of the other monsters brought a pirate ship to join the attack, we think, but we couldn't see the symbol," said the same shaky Marine from before. "And when they got out, they had dozens of prisoners with them! They appeared out of thin—"

"SOMEONE GET THAT MAN TO THE INFIRMARY!" Sengoku roared again, his patience snapping. Taking a series of deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself in front of the cowed vice admirals—again, except for the surprisingly silent Garp—he growled, "Vice Admiral, you're telling me you let the Impel Down garrison be utterly destroyed, on the eve of our war with Whitebeard, by a handful of unknown pirates and their pet monsters?!"

"P-p-pet monsters with conqueror's haki," corrected someone else, and Sengoku felt a vein in his head do its best to rupture.

"I don't care what you think a bunch of overgrown animals could do. You're dismissed," Sengoku said in a low, deadly voice. To one of the vice admirals in the room—or all of them—he said, "Get the Kuja Pirates on the line, and while you're at it, dig the Blackbeard Pirates out of whatever hole they fell into before we need them. Then send them to find that group and end them."

Chapter End Notes

And now: a brief look at Marine shenanigans. Quite overdue, really. Incidentally, Kizaru hasn't turned in his report about Sabaody yet. Once he does, Sengoku may have words with him.

And er. Well, the Tailed Beasts may have let a certain few details regarding the Gate of Justice slip past their partners' scrutiny. In the form of writing. (ex. "KURAMA WUZ HERE" "YOU CAN'T SPELL" "SHUT UP")
Later that night, after a shower on the Thousand Sunny, I ended up having to fall back on a tank top and shorts that I didn’t remember acquiring, since everything else was either in need of a wash or a patch job given the events of the past week. Given that my hair was already a complete disaster on the best of days, I flattened my bangs back with a borrowed bandanna. I wasn’t sure if I had completed my transformation into a beach-combing tourist, but it was too dark for sunglasses. Nonetheless, I headed up to the deck of the Sunny to see what was going on.

The only break in the sand wall on the island was from where the bulk of the Sea King—which was about as wide as Shukaku’s tail—still dangled into the ocean. Its front end was busy being turned into barbecue.

I walked across the improvised cove’s waters and made it to shore without losing a sandal. Go me.

“Come on, Cook-bro! How long is it gonna take for the next serving?” Franky called out.

At the same time, Sanji shouted something indecipherable and probably quite rude at the ranks of the prison escapees. But he wouldn’t let anyone go hungry. Even if he had to work all damned night to make sure everyone got enough.

I snuck past the ranks of the various former Newkama residents, almost skating over the sand with the faintest application of my chakra. I didn’t know them, but I took a certain level of comfort in the idea that they weren’t my problem. Ivankov would take them with him when he took his battleship to their destination, and none of them aside from him were strong enough to present an obvious threat to the individuals I cared about.

Speaking of, many of them had gathered a fair distance from the scramble for the next big Sea King steak, likely because they’d gotten first dibs. I slunk over to them, curious.

“Luffy, get your own!” Naruto snapped, defending his plate by sticking his foot directly in the Straw Hats’ captain’s face. He didn’t put that much into it, or else Luffy would have probably been stretching more to get past the impediment.

“Sanji’s not done cooking the next one yet!” Luffy argued, not giving up.

“I don’t care!” Naruto shouted back. “Gaara, here—”
And then Naruto threw himself at his pirate counterpart, deciding that the fight outweighed the food for the time being. While the two of them scuffled around in the sand, with Luffy snaking around direct hits and tangling both of them in knots, Gaara looked down at the plate and idly deflected the sand sent flying by the fight.

“Get him, Captain!” Fū cheered, zooming above the fight on Chōmei’s orange wings with a look of utter glee on her face. “Dinner’s at stake!”

“Dinner—ow!—is a steak!” Naruto shouted, while Luffy gave his war cry of, “MEAT!”

Ace sat back and snickered, which was about all he could manage with his ribs bandaged the way they were. Both of his arms were curled around his middle, but he couldn’t stop laughing.

Gaara took a bite of Naruto’s dinner while he waited.

“Cheating a little, aren’t you?” I asked Gaara, making him jump.

“Keisuke!”

“Kei!”

“Hei!”

“Kei-sensei!”

I raised a hand, smiling at their reactions and various nicknames. “Yo.”

“It was just getting good!” Fū complained as she touched down again, since now Naruto and Luffy were just trapped in knot form.

“By all means, you can keep wrestling,” I said sitting down to Ace’s left, while Naruto and Luffy started complaining about that little problem. “Don’t mind me.”

Naruto, taking this as permission, chose that moment to bite Luffy’s hand.

“OW!” And they were off again.

“I think he just wanted a fight,” Gaara said, as the two of them kept roughhousing across the beach. He slowly tilted his head to one side, replaying what he’d just said, and added, “Both of them.”

“I think so, too,” Fū said with a grin, flaring her wings again and nearly knocking Ace’s hat off.

“I’ll go be their referee!”

“Naruto didn’t do all that much while we were in Impel Down,” I recalled, then shrugged. “If Luffy can wear him out, good for him.”

Fū took off, giggling, and Gaara slowly shifted the sand underneath him until he was careening off after the brawling pair without moving a muscle. Somehow, he picked out Usopp along the way, and they started the first round of bets among the various pirates.

Ace struggled to get his breathing back under control, alternately wincing or fighting down the urge to keep laughing as his brother’s antics continued unabated. Or indeed, encouraged by Naruto’s hyperactivity. Eventually he just gave up, wheezing, and let himself flop back onto the sand. “Dammit, that hurt, but seeing anyone trying to keep up with Luffy—” He snickered again, then winced. “Ow.”
“Succeeding,” I corrected, while the betting pool started to finally incorporate money. “Not trying. *Succeeding*.”

“That may be an understatement,” Jinbe said, as he walked up to us with his own plate of Sea King steak. Ace and I automatically scooted over to make room for him, though without displacing the kids’ (and Luffy’s) things.

**It is.** In the distance, Isobu’s physical form rumbled, and most of Ivankov’s group paused warily until he stopped. One particularly flinchy member got shouted at by Sanji, because he was holding up the line.

“Isobu agrees,” I said, when Jinbe also shot my turtle friend a cautious look. “He’s just not saying so out loud.”

“Interesting,” Jinbe said neutrally, and started to work on his fishman-sized portion. Which was still, of course, far smaller than a Luffy-sized portion.

“Hey, Kei, did you change your hair or something?” Ace leaned over about as far as he could and peered at me before I could answer by pointing at the bandanna. “Wait, since when have you had that huge tattoo?”

Changing my clothes comprised the main difference. Still, I lifted my left arm, drawing it in front of me and turning it over slowly. “This?” At his nod, I let my arm drop. “Since I was seventeen. You’ve just never seen the whole thing.”

Ace blinked. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I confirmed.

Ace made a noncommittal noise, then continued looking at the design. By weight, I probably had more ink in my skin than he did. “And you’ve got… Oh, I get it. That’s Isobu.” He twisted, and so did I, so he could see my left shoulder better. “And the bird?”

“Tsuruya,” I replied, lifting my hand to cover her image. Aside from Naruto, I hadn’t seen anyone truly from home in months, and while I liked being able to call on Isobu in his true form just fine, I missed the single steadiest person in my life more than a bit. “She’s a friend.”

“Is she really that big?” Ace asked, changing the topic just slightly as we went back to sitting like normal people.

Oh *man*. I found myself smiling even as I said, “Thankfully, no. Tsuruya is maybe about as tall as Ivankov. She can’t fly with more than about three hundred pounds on her back, even with a flight saddle.”

“That’s it?” Ace jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the massive Sea King skull that had already been stripped for soup stock. “Because some of the seagulls around here would’ve made mincemeat out of the big guy way before we got around to it.”

Sanji was only moderately terrifying in combat—relatively speaking—but cooking was another matter, and he’d gotten just about anyone capable of holding the correct end of a knife to help. I got the strange impression that Ivankov was very impressed at having his authority usurped, even for a moment.

“Well, Tsuruya isn’t a seagull,” was all I could say to that. “Much less a *Grand Line* one. This place throws all the normal rules out the window.”
Though to be perfectly honest, I didn’t know if we were in the Grand Line. For all I knew, Isobu had carried the two ships on his artificial currents until we were in the South Blue or something, leaving direct Marine interference as far behind as we could.

“Perhaps from your perspective,” Jinbe put in, reminding us that he was there. He’d neatly eaten the entire serving in the time we’d been talking, and set his plate aside.

“Weren’t you born on Fishman Island, Jinbe?” Ace asked, while I snatched up the plate and piled it on top of the leaning tower Ace had made of his set.

Come to think of it, I didn’t know much of anything about Jinbe. Just that he was a Warlord and a fishman, and I didn’t have great records with either group on the lone encounters before him. If Ace hadn’t asked me to free Jinbe specifically, I wouldn’t have spared him a thought before leaving him to die in Level Six with the rest of the prisoners.

I wondered if it was even worth beating myself up over that when I still didn’t care much about the people who had died in Impel Down.

Maybe I just needed to get over myself. No one else seemed to give a fuck.

“I was, though the exact way the Grand Line’s usual hostility to life manifests is a little different there,” Jinbe replied, while I stewed in pointless moral quandaries.

I sighed inwardly. Ah, well. Another topic…

I would like to know what we plan to do next. Preferably before Kokuō needs to find a way to reach us and lecture me on anonymity. I got the impression that it had happened more than once, just from Isobu’s tone.

“Jinbe, you said earlier that the World Government was gonna end up in a war with Captain Whitebeard. Given that they had a set execution date and everything, they probably were going to set up a killing field on their turf, where it would be hardest for any pirate crew to stage a rescue.” At Jinbe’s slow, thoughtful nod, I went on, “But we just turned Impel Down into a crater, freed Ace, and escaped the admirals. That plan isn’t going to work. What do you think will happen now?”

“For a start?” Jinbe’s mouth naturally turned down at the corners, but I nonetheless got the impression he was frowning on purpose. “Without the threat of imprisonment in Impel Down, pirate raids on most of this half of the Grand Line will be more frequent. The New World should remain…somewhat stable. Inasmuch as it ever was. Between the Four Emperors, Marine influence was never so strong there.”

And of course, the loss of face would make the remaining Marines more aggressive. I bit the inside of my lip, thinking. “How likely is the World Government to admit that anything happened at Impel Down? We have all the escapees with us, and we’re still in hiding. They could easily claim that there was just a leak or something.”

“They could,” Ace said, resting his head on both hands. “But I bet they won’t. The World Government always chooses the worst option for anyone who isn’t them.”

“Or the worst option for everyone,” Jinbe put in. “Fighting Whitebeard will destroy more lives than the World Government or the Marines could ever save. The Marines are complicit enough in slavery that no one would trust them to take over protection of Fishman Island if Whitebeard fell.” Jinbe shook his head slowly, then turned his head to meet my eyes. “It would be like going back to
I stared blankly back at him. “I… I wasn’t really thinking that far ahead.”

“Neither was Luffy,” Ace said, and he had a point. Even if it was something of a low bar to clear. I also wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be offended by that comparison or not. “Luffy never thinks ahead.”

I grumbled wordlessly, then figured out which grievance I wanted to address. “I should know better. All I did as a precaution was tell the Whitebeards Impel Down was our target. Not to mention how I didn’t check in with Kushina before we attacked…”

“You won’t need to worry about that,” Jinbe said, “because I’m fairly certain the woman you just mentioned is a part of the Red Hair Pirates, correct?”

Oh no. “What did she do?”

Jinbe and Ace looked at each other for a second, and I felt my hopes die a slow, miserable death. “Shanks was drunk when Naruto called, but I’m still pretty sure they broke something important,” was all Ace said on the topic.

My imagination would have to fill in the rest until either Shanks recovered from whatever bender he was on, or until I was willing to talk to the woman whose son I’d allowed to enter Impel Down. I was not looking forward to that. The fact that Naruto had called his mother and probably told her everything while I was unavailable to defend myself was also not a good thing.

Welp. “At least I have a couple of days until Kushina kills me.”

“Over a snail call?” Ace asked, grinning.

I dropped my head into my hands, moaning. “No, in person, because Kushina is terrifying enough to hop the Red Line, and her son is currently busy fighting your brother.” I paused, looking up. “Wait, did you already know that?”

“That Luffy is fighting Naruto? Hard to miss that,” Ace teased. So, yes, he’d already gotten the message.

“Shut up.” If he’d been wearing his hat and not nursing scalp injuries, I would have yanked it down over his eyes. As such, I just huffed at him irritably.

“Depending on how many Marines are coherent after the display at Impel Down,” Jinbe said mildly in the face of our inability to stick to a topic, “there may also be a number of new wanted posters and bounties over the next few days.” His gaze focused on Naruto and Luffy, who had stopped wrestling and were both tearing into a new steak Sanji had provided for them. One or both of them might’ve been kicked in the head first. “The World Government isn’t shy about introducing bounties for anyone and anything associated with pirate crews. But I’m sure you already knew that.”

“Gaara’s got one, and he’s twelve,” I muttered unhappily. “Fū can’t be older than fourteen. Naruto… If his outlaw debut is what happened at Impel Down, then yeah, I can see the World Government being assholes about it. Even if I was the one running that circus.”

“It doesn’t just apply to active criminals,” Jinbe said. He folded his webbed hands into his long kimono sleeves, like a particularly patient teacher. “You might be too young to remember, but at
the start of the Great Pirate Era we live in now, the World Government organized thousands of Marines across the world into a massive hunt for the Pirate King’s child.”

A chill crept up my spine. “Ah.”

Beside me, Ace had gone very still. Worryingly so, and he didn’t snap out of it until I leaned forward to try and see his expression. “Sorry, thought I was gonna fall asleep again,” he said, with a smile so fake it belonged on a dead-eyed doll.

I didn’t believe it for a second. Still, I let him make his excuses. “Okay,” To Jinbe, I said, “I didn’t hear about anything like that. What happened?”

“Disappearances, child killings… Even living on Fishman Island, we heard of it.” Jinbe shook his head. “To the World Government, being blood kin to a notorious pirate is worse than being one. Even the Emperors did not see the same level of persecution after they were established. Then again, perhaps the World Government wanted to focus on an easier target than grown pirates.”

“I…see.” I could feel my chakra starting to pull on Isobu’s again, and clamped down on the urge to find the nearest Marine base and start throwing buildings around. Drawing in a deep breath, I exhaled slowly to soothe my overworked temper. “Well, that’s one more reason to gut an admiral and use him as Sea King bait. As if I needed more.”

Ace chuckled weakly. “We don’t exactly need more Sea King meat…”

He knew damn well that wasn’t what I meant.

But I let him get away with it once again. He’d either tell me what was eating him eventually, or he wouldn’t. I wasn’t interested in pushing.

Getting to my feet and brushing sand from the seat of my pants, I said, “I’m gonna go talk to Utakata. Do you need me to get anything for either of you on the way back?”

I had a feeling Utakata’s discussion with me would be…short.

“I’m fine,” Ace said, a bit too quickly.

“Go on,” Jinbe said with a wave of his hand.

I nodded and trotted off.

I found Utakata sitting at his own separate campfire, his back against Saiken’s flank as the giant slug loomed like a protective parent. He prodded at the fire with a long, fire-blackened piece of driftwood, his head resting on his hand. At some point, he’d ended up in a borrowed set of clothes, which resembled the outfit we’d sort of found him in. Given the kimono he’d worn consistently, from one lifetime or another, there was probably a reason for it.

His orange eyes caught the light as I approached, but he didn’t say anything hostile as I sat down next to him.

“Utakata?” I began, somewhat hesitant. “Is there something wrong?”

He shifted so, if I wanted to, I could reach out and touch him. But other than that, all he did was withdraw the stick he’d been using to prod the fire and put it to work as a giant pencil instead.

“If you want, I can just listen. Say whatever you want,” I suggested, feeling more and more like an
interloper the longer he went without responding.

Utakata glanced at me with his visible eye, then pushed his blindfold-like bangs away from the left side of his face. With both eyes visible, for once it didn’t look like he was holding something back. If it wasn’t a trick of the firelight, I could almost say he looked…wilted.

Utakata was a little older than Hayate, but I’d never given a second thought to his safety past the point where I’d repaired his seal. In all likelihood, Utakata outdid me in terms of sheer power. Out here, I had so many different people to worry about and so few allies to reliably call on—human ones, anyway—that I hadn’t been looking out for him. I’d just assumed that he could handle himself, because I didn’t have time to manage too many crises at once.

Before, Utakata had seemed bloodthirsty. He said he wanted to kill Akainu, and Saiken had made that wish quite clear on his end. But I remembered his comment about how a fight would be “therapeutic” in Impel Down, and the amount of time he had toyed with Magellan.

Utakata had never struck me as a sadist.

Something had hurt him deeper than any burn.

“Did someone make the clothes you were wearing before?” Utakata asked, rather than what I’d expected. “The ones Yugito has now.”

“Yes,” I said automatically, then wondered why that had been the first question out of his mouth. “Uh, Izo is his name. I, uh, I’ve been sorta maintaining the clothes we have here with us. Sort of.”

I could stitch, at least. Kakashi would have done a better job, but I was the one among my semi-consistent traveling cohort who had any knack for a needle and thread (or most domestic chores) and thus it fell to me. Despite that skill, I hadn’t been able to save Utakata’s things.

Utakata nodded slowly, but his gaze had shifted off to some distant, unmoving point well past my head. Then he just sighed. “I was…” He frowned, seemingly at his own hesitation, then forced himself to continue. “Before you found me. Before Saiken pulled me out of that…place. I was in a bad way.”

“You were.” I didn’t know Utakata, but there was no way I’d have let him die without giving my best shot to save him. Which, really, said quite a lot about the dissonance between how I viewed Utakata and how I viewed most other people here.

Being a better person was always a work in progress.

“Did you ever wonder why?” he asked, meeting my eyes for just a split second. His chakra had turned into a roiling cauldron, boiling unchecked just below a slowly trembling lid.

“I did, but—” How to phrase this? “A lot of people around here have secrets.” Ace, me, Yugito, Naruto… Hell, I could throw a rock and probably hit a skeleton in someone’s closet (that wasn’t Brook). There were enough of them around. “I assumed if you didn’t tell me, I didn’t need to know.”

“It’s more that we didn’t—” Saiken cut himself, shaking his huge head slowly. As I watched, he started to wring his hands together. “It’s been hard. And I didn’t want to say anything without Uta here and ready to talk, you know?”

I reached back and rested a hand against Saiken’s side, though only long enough to realize he was still slimy no matter how nice he was being. I yanked my hand back, saying only, “You’re a good
friend, Saiken.”

Saiken’s eyestalks bobbed as he gave a pleased little hum, but only for a short time. Soon, they steadied and focused on Utakata again. While I leaned subtly away from them to avoid being slimed, Saiken lowered his head until his equivalent of a muzzle seemed to rest against the back of Utakata’s head.

It looked absolutely ridiculous given the relative sizes of the people involved, but Utakata didn’t seem to take much notice.

“Are you ready now, Uta? Kei is my little bro’s partner. She’ll be nice,” Saiken whispered in the quietest voice I had ever heard from a Tailed Beast. I didn’t imagine he could hear himself speak, but both of us could. And yet, as he did so, his eyes swiveled to figuratively pin me to the beachhead as a warning.

Utakata nodded miserably. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he eventually said, “I wasn’t traveling alone.”

Oh, I thought, as I replayed the last few days in my head.

Oh no.

Utakata’s fist clenched over his heart. “Because of that bastard…” He took a deep breath, then flung the stick he’d been holding into the fire. In a tone that was held level by sheer force of will, he growled, “I don’t know what those pirates did before they found me. But they didn’t deserve that.”

Utakata had been grieving.

And I’d been too busy to notice.

“They were the first people here who accepted Saiken and me together,” Utakata said, staring into the fire. “Rosema even called him cute.”

“I am cute,” Saiken protested, bumping against Utakata’s back. After a moment’s thought, Saiken shifted his weight so he could rest his chin against the sand at Utakata’s back. With his eyestalks still swiveling, he said, “But Rosie and her girls didn’t even scream when they saw me for the first time. It’s been a long time since we had to worry about that, since Mei already knows and loves us, but strangers… Rosie was special. The Crimson Carnations were all special.”

“So I’d—if I could get…” Utakata growled in frustration at his own inability to verbalize his thoughts, his knuckles going white as he clenched his fists. “I need to fight Akainu. If we find him.”

“Then why did you ask about my clothes earlier?” I asked him, as softly as I could manage while trying to make sure he didn’t forget what had brought us to this point.

“I… I want him to know who’s coming to kill him. To tell him that they weren’t just targets he could destroy when he felt like it, just for being there,” Utakata replied, meeting my eyes. His glowed with faint red light, entirely independent of the campfire. “So I wanted to know if you knew how to sew.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised immediately. My gaze was drawn once again to the sand doodle Utakata had made, and I wondered if it was his attempt to draw that unnamed pirate crew’s flag.
“It’s the least I could do.”

“Thank you,” Utakata murmured. “I’ll show you the design they had at some point.”

I nodded, though he didn’t seem to be in the mood to lift his head and look at me. Maybe…

“Utakata, Saiken, could you tell me about them?” I got two sets of unreadable looks, and went on as gently as I could, “If they looked out for you, then they must have been good people. They deserve to be remembered.”

“I… I think they’d like that,” Utakata whispered. “Later.”

We sat in comfortable silence until the party died down hours later. It was what Utakata needed.

Traveling in daylight hadn’t been a problem since my initial attempts to traverse this wild and wacky sea, with just Isobu for company. Now that there were multiple ships and something like a hundred people to keep track of in some way, shape, or form, sailing in daylight set my teeth on edge. Even if most of the people running around with me now hadn’t been pirates, hungover, or both on any given day, I wouldn’t have been fully comfortable with the situation. We were exposed, my paranoia insisted, even if we sailed with multiple Tailed Beasts acting as massive, grumpy escorts just below the waves.

But at least I’d gotten all my clothes washed and didn’t have to deal with booty shorts anymore. And after a few false starts, I wasn’t worried about anyone getting into island-destroying fights.

Mostly.

“Have you finished the design yet?” Saiken asked, twisting one eyestalk to look at Utakata riding on his head, while the other one was pointed in my direction. He bobbed alongside the Thousand Sunny while Isobu swam on ahead, still creating his favorite artificial current to sweep us along in his wake.

At least we knew broadly where we were. Nami and the Newkama navigator—Inazuma, to my surprise—picked out our location as somewhere in the South Blue. Given that getting back onto the Grand Line was far easier than it would be in other circumstances, doing so appeared to be the plan. The Whitebeards were going to stay around Fishman Island for a while to meet up with whomever was heading that way, and Ivankov insisted that he could complete his various Revolutionary tasks on or off the world’s wildest ocean. At the same time, no one quite knew what to do other than to batten down the figurative hatches and make a break for it. We knew there had to be pursuers, because Kuromushi had picked up Marine activity in many different spots, but it was honestly more to our advantage than theirs if we were confronted in the open ocean, no matter which sea.

But that entire issue was a task for people who understood how to navigate, with or without Isobu’s ability to read currents like an animal. I didn’t have either knack and just waited until the part where everyone agreed that they couldn’t manage without the Tailed Beasts.

Then it became my problem.

In the meantime, I had more important things to do.

Since my talk with him, Utakata had managed to tell me a few more short stories about the former Crimson Carnation Pirates. They hadn’t been a particularly powerful crew, but the captain had been both an artist and a former merchant with an eye for spotting opportunity. Scarletti Rosema...
had led them well until her crew smacked into the Long Knife Pirates, who were going for the same treasure and were not interested in sharing.

Utakata had gone to confront that crew with Saiken, effortlessly destroying them. But while they were occupied, the Marines had opened fire on the Crimson Carnations simply because they were closer.

He was still having trouble fully conveying everything that had happened, but I got the idea. I just kept encouraging him to focus on the good parts. And on recreating the Crimson Carnations’ flag so I could help him stitch it onto his clothes.

“It’s okay, Saiken! Just let him focus for a while!” I called down to the giant slug over the sound of wind, waves, and people lying around with splitting headaches.

Proportionately, most of that last sound came from the nameless battleship rather than the Thousand Sunny, because Zoro insisted that he didn’t get hangovers. I still wasn’t sure I believed him.

I leaned on the Sunny’s railing and waited, because that couldn’t be the end of the topic.

“Uta…” Saiken trailed off unhappily, with only the top of his head and his eyes sticking out of the water.

“Not now,” Utakata said, loud enough for me to hear it despite the distance. “I’ll have it eventually.”

“Hey, can I try?” Naruto asked from my elbow.

I looked down, at this silly kid whose blue eyes were dark with something approaching understanding. I didn’t know what he’d said or done alongside Utakata over the past week, but clearly he had more insight than my overtaxed brain could offer. Naruto’s greatest superpower, much like Luffy’s, was this bizarre and occasionally terrifying ability to make friends in the unlikeliest of places. I…didn’t share it. I had too much history weighing on me.

I ruffled his hair gently, while he continued to make puppy-dog eyes. “I won’t stop you. But be nice, Naruto.”

He hugged me around my waist, then hopped up onto the railing and leapt easily to Saiken’s head. With both of the giant slug’s eyes reorienting to face the new interloper, Naruto trekked across the slimy expanse and sat down squarely to Utakata’s right.

Utakata started speaking quietly with him, but likely only because Naruto insisted. The kid also had decent art skills, so he’d be able to help with the design if Utakata wanted him to. If not, he made a decent hot water bottle. I could see Naruto making emphatic hand gestures to Utakata, apparently referring to a bubble wand if the motions were consistent.

It was nice to see people getting along. There wasn’t enough of that back home.

Just this morning, I’d seen Ace and Franky conspiring to design a new version of Striker, for all that Ace wasn’t a shipwright and Franky had never seen the little watercraft before. I didn’t think either shortcoming would be a problem in producing whatever new hilariously over-engineered monster the two were coming up with. Whatever happened, though, I didn’t need to worry about breaking up a massive multi-national brawl.

“Man overb—well, *bird* overboard!” shouted someone, breaking me out of my musings.
Luffy stretched an arm out into the waves alongside the Sunny from the lion figurehead. A very loud squawking noise punctuated the appearance of a hat-wearing seagull, which Luffy dropped onto the lawn in the middle of the deck.

“It’s been a while since the last News Coo,” Nami commented, immediately heading over to it. “Hey there. Has it been a rough trip?”

The News Coo squawked at her, looking at the crew and the Sunny, and then snapped to attention despite saltwater dripping down its wings. “Caw!”

“It’s a hundred beri per paper,” Nami reminded the creature, frowning like she expected it to argue with her. “And not one beri more.”

The bird appeared to consider the argument, then looked at the company we kept. Revolutionaries, Tailed Beasts, Straw Hats… It slumped a bit. “Caw…”

“Oh, oh, are there any wanted posters?” Luffy asked, hopping down from the figurehead. “Are there?”

The seagull produced the relevant paper for Nami’s perusal, and everyone froze for a very awkward second.

I read the front page of the bundle from the back, when Nami tore the delivery open to read the details, with the usual mess of wanted posters falling out unheeded and settling on the deck. Most of the newspapers did, too, as she realized that there was a bit of a backlog.

**BURNOUT: FIRE FIST ACE ARRESTED.**

That one was only a few days old, but it still didn’t speak well of the poor News Coo’s health.

“Have you had to carry a week’s worth of this stuff?” I asked the bird.

“Caw…” *And without pay.* I vaguely remembered someone saying that News Coos didn’t have infinite range, but I didn’t remember where the service area stopped. Poor birds.

I sat down next to it, folding the next discarded paper (*DUEL ON BANARO ISLAND; 100s DEAD*) so it could be stored for use as kindling. I was half-afraid of what the World Government had written about the Banaro incident, though I knew I’d done my best to keep people safe. “That’s rough. I’ll make sure you get a tip.”

“Caw!”

There was a small stack of bounty posters lying in a heap on the deck. One of them depicted a rather bizarre facial composite sketch that looked *almost* like Sanji’s old one, if his hair was longer and black. However, the orange iris in the visible eye? That was all Utakata. He didn’t have a bounty as such; instead, the poster said “reward for information” and not much else. The World Government probably didn’t want to admit that out of the entire group to attack Impel Down, they’d only got a clear look at one of our human members. And even that was pushing it.

I set the poster gently aside so he could look at it and the utter lack of a numerical bounty later. Ultimately, I was more interested in some of the other papers that dealt with more recent events. The editors of public newspapers could choose their font sizes and pictures, of course, but I had never seen someone decide to use font so large that the title alone dominated the front page.

**WORLD-SHAKER: TSUNAMI DEVASTATES PARADISE.**
My blood ran cold. Isobu?

Water must go somewhere when violently displaced. Isobu tilted his head to one side, or at least gave me the impression of doing so as he thought. That said, I have personal experience with waves as well as underwater earthquakes. While a Tailed Beast Bomb is devastating, the effect of launching one underwater is far less pronounced than full tectonic shifts, and we attacked primarily from the surface. Only the closest islands would be truly harmed.

...Why is that?

You may have noticed that Impel Down was vaporized. How much water is displaced when a massive quantity of the affected volume is converted to steam by heat and force?

Isobu, I’m not a physicist. I just make explosives as stand-ins for demolition charges and hand grenades. What happened?

Tectonic activity displaces water without converting it to another form of matter. The Tailed Beast Bomb expends energy differently. One of Isobu’s tails curled into a shape not unlike a question mark. The nearest islands may have experienced some unpleasantness, but I could expect to see no more than two- to five-meter-high waves for anything past Marineford. Sabaody experienced two, per Shukaku’s testimony.

With that worry…somewhat quelled, I went back to checking over the newspaper headlines. Because what else could I do?

Something more important came up.

“A…war?” Nami read aloud.

So much for Jinbe’s hopes. I sighed aloud, then held out my hand. “Nami, can I see that?”

Nami practically hurled the paper at me, and I opened it on the lawn, scanning the details that the World Government deemed appropriate to release for public consumption.

The newspaper was one of the single greatest pieces of fiction I’d seen since arriving in One Piece. Aside from the World Government playing the victim angle to the hilt when it came to declaring the Impel Down raid an “unprovoked” attack, there was no mention of the fact that our attack had been a success. The World Government was pretending not to know why anyone would be anywhere near the damned place, phrases like “sources say” and “persons unknown” made repeat appearances, and of course the prison was still there. Just, uh, no one should go and look. There were a few mentions of empty casket funerals and notorious prisoners being justly disposed of, but the real headline was reserved for the declaration of war that Nami had mentioned.

OPEN WAR: WHITEBEARDS ATTACK G-5 MARINE BASE.

Well, since Whitebeard had clearly been spotted in the New World, there was no way the Impel Down mini-tsunami could be blamed on him. Cold comfort, though.

The article went on to discuss the damage done by the old man earthquaking the hell out of the island the base had been on, though I knew he was precise enough to only flatten the base itself. There was something about Marco the Phoenix doing some damage or other, but none of that seemed to compare to the panic over Whitebeard himself acting on offense. Something, something, “campaign of terror” and other fun buzzwords.
Lies and slander, per usual.

Shaking my head slightly, I made a mental note to ask what about G-5 made it a good target for getting turned into a pancake. Aside from being a Marine base in the New World (which was in the freaking article), I didn’t know anything about it. Then I went back to the Impel Down article and checked for names.

Oh. “Hey, Ace? This says you’re dead,” I said aloud, sort of confused. Sure, the editor of the newspaper had chosen a much more bombastic way to say it, but there it was.

Yes, Ace had been reported captured, but using unilateral statements like that without the body in hand or a head on a pike almost invited the universe to prove otherwise. That was why those kinds of morbid public displays had been invented. Still didn’t see much point in the theater of it all, but working off shinobi logic clearly didn’t help me predict the World Government’s actions.

But for the most part, I was just relieved we’d called the Whitebeards within a few hours of escaping Impel Down. Letting them think that the mission to rescue Ace had failed that badly would have been unspeakably cruel.

“And I’m sure you can tell the rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated,” was Ace’s completely blithe response. “I should send them a postcard from San Faldo.”

Because of course it was. It wasn’t like he’d almost been disappeared and then gotten his head cut off in Marineford or something. The World Government hadn’t given us nearly its best shot because they figured that Impel Down and its expanded garrison would have been enough.

Now that they knew the prison had proved inadequate, what would happen?

**Likely more and more pathetic attempts to counter us. They lash out blindly in the dark,** Isobu scoffed regardless of my thoughts on the matter, and I felt his chakra surge on ahead of our little mini-fleet as he decided to take out his annoyance on the local wildlife. **We have both been cheated of a decent fight by their ignorance.**

*I suppose that’s what happens when we don’t play by their rules. They’re too busy scrambling to react effectively.* I turned a page idly, frowning. *But they at least seem to know what happens when people target Whitebeards.*

**And to think, they have no evidence that we are, in fact, working together,** Isobu remarked, as though he hadn’t been a major part of why the Marines were clueless. **A coincidence?**

*They’re hoping it’s not, because it reduces the number of enemies. Probably.* I bit my lip for a second. “We still have things to do in Paradise before we meet up with Captain Whitebeard. I can see a few problems coming up soon.”

“We already have a rendezvous point, so the rest is simple. Not easy, maybe, but simple,” Ace piped up, looking over my shoulder and reading the headlines. He shrugged and said, “The Marines’ staging area has to be Marineford, so we’re gonna avoid it.” As I folded the paper, he added, “Some of our subordinate crews are on this side of the Red Line, so we can use them to monitor Marine activity if we have to. And we are basically outgunning everyone within a thousand miles to start with.”

“That’s something,” was my flat response. I still didn’t like the situation, but at this point there was nothing I could do about what actions the Whitebeards would take. *Ah, well.* I held out the stack of bounty posters, for the Straw Hats alone, and Luffy snatched them up immediately. “Have fun with
Luffy grinned so widely that he almost managed to pull off a capital D shape. I still wasn’t sure if that was down to his rubber abilities or what. “I’m gonna hang these in our room!” And then he was gone.

“Luffy, I want to see mine first!” Sanji shouted, taking off after him.

Ace sat down next to me as the Straw Hats fussed, probably not cautious enough about their new, inflated bounties. “Did you get one?”

I handed the last poster to him. “Nope. Utakata did.”

Ace, to his credit, held in his laughter for about four seconds after seeing it.

“It’s less ugly than Sanji’s,” I said mildly, while Ace cackled. Good thing his ribs had mostly knit back together. “And the World Government probably doesn’t want to admit that a bunch of total nobodies turned Impel Down upside-down. Monster accompaniment or not.”

“Ahaha… Nah, they wouldn’t,” Ace gasped, wiping away a tear. “Honestly, I’m half-amazed they even admitted Impel Down was attacked. Usually they just ignore things that could make ‘em look bad.”

“If we hadn’t deliberately left hundreds of witnesses, they might have.” Which brought up another concern. “Speaking of witnesses, actually, what’s going to happen to Luffy’s crew now that he’s punched out a Celestial Dragon in public and escaped retribution? The World Government might not have the troops to respond now, but they will eventually. And those fights aren’t ones the Straw Hats are ready for.”

Ace gave a thoughtful little hum, leaning back on the lawn. “They have potential.”

“They still haven’t reached it yet,” I reminded him, frowning. “Especially not Gaara and Fū. They’re not even done growing.”

The Straw Hats needed a safe space to train. While I probably could have made mincemeat of Impel Down on my own, the kids weren’t there yet. Even if I wasn’t the strongest of the jinchūriki, Isobu and I coordinated better than any other pair. Having Isobu rip an access hole in the walls wasn’t beyond me, nor was simply tearing through the inmates and guards. I would just have lived with killing that many people, because being on my own didn’t make a mission impossible. Just messy.

They weren’t on that level at all.

“Pops would know a place,” Ace said, because my doubts probably showed on my face. “The Grand Line is pretty rough, but there’s always a place to hide and work on things like that, if you know where to look.”

“Do you think Luffy would accept that kind of offer from the guy you wanna make the Pirate King?” I asked.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Ace picked at his bandages, frowning. “And hell, I need to train. Freaky Devil Fruit or no, I still should’ve been able to knock Teach’s head in. Or dodge all his stupid attacks.” Ace rolled his eyes skyward. “Guess that’s what I get for not working on haki.”

“I still barely know what haki even is,” I admitted. But I could probably teach basic taijutsu skills.
Gai had given me that much, and my life had refined it. Still, could these people even use it? “And I’m not sure the Straw Hats know either. That should be where we start.”

“‘We?’” Ace repeated, his eyes widening.

“At this point, there’s not much point denying it, is there?” I asked, then shook my head in something akin to exasperation. “When the war comes, I’m going to stand with the Whitebeard Pirates. I—”

Ace cut me off. I was used to that, but not to the particular way he decided to express his feelings. Much like Naruto, Obito, and Kushina before him, Ace snatched me up in a bear hug. The main difference was that Ace was disproportionately strong for his size and could use it. He proceeded to lift me into the air and spin me around. I knew better than to fight it—having learned that lesson as a child when dealing with Kushina—and let myself go limp.

“Hah!” Ace crowed victoriously, “Welcome to the crew, sister!”

That word made my insides clench unpleasantly as Hayate’s face flashed across my mind’s eye. I still—I still had people back home waiting for me. People whose futures I hadn’t secured to the best of my abilities. People who I cared about as much as they did about me.

And I’d caved.

*Dammit.*

“Ace—”

Ace set me down, still grinning almost exactly like his brother would. I had to hold out my arms to keep my balance, and then he caught my shoulder and saved me the trouble. “Thatch is going to explode. And Izo—oh man—”

“I haven’t joined yet, Ace,” I tried to say, but it didn’t appear to matter.

“You said ‘yet,’” Ace pointed out, unperturbed.

So I had. Still… “I’m not joining a division. No way in hell.”

“I can’t really see you as a part of one. Isobu either,” Ace admitted, after a brief pause. “Subordinate captain?”

Maybe. We’d still have to see what would happen in the coming war. If there was enough pushing against me joining the Whitebeards, I would do what I had to. I wasn’t looking forward to fighting in two wars in one lifetime, but I was a soldier. It was what I’d trained for.

“That might work,” I said at last, meeting Ace’s grin with a weak smile of my own. “Or at least we’ll make the alliance formal.”

Ace rocketed off, probably going to spread the news, and I retreated to the railing once again. I needed someone to talk to who wouldn’t be quite so pro-pirate, and there were few options here. When I passed a thousand-beri bill to the News Coo, I had a few seconds to myself to contemplate my choices as it flew off.

I threw myself over the railing and ran across the waves to Isobu’s back.

*Your mind is in turmoil,* Isobu said as I darted up and across his shell, toward his head.
He could call it that. My hands didn’t shake as I climbed down onto Isobu’s crown of spikes, but it was a near thing. With the sea spray whipping across us both, I lowered myself onto my stomach and wrapped one arm around one of his spikes. I’m... I’m not sure what I’m doing. Not anymore.

Isobu made a reassuring noise, which sent a dozen waves through the water around us in defiance of the current. Tell me a little of what you are thinking. We will work through it.

And I did.

“—so be good for Kei and the Whitebeard Pirates, Naruto! We’ll see you soon, okay?” Kushina’s voice concluded, while Komushi grinned.

“Okay, Mom!” Naruto said. “And thanks for not killing Kei-sensei for the whole Impel Down thing.”

“She wouldn’t let anything happen to you. And I’m sure you wouldn’t let something so interesting happen without you, either,” Kushina’s voice grumbled good-naturedly. More sincerely, she said, “Take care of each other.”

“Look alive, little guy, for when Uncle B stops by!”

“Sure thing, Octopops!” Naruto replied, beaming. “Bye, Mom!”

Naruto and I said our goodbyes, and then we hung up the receiver.

“I’m gonna go see if Usopp needs any help with the exploding ammo, if he’s awake,” Naruto said, hopping off the chair. “We’re still training later, right?”

“Right,” I said, and Naruto bolted. Once he was gone, I tapped my finger gently against Komushi’s dial, trying to decide if I wanted to call the Whitebeards or not. While Ace had of course broken the news to his crewmates the other day, I hadn’t spoken to them directly. Maybe I ought to, if I was planning on fully committing myself to their side of the war.

But they already knew I would.

I patted Komushi on the head and walked away.

The Straw Hats’ library wasn’t the biggest ship-board one I’d seen, but only because the Moby Dick was so much larger than the Thousand Sunny. Either way, it was a convenient spot to keep all the transponder snails we’d picked up. Without Kuromushi’s unfriendly mug chasing the larger snails around, we could even keep them in one area without worrying that they’d kill each other.

I’d also finally gotten the Straw Hats’ snail numbers from Franky, so we could call them even from another sea when we finally went our separate ways.

I had to imagine that Ace appreciated that bonus nearly as much as I did. We both had people to keep track of on this proud little ship.

Over the past two days, everyone had decided who was splitting up and going where. The Revolutionaries planned to head to Momoiro, wherever that was, to reestablish the kingdom that Ivankov had been forced to abandon upon being sent to Impel Down. Once they had that sorted out, they’d likely reestablish their ties to Dragon’s main group and figure out where he wanted them. If there was anything to be said for the man’s mysterious operating procedure, it was that it kept his faction well out of the spotlight. Mr. 3 and Bon-Bon were going with them, though Luffy had looked like his pet turtle had died at the latter’s announcement (despite the little detail that our
groups weren’t going to diverge for a few days yet).

**Hmph.**

*Only a turn of phrase, Isobu.*

Buggy the Clown, despite his fifteen million beri bounty and lack of an established power base, had lucked into yet another ridiculous coincidence. His crew had apparently been searching for him and had been in the process of debating whether to chase him into Impel Down when the news of the attack hit. His circus-themed menagerie had been overjoyed to have their captain back and, though he still obviously disliked Luffy and everyone remotely associated with him, we parted company on almost amiable terms. I still didn’t like him, but wished him well solely because it was the done thing.

The cultists—*groupies*—were going to be sticking with us in spite of entreaties from the Buggy Pirates. Yugito didn’t want them sticking around because their pirate-y instincts kicked in harder the more time they spent at sea, but wasn’t making any headway with persuasion. While we had the undying loyalty of the newly-dubbed Cobalt Lioness Pirates, most of them were basically glorified cannon fodder. If they were going to form the basis of a fleet, their best bet was to look to the Straw Hats or the Whitebeards, because we had no use for them. A pity, then, that thus far *they wouldn’t leave.*

That was Yugito’s problem now.

I climbed down from the library and headed back to the deck, while Utakata looked out to sea with a spyglass against his right eye.

I had a design for him, at least. It was just a work in progress with a lot of hitches (and stitches), because Utakata was kind of a control freak. Not that I blamed him for it.

Still, now that Utakata had admitted what his problem was, he was less standoffish with the Straw Hats. While he wasn’t going to be a willing participant in group hugs with Luffy or anything, he had been roped into a few of their silly arguments and even felt up to creating a bubble light show for them. With Yugito and Ace’s affinity for all things that burned, the results were fascinating even in daylight.

But Akainu’s continued existence still preyed on his mind.

Saiken was working on him. Sort of.

“This plan’s awful, lonely, and has too much lava in it,” Saiken had complained, about one harebrained scheme or another.

“I’m not arguing with you about this,” was Utakata’s snappish response at the time.

I did say “sort of.”

Yugito had required no persuasion, from Matatabi or anyone else. She was going to meet up with Killer B one way or another, she said. Since Naruto was going to see his mother again whether I had to punch a mountain in half to get there or not, we were her best bet and actually wanted her to come along just as much as she wanted to make the trip. To that end, she was snoozing on the top spar of the *Sunny*’s main mast like a leopard in the Serengeti and not worrying about the rest of what bothered us.

*If we make it out of this sea without running into at least one of the admirals, I will be*
surprised, Isobu put in. And disappointed.

Same here, minus the disappointment part. But I’m sure Utakata and Saiken would agree with you. I crossed the deck without interacting with Utakata. He needed a bit of space.

Instead of bothering Utakata, I headed to the other side of the deck and sat on the railing, next to where Jinbe appeared to be meditating in the early morning light.

I honestly wished I could relax that much, even at whatever-in-the-morning, but I’d been up and about in order to call the Red Force when I was nearly certain the crew would be sober. I’d… underestimated them, somewhat. Shanks hadn’t been sober a single time I’d spoken to him prior to that point, so why start? If he’d been going dry while visiting the Whitebeards, I’d missed it.

But that dreaded snail call was over, so I could try and enjoy the morning I was going to have to face anyway. Hopefully, Sanji had a pot of coffee going. Maybe I’d be able to offer Jinbe some, too.

Jinbe, who’d told me the other day that his position as a Warlord was a thing of the past thanks to the Impel Down jailbreak, was accompanying us to the Moby Dick. I wasn’t sure how the World Government would even know he’d followed us out, what with Impel Down resembling a sinkhole more than anything now, but he was thinking ahead for the sake of his crew. I hadn’t even known that Jinbe’s tattoo was a symbol of that crew until he told me—and about Fisher Tiger’s legacy.

Personally, given what happened, I was still amazed that Jinbe could look at humans without any sign of hesitation or disgust. And I was human.

I wonder if we will be required to get those mustache tattoos if we are considered members of the Whitebeard Pirates now, Isobu remarked, while I was brooding. My shell would blunt every device they could hope to use.

I shrugged, though Isobu couldn’t see the gesture. I crossed my legs on top of the strange cannonball-repelling wood that made up the railing, bracing my elbows against my knees and looking out to sea. I think I have enough ink on me for one lifetime. Everything else is functional.

I would argue that, in fact, the image depicting Tsuruya and me is not functional. The seals underneath it are, however.

Oh, hush, I grumbled despite the heat rising to my ears. I’m still not getting close to another set of needles until I have to. Wearing the oversized Whitebeard-symbol-bearing coat would have to do for now.

There would always be a part of me that held back from more permanent measures, with or without my dislike of needles.

Fū chose to make her debut then, flouncing out of the door that mostly led to the kitchen. In the boys’ section, I could feel Gaara moving around, likely rousing his crewmates. Given the thin line of smoke emerging from the little chimney, breakfast was imminent, and thus Sanji probably wasn’t among the night owls Gaara pestered.

“Ah, what a nice day!” Fū sighed in contentment. As she started doing morning stretches, she said cheerfully, “I wonder what adventure we’ll have today?”

“One would hope for a single quiet day,” Jinbe murmured without opening his eyes.
“Quiet is boring!” Luffy’s voice rang out, from one of the windows leading to the cabin proper.

**Nothing is quiet with these humans around.**

High overhead, I was almost sure I heard Chōmei’s huge wings buzz at a higher pitch. They sounded like a distant airplane.

Isobu muffled a noise that might’ve been laughter if he was on the surface, but all I heard was the sound of water lashing harmlessly at our ships. Still, his amusement trickled through our link.

*What did he say?*

**Ah, nothing important.**

Uh-huh. Still, it was too early to argue like Saiken and Utakata did. That was probably why Saiken was traveling solely underwater now, towing Matatabi and Yang Kurama along in giant bubbles. The other two were probably offering him terrible advice, too.

But I didn’t have much more time to worry about that.

“Ship sighted on our starboard side,” Utakata called, snapping the spyglass down to portable size again.

Yugito snapped awake, dropping from the rigging to the deck without a whisper of sound.

“No.” Utakata tossed his head, ruffling his long bangs. He said, “Pirates, of course. They should be within shouting distance in a few hours, if the wind holds.”

“Oh, oh, I’ll go check and see if it’s someone friendly!” Fū suggested, shifting her weight from foot to foot eagerly. Sooner or later, she’d break out her wings and it’d be too late to stop her. “It’ll be a snap!”

“The captain should be able to decide that,” said Gaara, appearing from behind Fū like an extra shadow.

“You’re no fun.”

“You’re too careless.”

Well, wasn’t this just precious? It was like having a little Yugito and Ace arguing in front of us without the originals needing to raise their voices.

“We should wait until after breakfast,” Jinbe suggested, having gotten to his feet and joined the rest of us at the railing. He looked down at all of us, then said, “I can keep watch.”

“We’ll bring you breakfast,” Fū volunteered, then quickly disappeared into the ship.

I leaned on the railing, weight mainly on my elbows. I hated waiting games.

After breakfast, there was still time to burn. Thus, while waiting for the pirates to show up, I visited the Revolutionaries on their ship. Naruto came along, of course, because they were his friends and to check on Kuromushi. Luffy bounced over to Iva’s ship to play with Bon-Bon, and Fū and Gaara followed to keep everyone out of trouble. Ace also accompanied us because, as he was nominally a guest of the Straw Hat Pirates, he had nothing better to do other than observe their
general operating procedure. Sanji wouldn’t even let him wash dishes, and Chopper enforced the ban on unnecessary roughness with sedative-filled syringes.

“Iva,” Naruto said, while Kuromushi dug its little teeth into his sleeve, “can you get into contact with any of the other Revolutionaries from here?”

“With the snails we liberated from the Impel Down garrison, anything is possible!” Ivankov declared, as dramatic as ever. While I didn’t know what he’d been like before his stint in prison, I got the impression that Impel Down had failed to dampen Ivankov’s spirits one bit. He’d practically started a second revolution inside of a supermax, for fuck’s sake.

“Okay,” Naruto said as he crossed his arms. “But I need to check in because I’m a week late on the mission they gave me. And I don’t know for sure, but I’m probably not gonna be able to do any more.” On this last point, Naruto looked back at me with his puppy-dog expression going full force.

“Do you want your mother to kill me?” I asked, incredulous. “She let me get away with letting you into Impel Down, but I don’t think she’ll be that forgiving next time.”

“I handled that mission just fine! I just beat up a bunch of jerks with my Shadow Clones,” Naruto protested. “I wasn’t even that hard.”

“And?” I pressed, while Fū gave Naruto a congratulatory slap on the back.

“And—get off!—and I might’ve had to, uh, follow them for like two days,” Naruto said, a bit sheepishly, though he elbowed Fū away. “And memorize their patrol patterns and their faces. And steal ink for the explosives I had to make to distract them?”

Well, at least someone had been having an easier time making bombs than I’d had with seals in general.

“I thought you said it was easy?” Fū complained. “I take back the congratulations.”

“It wasn’t like I don’t know how to do that stuff,” Naruto pointed out defensively. “It just took a while and I had to plan, like everyone keeps telling me. But I handled them just fine.”

“I think the way you actually approached the problem was a good one,” Gaara put in. When the other two young jinchūriki looked at him, away from their impending argument, he just said, “He was thinking like a shinobi. It worked.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “That it did.” Suppressing the urge to swear in front of impressionable ears and minds, I just muttered, “Make your call, Naruto. I wanna hear what this ‘Uncle Sabo’ of yours has to say.”

Then I’d figure out if I needed to break his legs. And his boss’s legs.

Ivankov may have snickered, but when I looked at him to confirm my suspicions, he was all business.

...Okay, so maybe I wouldn’t break anyone’s legs. Ivankov had been helpful in what capacity he could offer us, and Naruto had done well enough as a Revolutionary despite the lack of guaranteed support from anyone but Yang Kurama. Maybe Kushina wouldn’t freak out when she found out just how much trouble we kept getting into, because I kept doing all the fussing for her.

While we waited for one of the stolen snails to connect to wherever the hell the Revolutionaries
had set up shop, I happened to look away from the impending conference call and take stock of everyone else. Gaara and Fū were still both arguing in hushed tones, though she put more effort into it, while Inazuma was as stoic as a statue. I wasn’t quite sure when he’d gotten here, but he was so omnipresent that maybe it would have been better to ask when he wasn’t by Ivankov’s side. The other Revolutionaries might or might not have joined up with Ivankov while they lived in Newkama Land, but they seemed interested in learning more about their new (old?) boss.

Ace and Luffy, however, looked like the wind had gone out of their sails. I remembered seeing the sudden shuttering of Ace’s emotions whenever I brought up something that dug into old wounds I hadn’t known about, but it was the first time anything had brought Luffy’s spirits low. I had never been one to press people for details if it didn’t seem like they wanted to talk, but any memory capable of affecting them both so deeply had to be an old, shared pain.

“…Luffy?” Gaara asked, in a voice so quiet that I wasn’t sure the others could hear it.

Luffy, of course, snapped back to normal with only that much prompting. “It’s all right, Gaara. I was just remembering Sabo. This Rebellion guy just has the same name.”

Gaara nodded slowly. “I understand. I’ll tell Sanji to keep the sake safe.”

I met Ace’s eyes over Luffy’s shoulder, and he shook his head just slightly with his jaw clenched. I wouldn’t ask, then.

“Identification, please,” said a young woman’s voice.

Ivankov and Naruto both rattled off a string of numbers each, and then Ivankov added, “If you don’t have a white transponder snail connected…”

“We do, Emporio Ivankov.” There was a pause. Then, “EMPORIO IVANKOV?!”

“Hey, I’m here too!” Naruto interrupted, shoving his way closer to the snail.

“And this number—Namikaze Naruto?! Hang on a moment, ple—HEY!”

The transponder snail’s expression shifted from that of a shocked secretary—or so I assumed—to copying someone else entirely. A smudge of sorts appeared over the snail’s left eyestalk, darkening it, and its eyes widened. “Naruto, you finally checked in! Where the hell were you?!”

“Hi, Uncle Sabo!” Naruto said, grinning like a particularly clever prank had gone off without a hitch.

“I’m not that old!” the Revolutionary on the other end snapped, before catching himself. “Wait, no—Naruto, what happened on that last mission? You were supposed to come back almost a week and a half ago.”

“I didn’t get to tell you this, but I found some of my family,” Naruto replied, bouncing in place. “Kei-sensei was already gonna go bust a guy out of Impel Down, so I remembered what I heard about the Revolutionaries stuck down there and decided to try contacting them since I didn’t have your number.”

“I... That is nowhere near what we asked, Naruto,” Sabo said, as a thud resounded from the other end of the call. Sounded like we weren’t just capable of aggravating Whitebeard Pirates. Our ability to drive other people past the point of frustration was universal! “Are you safe right—wait, what am I saying? Ivankov, what happened down there?”
“Mmmfufufu, your smallest agent did his work well,” Ivankov replied, while Naruto preened and I debated testing his taijutsu skills later. “After participating in the Impel Down break-in, Narutoboy delivered the black transponder snail to me. I’ll be returning with it shortly.”

“...I have so many questions.” Sabo heaved a put-upon sigh, then said, “Ivankov, I’ll call back in five minutes and give you a set of coordinates. Meet us there.”

“Of course, Sabo-boy,” Ivankov responded.

“I outgrew that nickname when I was seventeen,” the supposedly mature adult griped, and then hung up with a click.

“Rude,” Ivankov commented, shaking his head.

“How long were you in prison?” Fū asked, breaking the spell over us all that had lingered after the call ended.

“Oh, five years or so. Nothing so terrible,” Ivankov said, shrugging.

“Did you shank someone?” Fū clapped her hands together, grinning. “Tell me!”

That seemed to be the cue for the rest of us to leave. Gaara created a sand slide back over to the Sunny, though only Naruto and Luffy rode it. Ace and I just hopped back over to the other ship, like nautical parkour was a thing we did every day.

Probably counted as an everyday occurrence by now.

Nonetheless, the memory of Sabo—Ace and Luffy’s Sabo—hung over the group like a shroud. Neither Gaara and I had known him, but the brothers needed a bit of time to recover. I didn’t know if Ace and Luffy had had a falling out with him, or if he’d been forced to move away, or died, but it didn’t appear that they thought the Revolutionary was the same person.

But I wasn’t sure. One Piece was an idealistic series, or at least that was my best guess from what scraps I could remember. It was in the shōnen genre, like the series named after Naruto. How likely was it that two characters—people—could share a name when the owner was important to Luffy’s life?

Still, while Ace and Luffy disappeared into the Sunny with Gaara, I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Naruto?” I asked quietly, as the pirate ship in the distance continued its slow approach. “Could you please show me what Sabo looks like?”

“Eh? Sure, Kei-sensei,” Naruto said, and poofed into a different shape entirely.

I scrutinized the appearance of the man I assumed had been the one we’d just been talking to. Or rather, the person Naruto had been talking to. I hadn’t felt it necessary to level threats, and Luffy and Ace had both been abnormally quiet.

Sabo, per Naruto’s transformation, was a blond young man with a burn scar over his left eye that ran backward toward his ear. He had a black top hat with goggles strapped over it, in a style matching the pair on Naruto’s head apart from the blue lenses. Black overcoat, leather gloves, knee-high boots… The main thing that caught my attention was his cravat. While the one Naruto wore occasionally was just glaringly out of place, it seemed to suit Sabo. Maybe it was just the style wherever he’d come from.
Then Utakata’s voice asked, “Who the hell is that supposed to be?”

“A guy we just talked to on the snail,” Naruto replied, shrugging as he poofed back to normal in a cloud of smoke. “We’re probably gonna meet him in a bit if we stay with Iva and the others.”

"Joy," Utakata muttered.

But, as though to prove Utakata wrong, Ivankov reported a few minutes later that they were sticking with him. Utakata might’ve rolled his eyes, but he didn’t mind and neither did anyone else.

“Guess that solves that,” Naruto said, grinning.

Utakata made a neutral noise, looking out to sea again at the sloooowly approaching pirate ship. “Fair enough. But that’s for later. Ask someone if they know any red pirate ships.”

“Shit.”

Naruto whirled on the spot at the same time Utakata and I just turned, and all three of us pinned Zoro to the Sunny’s deck with our stares.

Utakata spoke up first. “Here, take this and tell us what that is.”

“Is it an enemy ship?” Naruto demanded, bounding up onto the railing just as Zoro brought the spyglass to his right eye.

“Close enough,” Zoro said grimly, after he’d peered through it for a few seconds. “If we’re not careful, this could get rough. That’s the Kuja Pirates’ flag.”

“Kuja…” Naruto blinked. “Are they supposed to be some big-name pirates? I feel like I’ve heard that name before…”

“Their captain’s one of the Seven Warlords,” Zoro said, handing the spyglass to Utakata again. “Boa Hancock, the Pirate Empress.”

“Is that anything like the Pirate King?” Naruto asked.

“…No.” Zoro blinked, as though the question had genuinely never occurred to him. Still, he had to have built up immunity to Luffy distracting him with tangents—or being distracted by them—because he continued a few seconds later. “But that’s not the point. The Kuja Pirates don’t leave survivors.”

“Two out of three kills is a decent ratio, since the last is our ally,” Yugito’s voice said from above us. She’d gotten back into the rigging at some point and was once again stretched out along the main spar. “But three out of four is better. If we keep going at this rate, we may end up clearing the World Government roster of Warlords entirely.”

I waved my hand irritably. “Not the point, people. Zoro, you know more about the Kuja Pirates than we do. What could we be up against?”

Zoro shook his head slowly. “I’ve heard that ships hit by the Kuja Pirates just end up drifting out of their territory, with statues strewn across the deck. No one wants to get too close anymore.” He paused to think it over, then added, “They call the three lead Kuja Pirates…the Gorgon sisters, I
think."

...Great. Fucking petrification powers, I thought as I slapped a hand to my face and let out a frustrated hiss. No one gets a moniker referencing Medusa without them. Still, now we need to deal with it.

Or we could, Isobu reminded me, and Chōmei’s wings buzzed even louder, far above our heads.

Impel Down apparently didn’t get the message across. We need to change tactics.

“Kei-sensei?” Naruto asked.

“I’m willing to bet my bottom beri that we’re up against someone who can turn other people to stone,” I muttered.

Yugito blinked. “You sound very sure of that.”

“Call it a hunch.” Not like I could explain Greek mythology quickly enough to make it make sense. Then, “Get everyone up. We need to decide what to do, and if it’s worth sending a strike team like with the Blackbeards.”

In short order, we all got to work. We would not be sitting ducks.

We were more like sea mines.

Chapter End Notes

And sea mines do terrible things to ships.

Hello, everyone. Since we're officially out of buffer chapters now, I decided to upload this chapter a bit sooner than normal to give myself more time until next Friday's upload. We'll see what happens then!

(Incidentally, the Red Hair Pirates went on a "rampage" in the New World, where newspaper coverage is spotty. Some reports travel slower than others.)
"Now, what happens next?" asked Hancock.

Utakata peered down at her notebook, then said, "Step three should be to make chocolates, I think."

"Chocolates?" Hancock repeated, a faintly puzzled frown on her face. "Is this a part of some ritual I don't know of?"

"There's a few local holidays, at least from what Rosie told me, but my point is that your paramour thinks with his stomach. It may get you as far as a date." Utakata held out his hand, "May I have the pen for a moment?"

"Oh, of course." Hancock's fountain pen looked like a serpent, of course. While Utakata scribbled something else in her notes, Hancock leaned her head to one side and on the knuckles of her right hand and said, "So, what exactly is a 'date' and how does it help me marry the man of my dreams?"

I could see Utakata visibly pause at that. He finished writing, handed the pen back, and then sat on the railing next to Hancock. "I'm too sober for this conversation."

"You're about the only one who is," said Ace, while handing over a massive mug of what was probably heavy-duty ale of some kind. "Here."

"I'm almost sure we can't get drunk," Yugito commented, while Utakata downed the entire drink in a few gulps. "You'd drown first."

"Can't drown," Utakata replied. "It'll have to be one or the other, and I choose 'drink.'"

"Oh, this could easily be step four!" Hancock concluded, and went back to writing in her notebook. "Drinking... contest." She leaned back against her massive snake lawn chair-slash-throne and shouted, "More drinks!"

"Does she know that this isn't how this is supposed to go?" I asked Jinbe in a careful whisper.

"Honestly, I'm not sure how 'this' is supposed to go anymore." Jinbe sighed, leaning against the red rails of the Kuja ship. "So much for a plan."
"I just wanna get this out of the way right now," Ace said, peering across the waves at the Kuja Pirates' ship. And pointedly not setting it on fire, though he was perfectly capable of lining up a shot and immolating everything at this range. "For the record, this is a bad idea."

"We keep records?" Naruto asked, hanging from the rigging by his ankles. Today was apparently a day for being a spider-monkey.

"We have a captain's log," Luffy said, "but I don't really write in it. Nami and Robin have a lot more to say on paper. I like doing things!"

"Not the point." Ace arched an eyebrow at the exchange nonetheless, then turned his attention back to Jinbe, whose suggestion had sparked this whole discussion. "We could outrun them or we could outfight them. I'm not sure we can out-talk them, not when Hancock can apparently turn just about anyone to stone."

"That's only a guess," I said.

"But it's one of your guesses, Kei-sensei, which basically means it's right," Naruto piped up again. Before I could stop him, he continued, "That's what you always do for Dad back home, right?"

I did my best to shrug casually when I felt Yugito and Utakata's eyes on me. While I didn't recall if Yugito had any special rank or links to the administration of her village, I knew Utakata did. As the Fourth Mizukage's husband, he ended up having a voice in Kirigakure when the previous Mizukage might have told him to sit down and shut up instead. And he, of all people, was probably more aware of my actual role in village politics than most of the other jinchūriki. After all, his village had been awfully determined to recapture Isobu for much of my childhood.

**As though I would go willingly**, Isobu said, rolling his eye.

"I'm sure they weren't going to ask."

"What does that really mean?" Ace asked, while the rest of us sort of stood around and didn't say anything.

"Is it like Gaara's secret?" Luffy asked Utakata, who stared back at him with a blank expression.

"Should I have the slightest idea what you're talking about?"

"Maybe not!" Luffy brushed off the brusqueness with his usual ease. "Anyway, we can go to them or let them come to us. Which one is it? Because the Cuckoo—"

"Kuja," Ace corrected on reflex.

"—Pirates are really strong, right?" Luffy concluded, not apparently noticing. "My crew is strong, but a lot of the other guys are really weak. They shouldn't fight."

"Bringing too many people to a negotiation can be seen as hostile," Jinbe commented, as though he hadn't been the one to suggest our new strategy. While I admitted that maybe killing everyone and
leaving no witnesses wasn't great for getting a message across, Jinbe was the one who brought up the idea to actually treat with the Kuja Pirates and their capricious captain. "Besides, we are in a powerful position. Isobu and the others make that, at least, a certainty."

"We could try something more interesting than pure negotiation," Yugito suggested, since my plan to blow up the ship had been vetoed and neither Ace nor Yugito were allowed to set it on fire. "Just to mix things up."

Utakata eyed her warily. "I thought you said you weren't trained in genjutsu interrogation."

"I'm not, but that is not what I meant."

As Yugito's gaze swept across us, I had to wonder what she was thinking. When her eyes landed squarely on Ace, I wondered a little less.

Ace looked like a man trying to brace for impact. "This had better not involve me going one-on-one with another Warlord when I don't have to. Been there, done that, don't need a repeat."

Yugito tilted her head to one side. "In a sense?"

Utakata very slowly reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. With his voice a little muffled by the sleeve over his hand, he said, "You're talking about seduction."

"What's seduction? Is it something you eat?" Luffy asked before anyone could get a word in edgewise, while Ace started to blush all the way to the tips of his ears.

"No, that's what it's called when lightning travels from one end of a power line to another," Naruto said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Like with Lightning jutsu, right? Right, Yugi?"

"The word you're looking for is 'conduction,' Naruto," I corrected him.

Luffy, of course, got stuck on something else. "What's a power line?" Then, "Ace, your face is all red!"

Ace sputtered as he got his voice back. "Hell no. No. No, no no no, no." He managed not to flail his arms, but only because he looked squarely into Yugito's face with his hands on his hips and finished with, "No."

Oh, goodie. Thoroughly off-track once again.

Yugito sighed. "That is not what I was talking about. Get your minds out of the gutter." This last was said with a pointed glare at Utakata, whose cheekbones were very faintly pink.

"Then what were you talking about?" I asked.

Jinbe looked like he wanted to jump into the sea and take his chances with the Sea Kings. He'd get more consistent focus out of them, even if it mostly amounted to perpetual hunger.

"I was going to suggest that we use a Shadow Clone under at least one Transformation layer to scout our enemies," Yugito said in a voice drier than Gaara's sand. "There's no sense in risking ourselves in the initial meeting. At least, not until we have our enemy's measure."

"Pretty sure the only one who can make those is me," Naruto said, frowning a little as he thought. "I don't know what happens if one of my clones turns to stone, though. Do I get the chakra back, or is it like when they blow up too far away?"
"I have no idea," I said, because I'd never heard of anyone turning a Shadow Clone to stone.

Paths of Pain? Sure, with a bit of Sage Mode shenanigans. People? Also confirmed, though I didn't know the name of the ninjutsu that caused it and the technique was at least theoretically reversible. Past that, anything that could forcibly modify the chemical or physical composition of a human against the subject's will tended to be life-threatening to the victim at minimum. I knew of at least one person who'd died after his chest had been hit by a "flesh-to-stone" effect, and that death had been agonizing by any measure.

"That still doesn't explain why you were looking at me like that," Ace said, having recovered from his most recent bout of embarrassment. With a cough to clear his throat, he added, "So, what was that about?"

"You have the highest bounty out of any of us, and thus a Shadow Clone in your likeness would attract the most attention." Yugito shrugged. While she cast a glance at the red ship that was slowly drawing closer, she didn't seem too concerned. "I also think that you were the one that the World Government was most interested in executing out of everyone in Impel Down, which may be a consideration in how the Kuja Pirates behave."

Luffy blinked. "So… What about—?"

This is taking too long, Isobu interrupted, rising from the depths like the giant sea monster of legend he was. While everyone on the Sunny could see him just by looking over the railing, he was careful not to allow his shell to breach the waves and reveal his position to anyone else. The Kuja Pirates wouldn't be able to see him on their approach until they hit him. Are we going or not?

Or until he hit them.

"That's our ride," I said, already hopping up onto the railing. "Do we know who's going?"

"Can I—"

"No, Naruto. You're staying here."

"This sucks!"

In the end, the actual group heading to visit the Kuja Pirates numbered seven. I was going, since I was a nosy busybody and one of our group's tanks. Utakata and Yugito were both curious and basically indestructible, so they got a free pass on the Isobu express, too. Luffy wanted to come along and no one could really tell him "no," given the lack of any higher authority to appeal to, and Ace was in the same boat. Figuratively speaking. As well as trying to keep Luffy out of trouble. Jinbe had to come with us because the whole parley was his idea, and there was no way to hold us all to it unless he was within arm's reach.

And finally, our insurance policy against betrayal or attack.

I heard that, Isobu complained.

Am I wrong?

…No.

Like I said. We were off to meet the Wicked Witch of the West. Now, if we all got turned into flying monkeys, the situation would match perfectly.
Boa Hancock. Oldest of the Gorgon sisters, leader of the Kuja Pirates, and supposedly the World's Most Beautiful Woman. On a ship pulled by hundred-foot-long sea serpents that were apparently so terrible even Sea Kings wouldn't bother trying to eat them.

And we were going to meet her on what amounted to her home turf, or at least a seagoing approximation of it. While traveling on the head of a giant crab-turtle monster that could tear their ship in half in a dozen different ways before even needing to open his jaws.

So, first impressions were kind of a thing.

Since Isobu traveled pretty low in the water when he was imitating a Nile crocodile, we were within sight of the...phalanx? Company? There were a lot of bows pointed in our direction, going by the stances the various crew members held as we approached. In a world that had discovered gunpowder and mass-produced personal firearms as well as naval cannons, I was honestly interested to see what this particular group of pirates could do.

As we got closer, I could also start to pick out the crew. The Kuja Pirates were an all-female crew according to both Jinbe and Utakata. I was seeing an astonishing number of bikinis on a dozen different body types behind the...holy hell their bows were alive. They were all the size of large constrictor snakes, but there was no way to be sure. Between Konoha's Forest of Death, the Land of Rainforests, and whatever biological bullshit had gone on in this world, my limited herpetology experience was less than useless.

Why couldn't my homeland have anything cooler than that? Friggin' oceans…

"How the hell do they string those?" I wondered aloud, before I could stop myself.

"String what?" Yugito asked distractedly.

"Their bows," I said, glancing over at her when she didn't really respond. "Which are made of snakes." In case anyone had missed that.

"I'm sorry, have you not noticed that they are all aiming at us?" Yugito said in response to my stare.

"That ought to be the captain, right?"

"How can you tell?" Luffy asked. He tilted his head all the way to one side. "No one here's done anything so they're not really hags or anything—"

"Do any of you hear what you're saying?" Ace demanded, while the rest of us continued to puzzle over pointless conundrums. So, really, it was like any other day on this trip.

"I am starting to regret not just taking care of this alone," Jinbe muttered.

"HEY," shouted one of the Kuja Pirates, "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!"

Ace slapped a hand over Luffy's mouth before he could answer.

"Thank you," said Jinbe, who was more diplomatic than any of us put together.
"We're…" Oh, crap. I couldn't lie on the spot to save my life. And yet I'd opened my mouth.

Thankfully, Yugito took over. "We're the vanguard of a larger fleet. Who are you?"

...Or not.

And so, the Kuja Pirates' first impression of us was probably that we were a bunch of lucky fools, not people who could flatten islands single-handedly. Sure, we were riding on a monstrous turtle, but Hancock's crew didn't fear Sea Kings if their homeland was literally smack in the middle of the Calm Belt. They were strong enough not to need to, even if I pretended that they didn't have overgrown sea snakes as draft animals pulling their flagship. And out of everyone on Isobu's wild ride, only half of us had recognizable mugshots in any local newspapers. Finally, the three who did were all men.

To the Kuja Pirates, we were probably too silly to be a real threat.

So their captain, when she appeared on deck in an exaggerated saunter, had nothing to fear from us.

Let me preface this next bit: Boa Hancock was beautiful. I could see why people would swoon over her despite her reputation for never leaving survivors and for being a freaking Warlord. From the top of her head to the points of her high heels, from her serpentine companion to her picture-perfect catwalk strut, she owned the persona attached to a title like "the World's Most Beautiful Woman." Very few people I'd ever met could or would put so much force of personality into being sexy.

It just didn't mean all that much to her intended audience.

"Identify yourselves, trespassers!" Hancock demanded, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she confronted us.

Speaking of first impressions…

"I swear, does no one read wanted posters anymore?" Yugito complained quietly.

"Silence!" demanded one of the other Kuja Pirates, for the sake of her captain.

"This is your last chance!" Hancock said, ignoring her underling. Crewmate? I was starting to get the idea that almost everyone was an underling to this woman.

Now, I wasn't the world's foremost expert on body language by any means, particularly on a planet to which I had certainly not been born. But Hancock's choice of pose to emphasize her point was a bit…odd. Rather than glaring or perhaps attacking for our collective non-response, she leaned back and continued to point at us, turning the entire idea of looking down on another human into something just weird. Looking down so much that she ended up looking up didn't really make any sense from a pragmatic standpoint, but perhaps her confidence was justified.

Is there not a small, ugly bird that drowns if it looks into the sky like that? Isobu asked. One with a wattle.

_Turkeys. You're thinking of turkeys,_ I thought, resting my chin on my hand. _And I'm pretty sure evolution wouldn't let them have that as a trait._

_Do I particularly look like I care?_

Given that I couldn't see his (lack of) expression from this angle…
"Doesn't that hurt her back?" Luffy asked, having escaped Ace's death grip on his head. While still wriggling out of anyone's control, given that he had almost all of Isobu's back as space to flee to, he added, "That kinda stuff is supposed to bother people who don't have bones made of rubber, right? Only Sanji can kinda—"

"Shut up!" Ace snapped, taking off after him.

Jinbe probably didn't deserve to be subjected to the hash we'd made out of negotiations. I felt sorry for him, really.

Hancock and all of the Kuja Pirates had gone silent at this.

"Sorry about that," I said, while everyone seemed to be either prepping sarcastic commentary, stunned, or sliding into despair at our various antics. I raised a hand and added, "And while the commander is busy, I'll extend apologies for trespassing in the Calm Belt on behalf of the Whitebeard Pirates."

Yugito blinked.

Jinbe stared at me.

"Not the Calm Belt alone. You are within the territorial waters of Amazon Lily." Hancock's eyes narrowed, while I internally swore at my and Isobu's total inability to navigate political boundaries. "This is a discussion best left for the same table. You have permission to come aboard… Some of you." Hancock pointed to me, Yugito, and then Jinbe. "You, you, and you. The rest stay on the turtle."

While Hancock turned to the other Kuja Pirates and started allowing her lieutenants to bark orders, Yugito and I exchanged looks with Utakata.

"I'm not worried about being left out, if that's what you're worried about," Utakata said, shrugging. "If things go well, we'll all be able to visit. If things don't, it won't matter."

"Okay. Keep Ace and Luffy from drowning while we're gone," I replied, though with perhaps a bit of teasing in my tone.

"It'd be a shame to have both of them die when we've put in so much effort," Utakata agreed. Then he got to his feet and climbed up Isobu's shell to supervise the brothers' impromptu sparring match more directly.

"Well then," Yugito said in a huff, though she cast a glance back at the other half of our negotiating group. "Shall we?"

"If it gets this meeting moving along slightly faster, we should," Jinbe said, though I was sure Yugito didn't really need that input. Without waiting for an answer or acknowledgement, Jinbe leapt from Isobu's head and down toward the deck of the Kuja Pirates' ship.

Yugito and I landed a moment later, bracketing Jinbe on each side in two near-identical crouches. While we were from different countries, some shinobi training seemed consistent.

Hancock lounged in the coils of her massive pet constrictor snake thing, treating it like a throne more than a pet. She, likewise, was flanked on either side by a pair of Kuja Pirates who were a bit unusual. One of them was approximately thirteen feet tall, with long green hair, a wide face and a forked tongue poking out of her nearly-as-wide mouth. The other was probably closer to eleven feet tall and built along the same parameters as Jinbe, with a portion of her long orange hair done
up in Princess Leia buns on steroids. If their capes and bikinis hadn't been nearly as elaborately adorned as Hancock's, I probably would have written them both off as bodyguards.

Hancock's eyes, meanwhile, were assessing me at the same time. She had to know who Jinbe was, since at one point they could have probably been called "coworkers," but Yugito and I were unknowns aside from our association with the Whitebeards. It didn't pay to be reckless.

"Jinbe," Hancock said finally, crossing one leg over the other. "You weren't at the meeting."

"The World Government didn't like the idea that I refused to fight in their war," Jinbe replied, squaring his stance though it didn't seem like we were heading for a fight. "Impel Down is nice this time of year."

Hancock shifted her weight onto her heels. "Don't tell me you escaped?"

I took back everything I had said about non-hostility, even in my own head. Yugito had picked up on it too—while her chakra had gotten subtler over the last month or so, her nails sharpened when she got tense.

"Jinbe, Marineford is...in a fragile state," Hancock said, and if there wasn't a hint of satisfaction there I'd call my ears a pair of liars. Her voice was much more serious as she continued, "Sengoku himself ordered me to find out who had attacked Impel Down and dispose of them."

"'Attacking' implies that we were unsuccessful," Yugito replied icily. "And that the prison still exists."

I was in the wrong position to elbow Yugito, but she got the hint when I glared at her. While I pinched the bridge of my nose hard enough to leave a mark, as was all too common ever since coming to this planet, Yugito at least didn't dig us any deeper.

"Impel Down is gone?" burst out the woman on Hancock's left, with the long green hair. "Sister—"

"I know," Hancock interrupted in a quiet voice. As her serpent reared up behind her head and she scratched under its chin, she said, "Sengoku kept that tidbit a secret, didn't he?"

"As he has many other things," Jinbe remarked darkly. "Tell me, did the meeting discuss why all seven of us were being called to Marineford in the first place?"

"The five of us," Hancock corrected, "were asked to fight the Whitebeard Pirates in a single, final confrontation." She leaned forward, lacing her fingers together under her chin as she took on a contemplative look. "Or at least that is what the World Government believes should happen. You clearly disagreed, and the last of our number failed to show. He was dismissed in absentia, afterward."

Jinbe nodded slowly. "He won't be a problem."

Mainly because nowadays Teach was doing time as fish food. If anything would even bother to eat him a week after being squished like an errant fly.

Hancock didn't say anything for a moment. Then, "A Warlord, Impel Down... You're clearly interesting people. Perhaps enough so that I can pretend I didn't see anything. You were never here."

Now, we might have resolved the situation with little more contact or comment, aside from possibly exchanging transponder snail numbers. Hancock didn't have a lot of information about the
outside world if she lived in the Calm Belt, and I doubted we'd get much of anything from inside the Calm Belt once we left. But hopefully something would end up coming of this nonviolent confrontation.

"GUM-GUM—"

And then Luffy happened.

"—ROCKET!"

A split second later, all of us could hear Ace shout in the distance, "Dammit, Luffy!"

Hancock's head jerked to the side as, one after another, everyone on the Kuja ship prepared for an attack that was really more Ace's overenthusiastic little brother's idea of getting around in style. She leveled her arm as though cocking a firearm, taking careful aim as a translucent pink heart appeared at the end of her fingertips.

"Pistol Kiss!" And Hancock shot Luffy square in the chest with her finger gun.

How the shit was that a sentence even in my head?

Whatever was supposed to happen didn't, though—instead of reeling or flinching, Luffy continued obliviously on his little flight path, bowling straight into Hancock with a mere "Ow!" after being shot. Hancock got knocked over the back of her snake throne with a surprised shriek, and the Kuja Pirates flew into a complete tizzy.

"We should have left him on the Sunny," Yugito said with a sigh.

As Hancock's two sisters sorted out the chaos—the green one picked Luffy out of the mess and held him out at arm's length, while the orange one barked orders—Jinbe, Yugito, and I mostly tried to stay out of the way. I had no idea why every single non-confrontation we got into was bound to have something go wrong, but it seemed to be a pattern as firmly set as the sun traveling across the sky.

"Luffy, was that really necessary?" Jinbe asked, when the green lady dropped Luffy from high enough that he bounced.

"I'm the captain," Luffy said as soon as he'd recovered. "Even if you're not a part of my crew, I'm responsible for my ship and my crew and Hammock is the biggest Warlord around here and she turns people to stone." He stood up and went on, "And Uta let me borrow his spyglass, and Sanji is a statue!"

I stared at him, and so did everyone else in the immediate area. …What?

"My sister didn't even aim at your ship!" said the orange sister, as scales started to appear on her arms and face. Holy hell, a snake Zoan? A were-snake? Were those a thing? Or was there a possibility of a were-human?

Gah, I needed names.

"Then explain why Sanji is a statue!" Luffy shouted back.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" Hancock's voice rang out, cutting through the crowd noise without a problem. She got to her feet and her heels clicked on the deck as she stalked directly to Luffy. Given that she was about eight inches taller than he was, he had to look up quite a lot to see her
Knowing that some men and women wouldn't have bothered, I gave him a ten out of ten for focus.

"Why weren't you turned to stone?" Hancock asked, her expression puzzled. "That was a direct hit."

Luffy blinked. "It was the thing Marines use, right? Finger Pistol? That doesn't turn people to stone, it just hurts."

This was going to go well.

Hancock frowned, then made a hand sign. With her fingers arranged into the shape of a heart, she said, "The penalty for touching me without permission? Oh, you'd wish for death, but I am merciful! Mero Mero Mellow!"

Oh, for fuck's sake. It was like a cavalcade of shōnen bullshit to see even professionals call out the names of their attacks.

Heart-shaped energy—which I was beginning to sense was a theme—burst from Hancock's hands and swept across the deck in a style reminiscent of Sailor Moon's signature attacks. Ever-expanding hearts engulfed all the non-Kuja people on the ship before blasting up and across Isobu's shell. If anyone besides Isobu had been truly in the blast radius, I couldn't have guessed what might've happened.

As it was, we all stood around after the pink light show was over, kind of confused. Only Jinbe had his hands over his eyes, which was probably a decent precaution against a gorgon's stare if any of the mechanics had made any sense. As it was, I could almost see floating question marks over everyone's heads.

"I'm—wait, did you say Noro Noro?" Luffy asked, though the energy had blown straight through him. He relaxed his arms from their defensive stance. "...Shouldn't I be slow now?"

"What just happened?" Yugito asked, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

"He—they just stood there?" said a blonde Kuja, looking shaken.

"Someone resisted our sister's power?" said the orange-haired Kuja. "Sandersonia, what's going on?"

"It—it must be their fear! If someone is in fear of their life, lustful thoughts might not have any room to fester," said the finally identified green-haired sister. "Don't worry, Marigold."

Hancock, confused but unperturbed, tried again. "Mero Mero Mellow!"

While the pink washed over us again, I lifted a hand to my chin and tried to think it through. If "lustful thoughts" was the determining factor for being turned into a statue, I was suddenly glad that Kakashi was back home. But did they have to be aimed at Hancock? Or did the Devil Fruit power not care who the victim was thinking about?

Yugito stepped forward as everyone continued to look a little puzzled, her nails growing into meter-long claws in an instant. "That's quite enough. You've launched three attacks on us, one of which is forgivable. You should all leave now."

"Forgive?" Hancock tossed her hair over her shoulder again. "Don't you understand? Is this too
much for you? No matter what I do, or who I hurt, I will always be forgiven!"

"Why's that?" Yugito asked in a flat tone.

"Because," Hancock said, leaning back once again as she looked down on Yugito so much she was looking at the sky instead, "I am beautiful!"

Every single one of the Kuja Pirates swooned. There was clearly a severe shortage of fainting couches in the world. Particularly on this ship.

"...That's it?" Yugito's voice was so unimpressed it bordered on hostile.

Oh boy.

"I don't care about any of that," Luffy said, bounding in front of Yugito before my Kumo counterpart could show off her claws and other people's organs at the same time. "Just turn Sanji back to normal!"

Not helping, either.

Hancock, of course, gave no shits about either confrontation. Instead, she pointed squarely at me over Yugito and Luffy's heads and said, "You. How are you avoiding my power?"

"I'm not attracted to strangers," I said bluntly. "And I don't know you except by reputation and what you've done here, which is mostly ugly."

I couldn't have hurt her pride so badly by stabbing her. Hancock went pale with horror. "U-ugly!"

"Trying to turn people to stone is disgusting," I said, as my eyes glowed faintly gold. They were itching again as Isobu lent me chakra for the sake of agreeing with me. "As is arrogance."

Hancock hauled her damaged pride up like a shield, which it wouldn't be if she kept this up. She turned to Yugito and demanded, "And you?"

"You're an enemy," was Yugito's equally rude reply.

"I had my eyes shut," added Jinbe helpfully.

"And them?" Hancock pointed at Ace and Utakata, who were still on Isobu's back.

"Ever heard of dodging?!" Ace yelled back down. And likely not in the usual Logia way, if he was taking his vow to train himself up to his own standards seriously.

"Married to a woman hotter than you!" Utakata shouted in response. The sad thing is that I was sure he wasn't trying to make a joke. He was being literal.

Hancock looked like she'd been hit in the face with a fish. With a trembling finger, she indicated Luffy. "And him?"

"Pretty sure he's not attracted to anyone," I put in.

Luffy crossed his arms. "If you're not gonna turn Sanji back to normal, there's no way I'll forgive you."

Without a further word, Hancock collapsed onto her throne. "S-So many..."
"Sister!" shrieked Marigold and Sandersonia at once.

Yugito blinked, then her claws shortened back to normal. "...That's it?" she asked, in quite a different tone from before. "Did she faint?"

"I think we broke her," I mumbled, scratching the back of my neck.

"Someone get fans!" Marigold shouted, and some Kuja hopped to it. While they ran around, she turned a glare on us. "You should get back to your turtle right now. Our sister will deal with you when she recovers."

I got the feeling that this was the Kuja equivalent of being treated with kid gloves. I mean, we weren't being shot at, and we were allowed to leave on Isobu. Though Sanji was still a statue, from what Luffy said, at least he wasn't a statue on the Kuja ship, right?

…That has to be one of the greatest wastes of time I have ever had to witness.

Sorta leaning that way myself. I frowned. But for now, we'll wait and see.

"You're married?" demanded just about everyone once we got back to the Thousand Sunny.

"...Is it really that surprising?" Utakata asked, tilting his head to one side in a manner slightly reminiscent of Luffy. With his arms crossed over his chest, he mostly looked huffy, but he'd loosened up over the past week or so. At least now he was playing along.

Speaking of playing along, Hancock did unfreeze Sanji from extreme long range after about an hour. When he instantly turned to stone after looking into the spyglass that he'd already had pointed in her direction, Nami had to make sure to steal it before she unfroze him the second time. After that, Sanji was bustled off to the kitchen to avoid a repeat until Hancock was already out of sight. Good enough for now.

"You kinda don't ever talk about your home," said Fū, perching on Franky's shoulder.

"Also, hotter than Hancock?" Ace added skeptically. "I don't see it."

"And I'm so jealous you have no idea," Sanji hissed, while perhaps chopping through vegetables with more force than purely necessary. Outdoor barbecues were fun, at least when looking in the wrong direction didn't auto-petrify our chef. "Goddamn lucky slug-bastard..."

"I meant it literally," Utakata said, because of course he had. I did, in some small way, have him pegged. "Mei has both the Boil Release and Lava Release bloodlines. She is explicitly hotter than someone without powers related to fire."

"Everyone says she's beautiful," Saiken put in, from just above the waterline. "The most beautiful Kage of all!"

"That, too," Utakata agreed, nodding. Then he thought about it. "Well, then again, the other four are men..."

"Sensei is pretty as hell and you can't convince me otherwise," I told Utakata. In a sage tone, I said, "Until Mei became Mizukage, he was the fairest one of all."

"You're talking about my dad here," Naruto complained loudly.
"Wait, wait," Nami interrupted. "Kage… You're talking about those village leaders! Gaara says one of them is his father, right?"

"The Fourth Kazekage, yes," Gaara said. "My siblings and I are his children."

"But we already knew that, though. Gaara said, months ago," Luffy said, thus proving that Gaara trusted Luffy more than he had probably ever trusted another living human. "Though I didn't know you had siblings, Gaara. You should've said!"

"We're…not that close. Not like you and Ace are," Gaara admitted, and was immediately swept into a hug by his captain. This seemed to be commonplace enough that the Straw Hats ignored it.

"We're getting off-topic," Ace said, while his brother did as he always did. Looking puzzled, he went on, "Are all of you related to the Kage of your villages?"

"Not all of us," Yugito replied. She tapped her chest. "I'm the cousin of the current C of Kumogakure. B is the Raikage's brother and partner." When this got a lot of blank looks, she added, "Kumogakure's leadership take on single-letter titles, such as A, B, and C. The Raikage's name is A, now. It wasn't until he succeeded his father."

"Fourth Hokage's student," I said, raising my hand. "But I was an accident. Usually the relationship's closer."

"Fourth Hokage's son!" Naruto said, bouncing in place. "Mom's also one of us, but most people don't know that."

"Third Mizukage's nephew, Fourth Mizukage's husband," Utakata added, looking bored as usual.

"And I'm the ward of Takigakure's village leader," Fu said, kicking her legs idly. "See, we're all kinda connected."

"Not hearing a 'something-kage' on that one," Zoro commented as he dodged Fu's flailing feet.

"Only the five big nations get to call their leader a Kage," Naruto explained. He took on a thinking pose as he thought back through his history classes. "'Cuz they were the first after the First Hokage started making Konoha, and they gathered the most clans together. Other shinobi villages might have land or a military that's strong, but those five are the only national armies with full daimyo backing and everything. No one else. It'd be like… Uh. Like making a new Emperor? Though there's already four."

Well, someone had passed his history class.

"Smaller countries generally try to pick a bigger one to ally with," Gaara added in a low voice, though Luffy was still squeezing him. "Except for Takigakure."

"Taki's never been invaded even once!" Fū crowed, puffing her chest out with pride.

Mainly because no one could figure out where it was. Takigakure was stubbornly isolationist at best and viciously xenophobic at worst, which made sense for a nation whose territory sat between the Land of Fire and the Land of Earth. If their home base could be found and besieged by a major village with a chip on its collective shoulder, Taki would be little better off than Amegakure during the gap between the Second and Third Shinobi World Wars. Border countries rarely did well when the bigger powers decided it was time to throw down, even when they weren't directly targeted.

Small wonder Fū hadn't realized that this wasn't even our old world. They'd probably hid her under
the biggest rock they could find so she’d be guaranteed to reach adulthood.

We might have kept discussing who was related to which non-local powerhouse, but Isobu interrupted with a fairly pointed, "**You do not have to shoot me to get my attention.**"

Which drew some screaming from the Kuja vessel, of course. While they were used to Sea Kings, apparently no one was used to the idea of talking to them. It had been a long time since a large group of people reacted nonchalantly to Tailed Beasts, and I missed those moments. Though with Isobu floating between the Kuja ship and the *Thousand Sunny* as a hundred-meter buffer, at least we only heard a little bit of the total decibel count.

"**Oh, be quiet. I can hear you perfectly well without the shrieking.**"

At least he was having fun.

"**Bro, does that mean we can all talk to the humans?**" Saiken burbled, his eyes poking over the other side of the *Sunny*. "**It's boring just listening to Shukaku and Matatabi hate water to death.**"

"I love how every time we try to pretend to be a normal bunch of pirates, everyone gets too impatient to bother," Nami grumbled, smacking a hand over her face.

"It wouldn't be half as interesting if we did," Robin replied, patting Nami's shoulder with a disembodied hand. As soon as Nami stopped acting quite so frustrated, Robin added, "Besides, I can't wait to see how this collapses into chaos."

"Do any of us have an actual plan here or are we just making shit up as we go?" Ace asked, with a somewhat dry tone reserved for Jinbe, now.

"This is so far out of my hands that it's practically in the New World."

How reassuring.

"**If you want to visit the ship, you have to abide by the same rules. Threatening anyone aboard the Thousand Sunny will mean I kill all of you.**"

…Somehow, that was genuinely reassuring.

"**It has been an hour. Why would they still be on my back?**" There was a pause, presumably as one of the Kuja replied. "**She should have thought of that before trying to turn people to stone. Does she promise—in truth—to conduct herself appropriately?**"

"I'm starting to feel a little irrelevant," Jinbe commented, but without annoyance. He seemed relieved that we'd managed to avoid sparking a massacre on either side.

"Story of our lives," Usopp replied. "Sometimes I wonder if we're getting into fights way too big for us."

"I think that's been the last week. All in a row," said Chopper. "First it was Sabaody, then Impel Down, and now this."

"**I have a question,**" Saiken interrupted, though quieter than he had when speaking to Isobu. "**Has anyone read the most recent newspaper?**"
"What, like today's?" Franky asked. "I'm pretty sure your answer there is 'no.' We've been out of the main trade paths for too long."

"Oh. Well, then I wonder why the human is asking Isobu about them?" Saiken mumbled to himself.

Franky frowned. "You can hear that?"

"Sort of." Saiken's eyes bobbed up and down. "*My brothers and sisters and me all used to be part of one being, so sometimes we can share eyes or ears like now. I just want to know if the newspaper is important. We went over old ones two days ago, and they were boring."

"There's news every day, though!" Luffy said, drawing both of Saiken's eyes to him. He'd let go of Gaara some time ago, but that just meant he could bounce with all four limbs. "That's why it's called 'news,' 'cuz otherwise it would be 'olds!'"

"Oh, that makes sense!" Saiken said, nodding in understanding. "So there must be 'news' today and 'olds' yesterday. Then I think they're talking about olds."

Utakata sighed. "I give up."

"It took you this long?" Zoro asked.

Utakata made an annoyed sound that didn't quite make the transition to words, then stormed off.

"Yes, he is," Isobu said to an unheard question from one of the Kuja. "*Which is why he and his entire crew have been pursued by Admirals on multiple occasions.* Isobu's left tail curled into a question mark shape. "No, we are not afraid of being attacked by them. One close call does not make a pattern."

"I get the feeling he's talking about Sabaody," Nami said. She bit her lip. "That was a close call."

"They are. I still don't know what makes a Celestial Dragon so special, but the olds talked about it!" Saiken's tails made their first appearance in the conversation, waving back and forth. "But it sounds like the Kuja aren't mad, just surprised. Does no one punch the little bubble-head humans normally? Because it seems like they should."

"Oh, believe me, we're all very aware of that," Sanji said, almost biting his cigarette in half. "It's just that actually *doing* that means you get an admiral up your ass. Kizaru was one hell of a close call, like the lovely Nami-swan said. We almost didn't get away even with Shukaku slowing him down."

"...So, if Uta and me want to get Akainu out in the open, we should just find one of those bubble-humans and kill him with lots and lots of witnesses!" Saiken concluded happily. "That's a lot easier than what I thought we'd have to do."

"I'm not sure if I should be horrified or not," Usopp said slowly, "that the most cheerful giant monster here is that casual about the next best thing to sacrilege."

"It's best to ignore it and move on," Yugito suggested. As her gaze slid to Isobu's still-speaking shape, she added dryly, "Besides which, your captain has actually *committed* that particular sin and gotten away with it. Or so Isobu has been informing the Kuja."
"...Yeah, that's not helping," Usopp said, scooting away from her.

Isobu turned slowly in the ocean, trying to avoid killing multiple ships with an errant tail-flip. Then he said, "**The Warlord wants to meet again.**"

Zoro rolled his eyes. "Should we take that as a good thing or a bad thing? Because if that's an open invitation, we're going to get to use the love-cook here as a coat rack."

"Screw you, marimo!"

I idly wired Isobu's hearing into mine, so he could pick up what the two were saying at such a distance.

"**It is not. She wants to see the same group as before.**" Isobu's eye focused on me. **Particularly Utakata and Luffy.**

*Oh, I have to hear her reasoning for this one.*

**As do I. This will be amusing.**

It turned out that Isobu was officially the world's least-likely wingman. Saiken was a close second.

While none of us has been paying attention to the Kuja Pirates' reactions to his terse statements, the results were quite beyond what any of us had expected. During the time our groups had been forcibly separated so Hancock could recover from her fainting spell, her sisters took a chance to read the newspaper that Saiken had obliquely mentioned. In it, they discovered the story of the epic punch that got the Straw Hats chased out of Sabaody with Kizaru on their collective tails. "Saint" Charloss was apparently still stuck with a wired jaw to go with his earlier glass one.

As for Utakata? Well, Hancock had heard that "married" remark and taken it as a sign that he could help her accomplish the same. She said it with her usual level of imperiousness, at least while her attention was on Utakata, but melted whenever Luffy so much as wandered into view—between each stage of the eating contest he and Ace had been in, with the Kuja Pirates as both spectators and fellow competitors.

And that was about the long and short of it.

Naruto, who wasn't old enough to drink but had somehow snuck over to the Kuja ship anyway, said, "She keeps giving Luffy that same look Sakura gives Sasuke when she thinks no one's looking." To emphasize his point, Naruto changed his entire body language to mimic a lovesick preteen girl. In a falsetto not much higher than his actual voice, he squealed, "Oh, Sasuke, you're *so cool!*"

I sighed. "Naruto, cut it out." In a lower voice, I added, "At least, where Hancock can see you."

"Pff, like she's even looking," Naruto said, flapping a hand dismissively. "Her eyes are so stuck to Luffy they might as well be glued there."

"Even so," I said, while ruffling his hair. "That's no reason to be rude."

Hancock had also pulled Jinbe aside to discuss something with him. While I didn't hear anything—and Jinbe made it clear that he wouldn't appreciate eavesdroppers—some tension left both of them after the talk. It was a little like the time I'd (distantly) heard Sanji shouting at Jinbe due to an event in Nami's past that I wasn't sure our resident fishman had anything to do with. Neither situation
was my business, and thus I didn't stick my nose in it.

One never knew when it could end up being bitten off.

"I'm surprised more of you weren't left on the hook for Impel Down," Sandersonia commented, her voice hissing on the ‘s’ syllables. It was more because she was allowing her serpentine side to show than anything, and because Fū found the effect hilarious and awesome.

"The Marines seemed too stunned to do anything other than cry," Utakata said, balancing his mug on his knee. He shrugged and said nonchalantly, "I'm honestly amazed they managed to put enough together to get my poster done."

"And what a terrible picture it is," remarked Marigold. "But are you sure you want us to send a proper one to the Marines?"

"As long as you don't get Luffy's crew caught up in this, I don't think anyone will mind," Yugito said, sharpening a long claw against a steel file. The file was losing.

"I would never," Hancock said immediately, even as she gestured for a Kuja to provide even more food for the bottomless brothers. Clutching at her face as she gave a lovelorn sigh, she went on, "My brave, sweet Luffy needs to be stronger to face the World Government all together. He doesn't even know how to use haki yet! Can you even imagine?"

"Eh? Did ya say somethin'?" Luffy asked, when he briefly came up for air.

"Oh, he spoke to me!" Hancock swooned, falling back onto her python throne dramatically.

Well, this was certainly a thing.

"Say you killed the rest of the group that hit Impel Down, including escaped inmates," I suggested, scratching the back of my neck as I thought. "But the big targets got away. Given what we did, you could probably swing it."

"And say that this was the flag," Utakata said, pulling a piece of paper out of his sleeve. When he unfolded it, I recognized the Crimson Carnations skull flag, which he presented with grim purpose. "Akainu should recognize the sigil."

"It still doesn't seem like a good idea," Marigold said, after examining it. "And are you sure you want that man's attention?"

Utakata nodded.

Oh, did he ever. Whenever he finally managed to get Akainu to rise to the challenges, I was going to be watching the results through a telescope. Nothing closer would be safe. Assuming, of course, that I wasn't right there with him and helping the revenge plot go through.

"We can do that," Sandersonia replied. Her tongue darted out of her mouth again. "Honestly, anything to tell the World Government to go screw themselves seems like a plan to me. Right, Sister?"

"I have no objections." Hancock didn't really seem like she had any attention for anyone but Luffy, but the rest of us took that as the next best thing to enthusiastic assent. Which it was, given the circumstances.

Despite the bit where Hancock supposedly worked for the World Government, it was pretty clear
that we were still all pirates here. Therefore, the general sentiment remained "fuck the police" in fancier clothes. Not a bad attitude to have, I thought, given the local constabulary.

Before we were able to say goodbye to the Kuja, however, Hancock had something to say.

"Please come and visit me," Hancock said, leaning down a little so Luffy could speak to her eye-to-eye. "Before or after you become Pirate King, I'll have a feast prepared. One made with my own two hands!"

"Is it gonna have meat?" Luffy asked.

"Only the best for my love!" Hancock promised.

"Then I'll come back someday, and tell you all about my adventures! And eat!"

"The sad part," Ace said slowly, while we fled the Kuja Pirates' immediate vicinity once everything was sorted out, "is that he will, and he'll have no idea why she wants him back so much."

"Hopefully, it won't be for a while," Yugito remarked, eyeing the Straw Hats' captain as he sat on Isobu's head and talked about all the adventures he was sure to have before he came back to the Calm Belt. "Then again, how long does it take to become something like the Pirate King? Are there other contenders for the throne?"

"Plenty," Ace said, crossing his arms. "Line starts with Pops and circles the Red Line, twice."

While I wasn't sure that Whitebeard cared about the title, since he was in his seventies and had been a pirate for so long that he could have probably grabbed One Piece any time before now, I knew Teach had been on that list. For all I knew, everyone else who'd gotten huge bounties at the same time as Luffy was going to be heading for the same prize, too.

Now that I thought of it, the only people who didn't care much about the whole Pirate King were probably Marines.

Utakata shrugged and leaned back on Isobu's shell. "Who cares?"

"I do, if we may run into them later," Yugito said. "But I can see why you would not. After all, you're after the head of the living volcano."

Utakata's visible eye narrowed. "He hit me at my weakest. I'm ready now."

"I'm not saying you're not. But we will be there when you do face him," Yugito told him, echoing my silent promise on that topic.

And we sailed away toward a different reunion.

"Dahahaha! You're kidding! All of that and what gets you a poster each is a photo op?" Shanks's voice said over the snail call.

"Well, for everyone over the age of seventeen," Naruto complained. "I wanted one, too."

Technically, it hadn't been a photo op. Rather, a Kuja with decent art skills had created rough sketches that were later filled in once their crew got back to Amazon Lily. For mugshots, they were as good as snail-derived photographs. Sure, the World Government was probably going to be howling for everyone's heads, but now they had names to faces and bounties to both.
"Save it for when you're an adult, Naruto," Kushina's voice cut in.

"There's plenty of time to commit a crime!" Killer B added, making the snail almost shapeshift a pair of shades. "Just give the Marines a bit to scream."

"Later," Kushina concluded, while Komushi glared at an unseen person. Probably B.

We'd already called the Whitebeards about the news, and thus the only people left to inform were the Red Hair Pirates. Mostly for the sake of Kushina's heart health, given that Naruto didn't have a poster and it was well within a mother's abilities to assume the worst if we didn't.

"Shanks, Shanks, did you see my bounty go way up? I'm almost caught up with Ace!" Luffy said, leaning on Naruto's shoulder while the blond elbowed him to no effect. "Soon, I'll catch up to you and you'll see how great a pirate I can be."

Ace mashed Luffy's hat down onto his head. "You're not there yet, Luffy. You haven't even been a pirate for a full year."

Yugito coughed at the same time that I did.

"Oh, shut up," Ace added for our sakes.

I had to admit, the Marines had gone all out. While I wasn't quite sure, the exchange rate between ryō and beri was something like one to ten, at least if I guessed based on purchasing power. So, if Asuma's bounty back home was thirty-whatever million ryō, it was over three hundred million beris. That would put Kushina's beri bounty pretty much in the same weight class, at least before the "rampage" or whatever Shanks's crew had done while Impel Down was going up in the form of miniscule particles.

"Cobalt Lioness" Yugito: Three hundred and fifty-five million beris. Unfortunately, her title also tied her irrevocably to her band of admirers, to her everlasting embarrassment.

"Tidal Blade" Kei: Four hundred and thirty million beris. There was something to be said for sticking to a consistent nickname. Mine was already established in the heads of people who were from my world. With any luck, they'd find me later.

"Carnation Prince" Utakata: Five hundred and seventy-five million beris. He was the only one of us who hadn't made a request for a specific title, and the result was Marigold's creation. Still, he'd beaten Ace's bounty in one (recorded) incident. Two posters for one massive crime.

For our first bounties, they weren't bad at all.

**Once again, you have been thoroughly cheated. You masterminded the attack. The highest bounty should be yours.**

*Oh, Uta's will be even more inflated by the end of this. He's the one who wants to bring down an admiral. I was more of an accessory. In the same way a silencer accessorized a gun. And besides, I'll catch up if I keep associating with dangerous people.*

Isobu huffed, but he let the issue go.

"I'm glad you at least remembered to keep your family names out of it," Kushina's voice said after a while. "I didn't think that one through."
"I'm not using your name out here, though. It's okay, Mom," Naruto replied.

"It was still an amateur mistake, Naruto," she argued, but gently. Komushi shook its head along with Kushina. "Imagine if Nagato had ended up out here just a few days ago and introduced himself to a Marine? He'd be fine, but there'd be trouble wherever it happened."

"Nagato doesn't even use it," Naruto muttered. "But I get it. I'll try not to get in the papers too much. 'M a ninja and a Revolutionary, not a pirate."

"I'd prefer if you didn't get in the newspapers at all," Kushina muttered.

"But you know what an army's for," Killer B added. "If you seek peace, prepare for war."

Sanji stared at the snail. "Did you get that out of a fortune cookie?"

"Hey, that's not an original line!" Naruto exclaimed, disappointed.

"It's late. They can't all be great," Killer B replied in mild annoyance. With a complete lack of a decent beat, he explained, "The Marines at Marineford are raising their sword. Can't take that back now with a fight off their bow. Their bait for Whitebeard is gone, but they'll think up a new one."

"How'd you even get info on that?" asked someone else from Shanks's crew.

"We have our sources," Kushina said in a faux-dramatic voice.

"Killer B has a partner in crime, Gyūki!" Naruto suggested, and his rhyme was…not great. But then, none of ours were.

"B, your imaginary friend is contagious."


From the other side of the call, there was the sound of two hands meeting two foreheads. "Boar, dog, bird, monkey, ram," Utakata supplied helpfully. Or as helpfully as he could sound while also being kinda condescending.

"Why didn't we think of that?" Kushina asked the universe at large.

"Hell if I know, but hey, let's go!"

There were two simultaneous shouts of "Summoning Jutsu!" an explosion, the sound of rushing water, and then a lot of screaming. Over the top of the cacophony, cutting through human voices, were two much larger voices saying in unison, "What the hell was that for?!"

Click.

Oops. I rubbed the back of my neck. "Probably should've told them to do it away from people, but…"

"They can figure that part out," Utakata said.

Naruto, Luffy, and Ace were all too busy laughing to contribute further.
And since I am now, officially, out of buffer chapters and other pre-written stuff, updates will slow down. This time I had to take two weeks to update, for which I apologize since it seems slow compared to what I was managing before, but sometimes that's what has to happen.

Also, I'm working on a small batch of side-snippets that may end up being Tumblr-only for now, so keep your eyes peeled for any mention of either fairy kingdoms or (even more) irresponsible consumption of alcohol.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Bow out for a bit.

Chapter Notes

This song is from Treasure Planet, often subtitled as "Jim's Theme."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kuromushi and Komushi kept our group out of trouble for the next few days. More trouble, anyway.

While I wouldn't say the Kuja Pirate incident hadn't worked out in our favor, at least as far as determining relative infamy went, any more detours before hitting the Revolutionary rendezvous point and then Fishman Island would probably be a bad idea. With that concept firmly in place, we sailed onward and listened to the Marines flounder.

Kuromushi kept belting out more and more overheard transponder snail conversations, because it was a tiny troll. Since Naruto had taken it from a Marine initially, we had to assume that the Marines had more somewhere even if the nearest band of white hats didn't. Komushi's calls could be intercepted, as the black snail had proven from the first moment I met it, and thus we couldn't risk calling the Moby Dick once we knew the Marines could be listening. Not until Kuromushi couldn't hear anyone else.

So, despite the ego boost from the most recent wanted posters and the grudges we had, all of us turned tail and let Saiken tow us away from any potential fights.

It took a few hours for us to get far enough away that Kuromushi stopped being able to hear other snails, and then we could give people updates and check in on others. We found out that Gyūki and Yin Kurama had only caused superficial damage to the Red Force, which had gotten Kushina and B a thorough scolding by Shanks's first mate. We also discovered that no one among the Red Hair Pirates had actually realized those two were far more than merely New World-level pirates—or weirdos, really. Shanks had mercifully shut down the call before the discussion got too out of hand.

Once that was over, we considered the available expert opinions. Nami and Inazuma had the actual, physical job of navigation cornered, with Nami turning it into an art, but sometimes it helped to bother people who'd been on the seas for upwards of twenty years.

Like Marco.

"Given everything, it probably won't surprise you to hear that the Marines are in a panic now. They've been doing the same song and dance over here since we took the Moby underwater," Marco said, when we called him for some advice. "I'd still suggest trying to meet up with us, but it sounds like you may be getting the worst of it."
"Pops didn't have to flatten G-5, you know. Even if it was a pit," Ace said, still sounding a bit sheepish about the chain of events that had led to said flattening. "That got the Marines pretty riled up…"

"We did," Whitebeard's rumbling voice replied, correcting Ace with infinite patience, "and you know that."

"Yeah, well…" Ace shook himself, though I caught a brief flash of a smile on his face. "We're going with our backup plan, now."

"The Revolutionary route," Zoro said, while Kuromushi remained blissfully silent. Must not have had any other snails in range.

"It's not a route," Bon-Bon broke in. "It's more of a meeting point!"

Zoro automatically ducked away from being kicked in the head by Bon-Bon's pirouette, though I'd seen him block Sanji's iron-denting kicks before. Maybe it was a rivalry thing. "Fine, fine. The point is that we're putting our fates in the hands of people we don't know."

I wasn't so sure about that. My "there aren't really two different people named Sabo" idea still percolated in my head, but I didn't have quite enough data to be able to put my hypothesis forward. Asking for details about Ace and Luffy's dead brother—as Gaara had explained, briefly—would only upset everyone.

"We know Bon-Bon and Iva, though," Luffy said, as he sat next to the unnamed snail from which we were calling Marco. "And Naruto's one of them too, right? Friends of our friends are our friends, too! That's how that works."

"That's…not how that kind of thing works for most people," said Jozu's voice.

"It does for Luffy, though," Nami said. She sighed. "Almost too well. His luck is ridiculous."

I idly tossed that response into my pile of evidence for my musings on this "Sabo" character. I had all of two pieces of evidence that weren't just my supposition, which did not a conclusion make. Thus far, my scatterplot was still half-filled. But I was seeing a pattern anyway.

"Anyway, our new destination is within a day or two. We'll get there and call you again," Ace said finally.

Once the Whitebeards signed off—though Thatch managed to shout, "Eat your vegetables!" before the click—we all had to turn our attention back to our Tailed Beast friends.

"We'll go back to the surface at night," was all Sai Ken said to inquiries pointed his way. "That way we know it'll be safe!"

They had also been promoted to babysitters.

"I would prefer if we'd gotten a chance to kill something, but you're all boring anyway," Shukaku grumbled, but Gaara didn't seem bothered by the comment and neither did the Straw Hats.

So not all of them were babysitters.

I ended up not doing that much during the trip that Saiken and Isobu shortened from days to less than twelve hours. While I did finish Utakata's sewing project to the best of my meager abilities, I spent most of it making up for the absurd sleep debt I'd racked up over the last two weeks. While I
wasn't normally on the level of a Nara, Luffy (sleep-eating), Zoro (sleep-training), or Ace (just sleeping at random), I needed a bit of time to recharge. Given the sleepless nights and days I'd had recently, my brain apparently decided that I owed it plus interest, and I cat-napped the travel period away.

And when I finally woke up for real, we were on the surface of the sea again, beneath a blanket of stars and a full moon that looked larger than it ever had in the glittering night sky. I was also under a literal blanket, and one that I'd last seen in Yugito's possession with distinct "do not touch" vibes radiating from her when I offered to wash it. From the sound of faint snoring and the gentle thrum of his chakra, Naruto had decided to join me after a very long, boring day.

Yugito sat next to me, but on the railing as opposed to bracing her back against it like I had. When she noticed I was awake, she slid down off the wood and slotted into place opposite Naruto.

"What do you think will happen when we go home?" Yugito asked, her voice hardly audible over the lapping waves.

I blinked at her, still a bit muddled by sleep. I sent my chakra through my body in a wave, snapping myself awake by force.

But I must have taken too long, because Yugito went on with, "I don't want to have to kill you."

Ah, right. That. I picked at the sleeve of my Whitebeard jacket, then heaved a heavy sigh. "I don't think I ever wanted to kill you. If something like—it wouldn't have been personal but it wouldn't have hurt."

Ensuring Yagura's death hadn't meant anything to me except that the threat to my friends was—temporarily—taken care of. It had just been business, and if I was feeling cynical, I would have admitted that the only thing I'd felt was relief that Yagura was finally out of my way. I'd had more important things to worry about at Sorayama than could-have-beens regarding a man who needed me dead.

"It will hurt now," Yugito murmured, lifting one hand to her lower lip. She pressed her hand over her mouth, then let out a muffled, "It will hurt so much." She closed her eyes, and I leaned against her a little as she said, "I-I have few friends back home. Children were always too afraid to get close to me when I was young, and adulthood has not been much better."

"And you don't want to lose the friends you have now," I whispered, my heart clenching painfully for Yugito's sake. I hadn't always been considerate of her, perhaps too caught up in my idea that Yugito was too hardcore to approach, and I regretted it now.

"No, I don't," Yugito replied, bowing her head. She drew her knees up toward her chest and rested her folded arms on top. "Kei, I don't want to go back to being alone. Without you, or Ace, or Utakata, or any of the others…" Yugito's breath hitched for just a second. "I don't want to think about it."

I...

I had more waiting for me back home. But that didn't mean I wanted to lose the people I'd met and been befriended by here on this wild ocean world. I was so afraid of people disappearing out of my life. At some point, it had stopped mattering which lifetime, which adventure, or which reality.

"It's not fair to Yugi," Naruto's voice piped up, and I looked down to find him looking up at us with a pensive expression. "Kei-sensei and Mom and me are all Konoha-nin, but you're from Kumo.
Octopops would probably be cool if you wanted to visit or be nice to us if we visited you, and we could talk Dad into something, but what about the Raikage?"

Yugito grimaced. A wouldn't be amenable to a deal, would he? I seemed to recall that he and Ōnoki had needed the pressure of fighting *Uchiha Madara*—or a jerk who claimed to be him—before anything like an alliance could form between them and Konoha.

But all Yugito asked was, "You could forgive what has happened between our villages?"

"I don't know," Naruto said, frowning up at the night sky. "But things are never going to get any better if no one tries. Isn't that what the First Hokage believed? And we got the villages out of it."

And while the ninja system was *deeply* fucked up, the Clan Wars era had been indisputably worse. That was something.

"I dunno if any of us is the next Senju Hashirama. But no one is," Naruto continued, unknowingly echoing my long-lived doubts about anyone ever living up to *Naruto*'s other legacy. "So we're gonna have to be *us*, and make things work our way. We've got us, and we've got the people close to us, too. We're going to probably have to work harder than we've ever had to before, but I don't believe in goodbyes forever like that, Yugi." When Yugito met his eyes, he finished, "Just 'see you later.'"

"Even so," Yugito said, as she ruffled Naruto's blond hair with a gentle hand, "I would miss all of you."

"We'd miss you, too," I said, around the knot in my throat.

Yugito and I hadn't gotten along at first, of course, and we didn't even *really* get along now, but it was in that way that comrades-in-arms didn't have to all like each other to know we had each other's backs. And that was apparently more than Yugito could count on even with her own village. I'd been lucky to have people to fall back on everywhere I went. If the way Yugito felt was anything like the hellish year I'd spent informally, unofficially banished from Konoha, I could never begrudge her the unwillingness to abandon this new world. Especially when I was wrestling with something similar.

"There must be some way we can keep talking to the people we care about here," Naruto said, looking up at the stars above us. "Voice or no voice, we can find a happy ending for everyone."

"I think, for now, I would rather not have an ending at all," Yugito mumbled. Then she sighed, and her chakra settled down again to a low, invisible flame. "But that's enough about upsetting thoughts. After several days on this ship, I'm looking forward to being on land again. What about you?"

"I kinda am," Naruto replied, accepting the change of topic. "Ships wiggle too much. I mean, I'm not getting seasick or nothing, but I *like* land. It doesn't flip over on you."

"Ships generally don't either," I pointed out. Though I'd noticed the fact that other people tended to sway a bit until they got used to the rhythm of a ship's movements, I hadn't paid particular attention to the processes of gaining my own sea legs. I didn't have any trouble adjusting to unmoving land, either, which only now struck me as strange.

**You are welcome.**

*That's you doing that?*
I assume so.

Credit-stealing crab-turtle monster. Though I was at a loss to explain the discrepancy any other way, I wouldn't let him keep taking all of it.

"Uta told me he and Saiken flipped a ship over, so it clearly does happen," Naruto countered.

I bit down on a laugh. Okay, maybe Naruto didn't like ships that much. "How many ships do you think that happens to?"

"Oh, there will be more in the future," Yugito said lightly.

"Exactly!" Naruto fidgeted, then scooted closer to her. "Hey, Yugito? Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Yugito said, as though she'd never been as unapproachable as I remembered. Then again, it had been some time since then, hadn't it? We'd experienced a lot of things together, and though some of those experiences hadn't been pleasant, we… Well, we'd gotten along in some fashion.

I'd had friendships get off to worse starts.

"Can I do your hair?"

Yugito blinked owlishly.

"I'm not gonna pull any pranks," Naruto said, in case Yugito was worried. "It's just… My mom and my sister have really long hair, so they let me style it sometimes. And I haven't gotten to do that in a while, is all."

There was no way either of us could miss the undercurrent of homesickness in Naruto's voice.

Yugito reached behind her head and pulled out the single tie she'd been using since we found her on Banaro. She handed it over to Naruto without hesitation, saying, "Do whatever you like, Naruto."

"Then… I'm gonna make a braid. A nice one," Naruto said, while Yugito turned her back so he could get to work. As he carefully combed his fingers through her hair in search of an easy way to split it up, he said, "Y'know, Tatsumaki doesn't usually let me do braids, since they take more pulling."

"Is that so?" Yugito asked.

"Yeah. Takes longer, too, so sometimes even I can't stay still that long," Naruto went on, draping two thick locks over Yugito's shoulders to keep them out of the way for a second. "Your hair won't take as long as Mom's, though. If I do that by myself, it takes like an hour."

"This coming from the youngest user of the Shadow Clone technique on the continent?" I asked teasingly.

"Pff, that's cheating," Naruto scoffed, briefly sticking his tongue out at me. "Dad and Tatsumaki help me out, though."

I sat back and let their voices wash over me as the conversation went on. Though Naruto still had his mind on people who weren't here, and Yugito probably still didn't want to go back, it was nice to just sit and let the moment have its moment. And I didn't need to be a sensor to tell that Yugito
was relaxing, too.

By the time anything disturbed us, Naruto was debating adding a flower to the end of Yugito's new braid—and being shot down—and even then, the interruption wasn't terribly unwelcome.

Gaara's raspy voice called out, "Land sighted."

Naruto let go of Yugito's hair and shot straight to his feet again, almost overbalancing as the Sunny swayed in a rogue wave. Likewise, Yugito sprang up toward the ship's observation deck as she decided that she needed to see what we were going to be tackling next.

I folded up the blanket Yugito had left behind and headed belowdecks to share the news with everyone else.

Our ships arrived together at the little unnamed rock that the Revolutionaries had selected for us. The Sunny, the Newkama Express, and the Lion's Den all anchored at the reef-docks Isobu had obligingly grown for them, which I had to smooth out to a granite floor-like finish until it stopped threatening to puncture people's feet. Not all of us headed for the shore that, even now, Shukaku was smashing into something a little less rocky and a lot sandier, but most of us did.

Naruto and Luffy took the lead, with Fū close behind them and Ace in fourth place. Shortly thereafter, the Straw Hats piled out of their ship with camping gear in tow, as did most of the Revolutionaries accompanying us. Eventually, the Cobalt Lioness Pirates followed suit, because this was apparently the sequel to the beach party from right after Impel Down.

Ivankov held back, though. I spotted him looking out to sea, his purple afro bobbing in the wind and Inazuma by his side as ever.

"I'm going to get us another Sea King," Utakata said, passing me as I tried to figure out what, exactly, Ivankov and Inazuma were looking for.

"I'm sure Luffy will appreciate it," I said absently.

"It's the only way to feed this mob at all," was Utakata's dry reply. And then he heaved himself over the side of the ship and took off out to sea on Saiken's head.

After a moment's thought, and the realization that Naruto had left four Shadow Clones on board each ship in addition to Isobu's tiny clone garrison, I went after them.

While Ace, Sanji, Zoro, and Luffy lit a massive bonfire on the beach—which Shukaku blocked from outside view with his massive sandy bulk—most of the rest of the group set up for dinner. Sanji was already kicking people into helping him on pain of...being kicked more, basically, as a gigantic splash sounded from out at sea and Saiken's bubbling laughter drifted back to us across the waves.

I picked my way to Isobu's spiky head, dodging the usual crowd of people doing too many different tasks at once. As I climbed up onto one of the spikes protruding from his lower jaw, I said, "Nice evening, isn't it?"

"The sea is more interesting," Isobu replied in a tiny whisper, at least for a being his size. "As soon as Yang Kurama comes back from exploring the island, he can have this spot."

I reached out and patted the tip of Isobu's stubby nose. "You're not gonna stick around to see the Revolutionaries?"
"I will see their ship as they arrive," Isobu said, twisting his head a little so he could see the open ocean with his single eye. "And if they tread lightly, I may let them pass."

"Overprotective, aren't you?" I muttered, but I understood the urge. We'd attracted a lot of unfriendly attention, and Isobu was one of the most capable of ending anyone who would dare do our group harm.

True to his word, Yang Kurama's arrival was heralded by Isobu abruptly pushing off the beach and into the sea again. While Isobu did stop to help Saiken haul his Sea King prize back to the island, Yang Kurama was the one to complete the task by hooking his massive white claws under the beast's gills.

"I want to try this," Yang Kurama said, while Sanji contemplated the exact way the overgrown fish would be cleaned.

"You do not need to eat any more than the rest of us do," Matatabi pointed out, holding up one paw before bringing it down on the Sea King's crocodile-like head. "Try being considerate of the humans' needs."

"Bah! I need something to be interesting around here if I can't kill anyone without hurting their little feelings," Yang Kurama growled. His huge red eyes narrowed, focusing on Sanji. "You, human. Cook for me and my siblings."

Sanji, to his credit, didn't blanch. No, he rolled up his sleeves and replied, "On my pride as a chef, I can't do any less. I'll give you and your siblings a gourmet meal."

I didn't ask where he was gonna get the spices for it or anything like that. I didn't think he knew. Still, Yang Kurama leaned back on his haunches with a self-satisfied smile on his giant mug, so I had to assume that was the correct response. Even though I wasn't sure Yang Kurama—or most of his siblings—had any functional organs beyond their stomachs. And this was coming from someone who had literally seen the giant fox cut in half from nose to tail before.

Matatabi tilted her head to one side, her triangular ears angled toward the bonfire that had been made by humans near her paws. Bringing one of her flaming paws down near Sanji to get his attention, she said, "Young man—Sanji, was it?—perhaps it would be more helpful if I make you a fire pit of some kind? Then we can cook much more food at once."

Sanji must have said something in the affirmative, because a clear space materialized around Matatabi as though by magic. She scratched out a deep gouge in the earth, while Luffy and the others piled more and more wood into the ground as it cleared out. Ace set the actual fire, just in case Matatabi's blue flame was too much, and Naruto and Gaara made certain the coals that resulted burned extremely hot with their Wind ninjutsu. Zoro and half a dozen different Revolutionaries were drafted into assisting Sanji, and Yugito followed along for the novelty of it.

Collaborative cooking, macro-scale.

Despite the general chaos of food preparation, the size of the main course and the customers, and everything else that could possibly go wrong with so much of Sanji's kitchen being in open air, the resident chef eventually gave the okay for dinner service to begin. Each interested Tailed Beast was served a massive, Sea King steak served rare on stone plates the size of helicopter landing pads (carved out by Zoro as a training exercise), while the human contingent got normal-sized plates that didn't hiss from leftover heat. More of Naruto's clones were on plate-distribution duty, and their unerring ability to pinpoint each other's position kept things organized.
But it was during the dinner rush that something odd happened.

I happened to pass by the shadow of Shukaku's tail, while rushing to save a plate when the clone that carried it popped unexpectedly. I automatically caught the flying tableware while Shukaku's sand shifted around us and passed it off to the nearest open hand, belonging to another Naruto clone.

And then Shukaku's tail lashed out, over all our heads, and scattered into a miniature sandstorm in time to catch two figures that would have otherwise put a pair of craters in our beach party. Instead, Shukaku's tail re-formed with both interlopers caught in his sand, then lowered them slowly to the ground while he brought his massive paws down on either side of them as a warning.

The party had gone very quiet. Prior to this point, none of the Tailed Beasts had moved at a speed greater than cold molasses for fear of causing a panic. They were alarmingly fast for their size when they chose to be, and Shukaku had just demonstrated that in spades.

*Since when is Shukaku the bouncer?*

**I prefer to think of him as a "splatter." He hits harder.**

*How in the world do you get to make that reference? Any one of you could crush a human like an ant, as you already demonstrated this month.*

**You were not going to,** Isobu said, sending me an impression of a shrug. He didn't have to be so smug about it. **I saw the opportunity and took it.**

While I argued with Isobu, the two intruders got to their feet.

One was a young woman with eyes about as wide as Lee's, with strawberry-blonde hair and a frilly-collared maroon jacket. She wore a skirt with thigh-high stockings and the wide-toed heels that were so common around here, and there was a discarded hat by her side I'd have described as a newsboy cap. She rubbed her nose as she got to her feet, though Shukaku's sand shifted ominously below them as a warning.

The other was Sabo.

I briefly considered punching him in the nose.

Naruto—five of him—got to them first. Bowling the Revolutionaries over, the lead Naruto said cheerfully, "Koala, Uncle Sabo! You made it!"

"I'm not that old!" said the blond, from under the pile of multiple twelve-year-olds. "Geez, Naruto, I'm a big brother at most."

"You know I only call you that because it pisses you off, right?" one of the Naruto clones said, while Koala pushed it off her knee and it poofed away.

Sabo opened his mouth, paused, and sighed. Sitting up despite the clones' weight, he grumbled, "I should have known."

Sabo and Koala were almost immediately mobbed by the Revolutionaries. Most of them had probably never met the actual chain of command of their organization past Ivankov, and from what I gathered Sabo had somehow managed to become the second-highest-ranked person in the entire Revolutionary Army aside from Dragon himself. By age twenty. If it hadn't been for the way his eyes kept searching the crowd for someone he couldn't find, I might have been convinced that he
was just any other ranking officer in any military, catching up with the troops after a long mission.

Koala, meanwhile, was an assistant instructor in Fishman Karate and knew Jinbe from their past with the first incarnation of the Sun Pirates, which meant they greeted each other like old friends. Their conversation drew off a large portion of the crowd, including Ivankov and Inazuma once Sabo shook his head at them. Okay, so this was still a party of some kind. Sanji continued with the food, a bunch of people and pirates were getting totally shitfaced…

But I couldn't help but notice that neither Luffy nor Ace were in sight.

"It's like having another you around," Koala had once said, while Naruto made a mess of the Revolutionaries' training facilities months ago. "Or, you know, fifty of you from back before your voice cracked."

"You got that from Hack, didn't you?" Sabo had responded, wincing as he watched one of the clones explode. A kid who could copy himself hundreds of times over without feeling the strain, on top of his insane energy levels… While the Revolutionaries weren't exactly starved of manpower, this was just silly.

But something bothered him for the entire time he knew the little troublemaker and his titanic fox guardian. While Sabo bought Naruto clothes with Koala's help and taught him how to tie a cravat, there were little moments that would throw him for a loop when he stopped and paid attention. Details or mannerisms that jarred the blank spots in Sabo's memory, over and over again. Sometimes Naruto would tear into a dozen bowls of noodles like his body was some kind of machine, or utterly refuse to back down from fights that were better left alone. Others, he'd frown in his sleep and start reaching for something, only to find it gone when he woke up. Naruto rarely talked about where he came from, except to Yang Kurama, and Sabo didn't pry.

Sabo didn't think he'd be able to let Naruto reciprocate if he did ask. While Sabo had been as worried as Koala and Hack after realizing Naruto went off the rails and into the sea after the mission to find a black snail, a small part of him was relieved that the gaping hole in his history was finally allowed to rest. Sabo hated it, especially when they had no way of knowing if Naruto was alive or dead.

And then his identification number had reappeared on the same snail call as Ivankov's had.

Sabo had never elbowed an intelligence officer out of a chair before, but there was a first time for everything. He got enough information to confirm that everyone was alive and well, then directed the Revolutionaries among the Impel Down group to meet at a certain island just to make sure Kuma had someplace to aim.

Once the organization scramble was over, Sabo slumped back in his stolen chair. In one fell swoop, the Revolutionaries had gotten one of their greatest assets back in play and had a bunch of random pirates to thank for it. Or rather not-pirates—Naruto's supposedly nonexistent connections were scattered around the world and making friends with some of the most dangerous people on either side of the Grand Line.

Still, Sabo probably would have left the meet-up for Koala and Kuma to sort out, with or without a ship, if he hadn't gotten around to reviewing the accumulated newspapers two hours later.

"Sabo?" Koala's voice had asked, but it was like he heard her voice from underwater.

The newspaper crumpled between his gloved fingers, almost wrinkling the obituary pages. Then,
slowly, they started to tremble.

"Our bond will never be broken!"

Ace, Luffy, did you get hurt in the fire? I'm worried about you guys, but I know you're all right. Unfortunately for you two, by the time you get this letter, I'll already be at sea...

Fire, fire—

Pirates are freer than anyone else in this world. We should become pirates one of these days! Then we can meet again somewhere out there.

—he was on fire; he had to put it out—

"I'll become a famous pirate! I'll show the world what I'm made of!"

Koala had been shaking him, trying to get him to come back to earth. "Sabo, what's wrong?"

He wasn't some random pirate, Sabo thought, as though in a fog. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, drowning out sound from any other source. Not just another bounty. He—

"We'll be brothers once we exchange sake cups!"

Ace was my brother!

Three comatose days later, and there was a hole in Sabo's memory precisely that wide. Everything else—the memories that he'd never thought he'd recover before—had slotted back into place as though they'd never been lost. And though Hack and Koala had been afraid he was going to leave—as though he wouldn't have made the Revolutionaries his life even with his memory intact—Sabo knew where he belonged.

But he had to know. If there was even a chance that Ace was still alive—and Sabo hoped beyond hope that the newspapers were lying—he had to know.

"Uncle Sabo?" Naruto's voice said, once Sabo got enough of his thoughts coherent enough to call. "What's up?"

Sabo plastered a smile onto his face, which made Hack wince at its sheer falseness. "Hey, Naruto. I just wanted to ask you something."

Naruto could lie, but why would he? Sabo hadn't known of his connection to Ace or Luffy until that thrice-damned newspaper article, and Naruto was mostly honest whenever he wasn't on a mission.

"Okay. What is it?"

"When the Impel Down breakout happened..." Sabo trailed off for a second, not sure how to ask the question. So, he danced around it. "Can you tell me why you decided to go in?"

"Oh, that's easy. Kei-sensei was gonna rescue Ace, and Luffy wanted the same thing, so we all went in together and turned Impel Down into a crater on the way out."

"I...see," Sabo said carefully, though internally grateful that his heart finally stopped trying to leap up his throat. "And it was a success?"

"Yeah. I can go find the guy right now if you need proof of life or something." Naruto's tone was
utterly calm, as though all of this was normal for him. "He's just eating his own weight in food again."

Sabo made a strangled noise, halfway between a laugh and a sob. Part of him wanted to break down again in sheer relief that his brother was alive, and the other half was busy being joyfully incredulous that Ace hadn't changed in the past ten years.

"You okay?" Naruto asked, shocking Sabo out of his internal dilemma. "I mean it, I can go get him."

"No, no, it's fine. I'm fine, Naruto," Sabo managed. He cleared his throat in an attempt to get his tone under control, then added, "I'll see you in a day or two, if you're at the right island."

"I'm not worried about that," Naruto replied, and the snail showed his grin. "Luffy says his crew has the best navigator in the world, and I believe it. We'll have a party and everything once we get there, so be sure to save some room for Sanji's cooking!"

Sabo agreed to the party invitation, roped Koala into the trip, and then marched off to find Kuma almost instantly. Their plans had changed.

And now, here he was.

At the party.

With Koala, and Naruto, and more than a hundred strangers and more giant monsters than he'd had an inkling existed.

After about ten minutes or so of everyone greeting the new arrivals, the party settled back down. Or wound back up, given the amount of alcohol once again making its rounds. Sabo wasn't interested, having other issues on his mind. Koala could party it up with Jinbe and catch up on old times.

"Well, that's weird," Naruto commented, folding his hands together behind his head. "Ace and Luffy took off. I figured at least one of them would stick around long enough to steal food."

Sabo reached down and gently ruffled Naruto's hair. "It's okay. I'll keep looking for them."

"You never did tell me why you called out of the blue," Naruto said suspiciously, pushing Sabo's hand away and eyeing him in his usual narrow-eyed way. "You don't just know 'em by reputation, do ya?"

Sabo couldn't force back a smile even if he tried, and so he didn't bother. "No. We grew up together on an island in East Blue." As Naruto's eyes widened, Sabo went on, "They're my brothers."

"Holy shit, really? That's amazing!" And though Sabo had never been able to put the pieces together before, he knew now why Naruto's mannerisms had been so familiar. His subconscious had recognized his brothers' smiles, though in a new face.

"It is," Sabo agreed. "And thank you for helping rescue Ace. I don't know how I can thank you."

"It wasn't my idea," Naruto said modestly. "And I didn't know Ace or Luffy before we got to Impel Down, not really. Kei-sensei did, though. And she probably knows where they are now."

Sabo eyed the hill behind the party, where random bursts of flame occasionally lit up the night sky. Unless Naruto's travel group had another person who could create that much fire on a whim, Ace
was probably not in a mood to talk to anyone. And though Sabo's observation haki wasn't perfect, he didn't have to be in order to feel the rage and pain radiating off the false volcano like heat.

"Or at least she can probably get you closer without your napkin getting singed off," Naruto concluded, noticing the same problem Sabo had.

"It's a cravat, Naruto."

"It's a wearable napkin!" Naruto ducked behind Sabo's back and shoved him with both hands, making him stumble. "Kei-sensei's the one with the scar on her face over there. Go say hi!"

"Kei-sensei" turned out to be a woman with exactly the scar Naruto had mentioned, crossing diagonally over her face and a bored expression on it. Aside from it, she was pretty in an I-can-kill-you-twice-over-before-you-hit-the-ground way, with features generally seen more on people who escaped Kaido's Wano before the purges began. At the same time, the barest focus on his observation haki indicated that if she wasn't the most dangerous person on this island, it was a close-run thing.

Given what he's seen from Naruto on the occasions the boy trained out in the open, it made sense that his teacher would be a woman like her. She was no Dadan, that was for sure.

She raised one eyebrow, leaning back against Yang Kurama's knee as he approached. "Did you need something?"

Sabo placed his top hat back on his head, which had been dislodged by Naruto's greeting earlier and even now was still full of sand. Then he met her eyes and said, "I need you to help me reintroduce myself to my brothers."

It hadn't been his initial plan. That would have required him to have a plan in the first place—the closest Sabo got, while puzzling over how to meet his brothers all over again, was the vague notion that he'd need to avoid letting Luffy strangle him from careless, overwhelming joy. Ace was a tougher sell—much slower to trust, and hurt worse when that trust was betrayed—and Sabo still wondered if he ought to expect a hug or a punch in the face.

Kei blinked, her eyes widening just marginally as the only hint that she was at all surprised by his request. Then she pushed herself off Yang Kurama and beckoned for him to follow her as she left the party. "Okay. We can walk and talk."

That was easier than he'd expected. "Aren't you going to make sure I am who I say I am?"

"Naruto said you were Sabo," Kei responded, glancing back at him. "And he's a sharp kid. Good enough for me."

Sabo fell into step beside Kei as they trekked past the lounging Tailed Beasts, following the occasional burst of fire from up the hill. Ace, it seemed, was working out some issues, and the occasional thud of something hitting the island said that Luffy was helping.

Sabo and Kei exchanged one look before mutually deciding the direct route was a bad idea.

"So, tell me how Naruto met you Revolutionaries," Kei said into the silence, while they took the long way around.

Sabo blinked, wrong-footed. He'd expected a different question, if any, and stumbled for a bit. "Oh, uh… I kind of expected you to ask about the brother…thing."
"Because none of you look alike?" Kei shrugged. "That's not my business. However, Naruto is. When his parents aren't around, I'm responsible for his well-being. So..." Holy hell, her eyes glowed like an animal's? Since when? "Start talking."

Sabo suppressed a full-body flinch as his observation haki screeched a warning as shrill as any transponder snail. It was honestly embarrassing for any Revolutionary officer, especially for the Chief of Staff, but he couldn't help it. "Right, well, uh... It all started when we found him washed up on the shore next to our base. Really, we just assumed he fell off a ship, but practically the first thing he did was bounce up and introduce himself as soon as he woke up. Didn't slow down at all."

"Sounds like him," Kei said in a mild tone, which told him that she knew Naruto all too well. "And how long did it take for you to realize that he had a giant furry bodyguard?"

"It took about five minutes," Sabo replied, smiling at the memory. "He woke up and said, 'Hi, I'm Namikaze Naruto. This is Old Man Yang! Who are you?'"

If he was being honest, seeing Yang Kurama for the first time was one of the most terrifying experiences of Sabo's life at the time. He'd understood, intellectually, that Sea Kings got bigger and so did some turtles, but nothing of Yang Kurama's size was nearly as intelligent. Everyone except Dragon had been in a similar boat, though training kept them from screaming.

Since regaining his memories, Sabo had shoved that event down the list by two spots, replacing it with his first encounter with a Celestial Dragon and the last time he'd seen his brothers before now. Yang Kurama, at least, was honest about what he was and what he intended, and made no apologies for either. It was just that every death threat he'd slapped the Revolutionaries with had turned out to be nothing but hot air. Naruto had told Sabo and Koala later that Yang Kurama didn't bluster if he was in the mood to kill.

If Yang Kurama felt like killing, the corpses would be mere shadows on a wall. If there was a wall. No talk, just death.

But to Sabo's surprise, Kei didn't seem interested in the sheer destruction that the Tailed Beasts could wreak if they were annoyed. Instead, she smacked a hand to her forehead and muttered something almost unintelligible, though the word "security" featured at least twice. None of it seemed to be directed at him, but Sabo waited until the quiet tirade was finished before he spoke again, like nothing had happened.

"I still don't know why he seemed to expect us to know who he was," Sabo said, shaking his head slightly, "but practically the first thing he did after that was demonstrate a bunch of crazy skills, get offered training by Hack, and accept."

The most unnerving part of those first few days was when Naruto crab-walked across the ceiling, just to scare people. He'd even worn his jacket backwards, his face hidden by its collar, to trick everyone into thinking he'd twisted his head all the way around.

It lasted until Kuma plucked him off the ceiling and sent him to go play outside.

Kei didn't seem at all surprised. "Did he test out of the classes or something?"

"Yeah," Sabo replied, while they walked around a boulder. Dragon had given Sabo a knowing look when Naruto had mobbed Hack into submission, proving that he was good enough to fight alongside his clones and not just from behind them. It had been a long time since the last person to basically skip that part of the Revolutionary curriculum. "Honestly, we probably wouldn't have let..."
him go on a mission at all, but he insisted. And Yang insisted that he needed to stretch his legs, and here we are now. I almost had a heart attack when he didn't come back."

"And of course he didn't call," Kei muttered as the last of her protective anger faded. Visibly more relaxed, she went on in a calmer tone, "Naruto disappeared because he was joining our mission. I'm sorry if you worried."

"Ah, no harm done." Sabo scratched the back of his neck. "I've had a lot of shocks lately."

As always, putting the situation into words underplayed it, if anything.

And he still didn't know for sure how Ace and Luffy would react. He had an idea, of course, but it'd been ten years and a near-death experience or twenty since then. And that didn't even mention the amnesia complication he'd only recently dealt with…

"You're referring to the 'brother thing' you mentioned before?" Kei asked, while they rounded another curve in the artificial bay. Because there was no way that the Tailed Beasts had just happened on an island that could mostly hide them from view.

"Oh…that's the part that's a bit hard to believe," Sabo said. This was going to sound utterly cheesy, like something out of a terrible pirate novel. Thus, he braced himself for disbelief even as he said carefully, "Would you believe I had amnesia?"

"Sabo, I come from a place where the greatest enemies of humankind are putty people spawned by a giant tree, whose master plan is to hypnotize the whole world into submission," Kei replied in a perfect deadpan, while Sabo bit down on a laugh because the world was wild enough to have those and worse in spades. He'd even seen some of them. "If you say you had amnesia, I believe you."

"Oh, good. I just hope Ace and Luffy believe me," Sabo said, while another bout of melancholy tried to leap up and swallow him. In a low tone, he admitted, "I haven't seen them since I was ten. I didn't have any idea they even existed until a few days ago."

"Can I ask what caused your memories to come back?" Kei asked neutrally, not asking for permission at that point. That sort of question was sort of a formality.

They lapsed into silence for a few moments, climbing over ever more thoroughly scorched debris and overturned stones here and there. They were getting closer to the summit, and with it Sabo's reckoning. A tiny part of him was almost surprised he was admitting this much to a relative stranger, but the lack of cloying sympathy in Kei's voice was refreshing. Hack and Koala had both gone through a phase where they treated him like he was made of glass upon regaining his memories, which wasn't what he wanted.

Even so…

"I…" Sabo trailed off, all too aware of the lump in his throat. He tilted his head forward a little so Kei couldn't see most of his expression, averting his eyes for good measure even if he could only just see her feet. He coughed, then managed, "I should probably save that for Ace and Luffy, if it's all the same to you."

Well, the fire had died down. It was probably safe to approach for real, now.

Sabo and Kei hiked up to the top of a hill, where the fire had been originally. When they arrived there, the trees on the top of the hill had all been scorched on one side. Likewise, the rocks lay bare on the hilltop except for a fine layer of ash and charcoal, and some of the plant life sitting nearest the epicenter of the blast had been rendered into particles. Sabo could almost hear a Revolutionary
file's contents playing in his head, like a snail call, recounting the damage Fire Fist Ace could do with a single use of his eponymous attack.

Ace sat in the center of the blast radius, sitting with his legs crossed one over another and his palms resting on the sides of his knees as though he was bracing himself. His head was bowed and his hat pulled low so neither Kei or Sabo could see his eyes. Flame flickered along his shoulders, but it seemed the light show was over.

Luffy sat next to him, bobbing slightly in place and keeping his eyes mostly on Ace. His hat was pushed back so it sat behind his neck, and he spotted Sabo and Kei before Ace did. "Hey, Hei. It's okay now."

Ace looked up, then, and Sabo immediately disagreed with Luffy's statement based on Ace's expression alone. Sabo had only seen Ace so sick at heart once before, and it was the last memory Sabo had of him prior to this point. The day Sabo abandoned his brothers in a gamble to save their lives from his fucking father. If Ace had been gifted with Kizaru's Devil Fruit instead of his Mera Mera no Mi powers, Sabo would have been struck dead and his ashes would be flaking away in the wind already. He wouldn't need to be in reach.

"Why the hell'd you bring him here?" Ace demanded, his voice seeming to crackle on the low end like a flame. His hands gripped his knees to keep himself under control.

Cold lead shot pooled in Sabo's stomach.

"He asked," Kei said, like she didn't know it would piss him off to hear that. Still, she was obviously ceding control of the conversation to Sabo instead, even before she prompted, "Sabo?"

"Even if he's got the same name, he's not our Sabo," Ace hissed, smoke coiling upward from his flames.

Shit.

"Ace," Luffy tried to interrupt, and Ace's fire didn't get anywhere near touching him. "Ace, but what if he is? What if Sabo—?"

Sabo's heart was in his throat, choking out any response before it could reach his voice. Luffy's pleading hurt worse than getting shot, even without armament haki, as his mind automatically flew back to the last time he'd heard his younger brother before this. Back to when Sabo had turned his back on them both. Back before he'd almost gotten himself killed twice over and gotten his memories blasted out of his head.

"He didn't, Luffy," Ace snapped, though Luffy refused to back down. Even so, Ace jerked his gaze away from Luffy back to Sabo. "Sabo would have come back. Our Sabo's dead."

"Not if I couldn't come back," Sabo replied, finally finding his voice. His fists clenched at his sides as hot tears muddled his vision and rolled down his cheeks. He vaguely felt Kei make a move in his direction before stopping herself, giving him enough breathing space to go on. Practically snarling as he wiped the tears away on his coat sleeve, he said, "Not if I lost everything I was when the Celestial Dragon shot my ship."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ace growled, getting slowly to his feet. With his hat finally settled back on his head, the flickering firelight revealed that Ace wasn't exactly dry-eyed, either.

Sabo stepped forward, away from Kei, and raised his voice to shout, "It means I had amnesia for the last ten years!"
"What's that?" Sabo heard Luffy ask, looking back and forth between his two arguing brothers. And still, his next thought was, "Is it something you eat?"

Just like before.

"It means he lost his memories," Kei explained to Luffy, while Ace and Sabo fell silent in the wake of his question. "He didn't remember you two until recently."

"Oh, bullshit." Ace's clenched fists were spitting orange sparks. "Sabo was our brother! There's no way he would have forgotten us, and you're just an imposter with the same fucking name." Ace's arms disappeared into plumes of flame even before he drew back his fist. "GO TO HELL!"

Sabo unhitched his pipe from his back. If Ace wasn't going to listen to reason, he'd settle this with a fucking fistfight if he had to. Half the time violence had been the only way to get anything through Ace's thick head back then, so why would it be any different now?

Kei ducked sideways, bringing up a veil of water to take the brunt of the attack when Ace once again turned himself into a towering inferno. With her out of the way, there was no one to interfere with this match. While Sabo's stomach still clenched at the thought of having to fight someone who was closer than any blood family he'd ever cared to name, his blood burned. Maybe a fight would settle more than just the debate.

Sabo took a fighting stance, his pipe in front of his face and rapidly turning black with armament haki, before he lost track of Kei entirely in the fire. She could handle herself, and Ace would never hurt Luffy. The rest was down to the fight, and Sabo's fingers automatically shifted into the Dragon's Claw as Ace cocked his flaming fist back.

"Did you even see the attack?" Sabo's voice rang out, as clear as it had been since before seeing his brothers again. His anger, grief, and misplaced hurt was unaffected by the heat or the glare. "Did you find my body? Did you even fucking look for me?!"

"There was nothing left to find!" Ace almost screamed back, and Sabo knew that tone. Denial. It hurt him too much to admit that something so fundamental to his life had all been based on a misunderstanding. A mistake. "Quit acting like you're him, you bastard!"

"I am him!" Sabo knew how to fight Logia Devil Fruit users, at least in theory. Observation haki helped him dodge and armament haki let him hit in a way that Ace would definitely feel in the morning. But dodging was dangerous when Ace had enough flames to just carpet the entire area in burning death.

So Sabo headed directly for him, using his pipe to take the brunt of the attack, before he swung right for Ace's shoulder. The sharp thud of a solid hit made Ace gasp in surprise, but it only lasted until the next burst of fire exploded outward from his body, driving Sabo off for the moment.

Sabo's next attack got two more grunts of pain, but the shock was over. Ace knew he was fighting a haki user, not just someone getting lucky because he was distracted.

"What took you so fucking long?!" Ace shouted, while the flames swirled around the hilltop and created a massive arena wall. He was finally in full view again, with both hands engulfed in fire and visibly rising welts on his shoulder and head.

"That wasn't my choice, you reckless jerk!" Sabo yelled back, and both his coat and his hat were smoking from the last round. His pipe almost glowed on the business end from the sheer heat. "I saw a newspaper with your fucking face on an obituary, and everything came back to me! What
"Kind of brother are you to make me worry like that?!"

"How should I know?! I don't control what gets printed or what idiot thinks I'm dead!"

"Take better care of yourself!"

"I was in prison!"

"That's no excuse!"

"They stole my fucking boots, Sabo! My boots! You think I would give those up if I had a choice?!"

Distantly, Sabo felt Kei go still with confusion and Luffy glowing like the figurative sun.

A grin stretched across his face, even as Ace's fist—no longer aflame—grazed his chin. Luffy knew already, and Sabo felt it too.

They were winding down.

"See, Hei? They're working things out," Luffy's voice said as the flame wall quieted down to mere embers.

True to Luffy's statement, Ace and Sabo had more or less stopped fighting seriously. While the two of them were still trading blows heavy enough to send shockwaves across the hilltop, Ace's fire was limited to his Logia auto-parry and Sabo's pipe was only black along one side. Both of them were scuffed up and breathing heavily, but they were on their feet.

Both of them sank to their knees at the exact same time, well within each other's reach.

"So..." Sabo gasped, while his pipe rolled out of his grip. Ace had definitely gotten stronger since the last time they'd fought. "You finally...believe me?"

"I think I—hahhh—I think I already did," Ace panted, supporting his weight on his hands. "Just didn't want to admit it."

Sabo sat back, his hat toppling to the ash-coated ground. His blond hair stuck to his face from sweat and every scrap of exposed skin was smudged with grime. Despite that, he was grinning to match some of Luffy's best smiles, at least in the time that he could now remember. Ace's expression wasn't a perfect mirror, but he was almost always a little slower with positive emotions. Didn't want to scare them off.

It didn't last. "Y-you were always the slowest t-to trust anyone else with that k-kind of thing. Guess I can't blame y-you for being skeptical now, right?" As he spoke, his breathing hitched and he covered his eyes with one gloved hand. Tears nonetheless dripped right past any attempt to stop them, landing on his knees.

Across from him, Ace wasn't any better off. The first few tears hissed away into steam, but the rest dribbled down his face unhindered. Much like his brother, snot followed. "S-Sabo..."

Now, they might've been able to continue in this vein for some time. But then Luffy, who had been left out of the reunion thus far, shot forward like a rubber band and slammed into both of his brothers with a vengeance. While the three of them rolled across the hilltop and got tangled in Luffy's stretchy arms, Kei finally stopped maintaining some kind of water barrier now that there was no point.
Luffy was a loud, dramatic, *screaming* crier ("SABO'S ALIIIIIIIVE!"), and in short order the sound of muffled sobbing filled the still-crackling clearing. Sabo patted ineffectively at Luffy's face with his untied cravat acting as an improvised tissue, while Ace buried his face in Sabo's coat and swore furiously under his breath, and Luffy crushed all three of them together under his grip. With Luffy and Ace pinning him in place, there was no way he could have escaped, but Sabo couldn't think of anything he wanted *less*. The sound of his brothers' voices and their weight and their warmth was something he'd missed so badly he could hardly believe, now, that he'd forgotten how important they were.

"D-don't ever die, S-S-Sabo!" Luffy sobbed, his chin poking into Sabo's sternum. His entire face dribbled snot and tears and even drool, and Sabo's vision blurred even worse than before. "D-don't leave uh-us ag-g-gain!"

*I promise*, Sabo thought, as his tears dripped off the end of his nose and into Luffy's and Ace's hair. "I won't. I *won't*, not again."

"Fuckin' liar," Ace managed, but there was no bite to it. Sometimes, Ace argued just to be argumentative. All he did was squeeze Sabo's waist a little tighter than before.

Before Sabo had joined the Revolutionaries, he'd already been a liar. To his parents' faces, to Ace and Luffy about his origins, and now as a professional spy. But here and now, held in his brothers' arms and clinging to them in turn, there was nothing to hide.

None of them let go for a very, very long time.

"Luffy has another brother?!" was the Straw Hats' response to that little revelation when the three brothers arrived at breakfast the next morning. "Since when?"

"Oh, Ace, Sabo, and me all became sworn brothers over cups of sake!" Luffy said cheerfully, while his left arm was still looped around Sabo's rumpled coat. "And then Sabo died, but he's back now and we're all together again!"

"I didn't *actually* die," Sabo said, when it became obvious that no one believed Luffy's account of events. "I just lost my memory. I got it back a few days ago, so I had to come out here and make sure my brothers were all right."

"And we *were*, thanks to everyone here," Ace finished. He bowed as deeply as he could without falling over. "Thank you for taking care of us."

"It was our pleasure!"

With that somewhat flimsy explanation out of the way, certain parties came to the realization that between Luffy being the captain of the Straw Hats and Dragon's son, Ace's rank as the third-in-command of the Whitebeard Pirates, and Sabo being the Revolutionary Army's Chief of Staff, there was a ludicrous amount of power in a single set of brotherly bonds. Politically, anyway.

One of those parties was the Tailed Beast collective.

"This seems to be the kind of bizarre web of coincidence that ought to be impossible to construct even if it was deliberate," Isobu said, when Ace went to visit him after breakfast. Even if the big turtle hadn't been the one Ace knew the longest, he made the best nap spot and was actually willing to act as one, which made him Ace's favorite. "A conspiracy could not have done it better."
"Not everything is a result of enemy action, brother," Matatabi commented, though her voice was a little muffled by her flaming tails as she lounged in the sand.

"Oh, just relax and go with the flow," said Chōmei, who was on the ground for once. His only actual tail—a yellow whip that didn't match any of his wings—curled up and behind his head as Fū hung on for the ride. "It's nice when our side gets lucky for a change! Enjoy it."

Ace did his best to tune out the rest of their discussion from his spot in the crook of Isobu's armored arm. With his stomach full, he dozed in what sunlight made it through Isobu and Saiken's artificial fog, and tried not to think too hard on what would happen next. Though Ace would never admit it out loud, being this close to the biggest seafood combination he'd ever seen felt like one of the safest places on the sea short of the *Moby Dick* itself. When he sleepily felt Sabo and Luffy pile onto him, equally drowsy after devouring their portions of the huge breakfast, Ace just gave a contented sigh and fell fully asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Kei kinda vanishes from the chapter about halfway through with her mad ninja skillz. She's giving the ASL bros some space, and I think they deserve it. :D
Two days ago, in the New World:

Thatch caught the purple projectile aimed at his head without looking, observation haki having been working overtime since Teach's betrayal some months before. While Kei killing the man and Ace's safety had stilled his shaking nerves, he was still keyed up enough that he probably could have caught a bullet if shot at.

Then he looked down and recognition kicked in. He looked back to Marco, who was leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. Thatch asked, "Wait, what the heck? You found it?"

Marco smiled lazily, as though he hadn't just been out all day flying everywhere. While Thatch eyed him skeptically, the resident phoenix said casually, "I just went to the first island that willingly grew durians for sale and turned their records upside-down. I bet you never even figured out that's what it was."

"I found it in a box." And besides which, Devil Fruits warped whatever they were based on into nearly unrecognizable lumps of swirly colors… Oh, who was he kidding? Marco had been at this pirate thing longer than anyone except Pops.

Predictably, Marco ignored his rejoinder and stepped forward, tapping the side of the newly-reincarnated Yami Yami no Mi. "Are you going to eat it?"

Thatch scratched the back of his neck. "Honestly, if you'd asked me before this whole thing started… I probably would have given it to Teach if he asked. I wasn't really interested in learning how to use some weird power."

Marco nodded. "And now?"

"Now, I'm mostly thinking 'screw him.'" Thatch set the Devil Fruit on the edge of his cutting board. "But I'm going to freeze it first. If I cut this thing open right now, we're going to be smelling it for a week."

Marco winced. "Yeah, that'll be fun to explain to the others."
"Better get on that, Mr. First Mate," Thatch suggested brightly. "Because you've got about four hours."

Marco fled, which saved Thatch the trouble of chasing him out. Left alone with the fruit, Thatch rested his hand against the ridges and sighed quietly to himself. This Devil Fruit had been the source of a lot of misery, and had almost gotten him killed. Teach's ambition had done the rest.

Thatch figured it was time it was put to better use.

Other than the drama of introducing Sabo to everyone, the morning was a pretty quiet one. The miniature mixed fleet was so far out of the normal shipping lanes that Inazuma didn't think they'd see any other vessels for weeks, while monsters like Sea Kings had quickly learned how little Tailed Beasts cared for their input and ended up filling the larder. Ace, for his part, simply stated that he was still heading toward Fishman Island and the rest of his family, and then the navigators could hash out the details.

"Hey, Franky, is Striker II ready to go?" Ace asked, sticking his head down into the cyborg's den. Well, Ace called it a den, but it was more of a shipborne shipwright's paradise. He couldn't name half the tools involved in Franky's work, but Luffy's shipwright knew his stuff. "I wanna see if I can stress-test it."

"Sure," Franky said, from where he was stooped over the designs for his next super-project. "Lemme just get it up to the deck."

Ace grinned and gave the cyborg a thumbs-up, then headed up to Sunny's deck.

"What's with the smirk?" Sabo asked. "Don't tell me you're planning something and were gonna leave me out?"

"Would I do that?" Ace asked. When Sabo raised an eyebrow nearly the same way Ace did, he gave up and said, "Okay, yeah, I would. But I'm not this time, so you can come along if you want."

"Oh, is it going to be something dangerous?" asked Saiken, whose antenna-eyes poked up over the deck. Ace didn't see Utakata anywhere, though, so Saiken was the best choice for this.

"Yeah, sort of," Ace said. He leaned on the railing and said, "If either of us fall in, do you mind coming to the rescue?"

"I can swim, Mr. Hammer," Sabo said in a dry voice. "And I looked after Luffy as much as you did back when he used to forget."

"It can't hurt to be safe, Sabo," Saiken said, lifting his head and curling both eyestalks in so he could focus on them. "We fought to rescue Ace, and Isobu told me your brothers lost you for a while. I'm not gonna let that happen on my watch!"

"You're the wrong shape for a mother hen," Ace complained.

"And Isobu told me you nearly drowned the first time he saw you in person," Saiken went on.

"You did what," Sabo began, only to be cut off by Franky's shout of, "STRIKER II'S SUPER DEBUT!"

Ace stuck his tongue out at Sabo before leaping off the side of the ship, just as Franky pushed Striker II into the water. He landed with his feet balanced on the backs of the two seats, spinning
both arms like a pair of windmills as he tried to keep his balance. It'd been way too long since the last time he'd been on a craft this size, and he could hardly wait for the rush.

And then he fell asleep.

Ace woke to Sabo poking him in the cheek, from the seat in front. He was sprawled back over it, looking at Ace upside-down. "Hey, are we gonna get this moving?"

Ace swatted his hand away. "I'm working on it!"

Striker II had a different mast than he was used to, since it could fold up and out of the way instead of a permanent square-rigged one. And it was kinda triangular. Unlike the first edition, it was a real two-seater and it had a dual-powered engine. Whenever Ace didn't want to power it with his flames—which would be even faster now—the World's Greatest Shipwright had helpfully thrown in a Flame Dial as a freebie.

"Tell me how it runs!" Franky called from the deck, waving. "I won't settle for anything less than a SUPER experience, and neither should you!"

"You got it!" Ace called back. While Sabo got back into the front seat and braced for launch, Ace said, "So, ready to take this for a spin?"

"More ready than you," Sabo said, and they were off.

The new steering system is a bit twitchy, Ace noted, as they shot across the sea with two joyful whoops. Previously, he'd used his body weight to steer for the most part, but Franky's redesign skimmed over the waves sideways if Sabo happened to be leaning a different way. Or maybe Ace needed to train his passengers to copy him? He decided to mention it later, if he couldn't figure out a way around it.

"Didn't you have a different boat before?" Sabo asked over the roar of the water and the new engine.

Ace leaned to the left, steering them toward Isobu's shell-spikes. An obstacle course sounded like the perfect way to stress-test Franky's design. Even if Isobu got grumpy about it, they wouldn't have far to fall if they hit one of the obstacles. "Yeah, but Kei hasn't seen it since Banaro. I asked."

"Right, Kei. So..." Sabo dragged the word out, making Ace eye the back of his head suspiciously. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"WHAT?!" Ace nearly steered them into a spike before swerving hard enough to send Sabo sprawling. "No, Sabo! She's a friend."

"Methinks the lady protests too much!" Sabo sing-songed.

Ace kicked the back of his chair with the foot that wasn't pure flame, even as they wove through spike after spike, never getting close enough to clip one. "Jerk. Are you trying to make up for ten missed years of yanking my chain?"

"Oh, you know it," Sabo replied, craning his neck to look back at Ace and give him a brilliant grin. "So, don't wreck us before I can!"

Ace was about to retort, but the docile obstacle course suddenly bucked, throwing ridiculous amounts of water all over the place. The bottom of Striker II skipped across the now-exposed shell, making Ace wince at the noise as they shot off into open water again. What if he'd screwed up
Franky's paint job?

"What are you doing back there?" Isobu demanded, lifting his head out of the ocean. His single working eye glared down at Ace and Sabo as the Striker II started drifting a bit in front of his nose, sail extended. "I was enjoying the peace and quiet before you went on a joyride."

Sabo tensed. Oh, right, Sabo wasn't really used to having Tailed Beasts around all the time. And the one he did was... Well. Naruto might've called him "Old Man Yang," but no one else would dare. Yang Kurama was at least as nasty as Kaido, with his entire fleet of followers, and the fact that he'd decided not to kill everyone didn't feel like a reassurance as much as a suspended sentence.

Ace shoved his brother's top hat down around his ears and bellowed back, "Have you seen what lives in these waters? And not counting you!"

"I have killed most of them." Isobu rolled his eye, in a gesture he had clearly copied from a human somewhere. "Or else we would not be able to feed you."

"Ow!" Ace laughed. "Right in the heart."

"Or stomach," Isobu replied, peering closer at them. "A new ship?"

"Yeah. Did you see what happened to the last one? Kei didn't know," Ace said, leaning heavily on Sabo's shoulders as he finally got his top hat off.

"It was destroyed in Utakata's initial rampage."

Huh. One mystery solved, then. "Well, I guess if he hadn't done that, I wouldn't have this. And it wasn't like I was around to complain much."

"Excuse you," Sabo broke in, pulling on Ace's hat's cord. "But Luffy said you had a wake. For a glorified raft."

"Shh!"

"And not to mention you have my name on your arm, you sap," Sabo went on.

"The hell I do!"

"You can spell your own name! I made sure you could!"

"I am suddenly not convinced the two of you are adults," Isobu commented, as each of them did their best to put the other in a headlock.

"Adulthood's no fun if you can't be childish sometimes!" Sabo replied, sounding more relaxed than he had since Isobu emerged. Ace couldn't attest past that—he was a bit busy trying to escape the arm bar Sabo had him in without turning into fire.

"Noted." With that, Isobu dove back underwater and left them to their game.

Ace promptly burst into flames, making Sabo yelp and let him go. The next few minutes consisted of the two of them wrestling and not a whole lot of sailing, though the Striker II held up just fine in the face of their roughhousing. Even when Ace threw Sabo off the boat and then remembered he wasn't supposed to do that to someone who'd nearly been killed by fire on a ship, and nearly dove in to get him out before he remembered he couldn't swim.
"Oh, quit looking at me like that," Sabo said once he climbed back onto Striker II, dumping seawater out of his hat. He set it on the edge of the boat instead of on his head again, then started writing out his neck-napkin. "I'm not made of glass."

"...No," Ace said. Then he had second thoughts and said, "But isn't there some kind of Logia—"

"Not the point!" Sabo said, and hit Ace in the face with the napkin. "Hell, I bet I'm stronger than you are."

"You take that back," Ace retorted, reaching to grab it.

"Hi Ace, hi Sabo. Having fun?" Kei's voice interrupted, making both of them whip around to stare at her.

She was crouched outside of their ship, with Isobu nowhere in sight and therefore no real *reason* for her ability to walk on water. Given that Striker II sat kind of low in the water, she had her arms crossed on the rim.

"...How the hell are you doing that?" Sabo asked, as his eyes darted from her feet to her face twice over.

"I could tell you," Kei said mildly, "but then I'd have to kill you."

Sabo grinned. "Or I could just ask Naruto."

Kei shrugged, standing up. "Could. Anyway, the answer's 'chakra.'"

"That's the next best thing to 'magic,'" Ace complained. "Except all of them have it and there's no Devil Fruit rules or consistency."

"Right back at you, firebug," Kei said. "And just so you know, we're heading out soon. As soon as you and Sabo get back to Franky, actually."

"You came all the way out here to tell us that?" Sabo asked.

"No, but you were on the way." Kei tilted her head to one side and glanced toward the turbulent waters Isobu had left behind. Her eyes went distant, the way they generally did when she spoke to Isobu in her head. After a second of pure zoning out, she shrugged and concluded, "Might wanna get out of the area before Isobu surfaces."

"Can do," Ace said, and Kei darted away just as he kicked Striker II's engine to life.

"There you are," Isobu said, once they were out of the blast radius and not dodging his scaly tails. "Now, as for Fishman Island..."

"You know," Sabo began, as they shot across the waves and back toward Sunny, "for someone who didn't know what Devil Fruits were when you met her, I think she fits in with everything on the Grand Line just fine."

"That's what I kept thinking." While Isobu tearing the ocean wide open again cut off the actual sound, Ace felt Sabo cuff him on the shoulder anyway for turning it into an impromptu attempt at windsurfing. Sure, Striker II wasn't quite as flat or as...board-like as a surfboard, but it sort of worked.

And then, when they were about to head back to the fleet, the engine sputtered and died.
"Performance issues?" Sabo asked, while Ace swore at it.

"Or is the thing broken?" Saiken's burbling voice asked from relatively nearby, and Ace looked around until he spotted the usual periscope eyes. Now, if Saiken had decided not to let his tails flail around above water, he might've been stealthy.

"Guess Franky didn't work out the kinks or something," Ace said, though a little louder than usual so Saiken could hear him. "I'll just sail us back to the ship."

"Or I could get Isobu to do it. Or tow you in a bubble... But while Uta is doing things without me? Nah, Isobu will want to!" Saiken paused. He lifted his bulbous head out of the water and called, "Bro, bro, can they get towed back to their other human friends?"

Isobu turned his huge bulk around, since he was mostly shell while Saiken was mostly slime. Ace had seen the giant slug stretch out while trying to hug Isobu, and he was reminded so strongly of Luffy then that it had almost hurt. Here and now, though, it was just amusing to see something that big acting like a whiny kid.

Kei waved down at them from Isobu's head-spikes, while Saiken swam off to go bother more interesting people.

Ace looked around Striker II, considered, and then hauled Sabo up by the back of his long coat. "Permission to board, Captain Kei?"

Kei gave him a thumbs-up.

Isobu said, "Get up here."

And before Sabo could react, Ace hurled him up at Isobu's head. "Up you go!"

"You jerk!" Sabo shouted on the way up, but at least he landed all right on one of the spikes, treating it like the trees of their childhood on Dawn Island.

Once Isobu was close enough, Ace leapt off the little craft's nose, hitting a spike in flame form and then pulling himself up onto Isobu's head next to Sabo and Kei. As soon as he was clear, there was a sound like a landslide and a loud gulp. Striker II disappeared into Isobu's mouth.

Sabo blinked. After a few seconds as he searched for words, he said lamely, "...That was your boat."

"It was until the engine crapped out on us," Ace said, shaking his head.

"Isobu will spit it out once we get back to the others," Kei said, still lounging on a different spike. She had one arm holding her head up, barely, and hadn't opened an eye at their antics. Other than noting that she'd pushed one of her arm band things up so her banded wrist was visible, Ace didn't really know what she might've been doing up here.

Though a nap sounded nice.

"I take it this happens a lot?" Sabo asked, "And I'll get my hat back?"

"Yep, to both questions," Ace replied, and leaned heavily on Sabo.

Speaking of naps—
"—didn't do this when we were kids," Sabo's voice was saying.

*Whoops.* Ace sat up, yawning, and pulled his hat off his face. Strange, it hadn't been there before...

"Hey, sleepyhead," Sabo said, and poked him in the shoulder. "We were just talking about you."

"Must've been why my ears were burning," Ace responded instantly, poking Sabo back.

"Technically, you're almost always burning," Sabo retorted. And then more poking.

"Hah," Ace huffed, turning around where he sat.

They might've been able to start some kind of ridiculous haki-versus-Devil Fruit thumb war if Kei hadn't interrupted with, "You're both as bad as Luffy."

"Who do you think he got it from?" Sabo teased, and knocked Ace's hat back over his face.

"Not from me!"

"I can see pretty clearly that you're all bad influences," Kei said in a dry voice, but when Ace looked at her, she just shrugged.

While they were cruising, Ace took the opportunity to lounge across Isobu's head like a cat, though he'd just had an accidental nap. Next to him, Sabo sat back to enjoy the ride. Kei remained in her position, looking out to sea with a completely placid expression on her face. Isobu's low, gentle rumbling made a peaceful background hum to the sea's slow rolling. Now, if only Striker II was fully functional, it would have been a perfect day.

But there was one other problem.

Ace had made the mistake of mentioning certain things to Sabo while he and Luffy had been filling their blond brother on all the things he'd missed. Like the thought, no matter how tinged by desperation or empathy, that he had *wanted* to tell Kei who his father was. Half as a test, half because he was certain Kei wouldn't care. Or know enough to care. Only he'd never found the right time, and now it'd been long enough that his doubts had settled in.

But to get into *that*, he'd needed to talk about Teach and Impel Down, and Sabo had punched him in the head out of retroactive worry. It'd hurt even if he didn't use haki.

Sabo hadn't said anything to say regarding Ace's question, though, beyond, "If you want me there, I will be."

Which was why he was here now. Luffy would've blurted something out before Ace had a chance to.

"So, why're you out here?" Ace asked Kei, fiddling with the beads of his necklace. "Since I know why Sabo and I are."

Kei raised one eyebrow. "I'm just keeping out of the way. Whatever happens next, Isobu and I can handle it."

Ace eyed the bulk of the monster sea turtle below them and had to agree. He hadn't seen anything slow Isobu down since he'd met him, except Kei's expectations about not being seen or causing a ruckus. Now that those restrictions had been lifted, and after the shit that happened at Impel Down, there wasn't much to hold him back except for the health of the people around him.
"I can believe that," Sabo said, and Isobu gave a low chuckle that shook everyone like an earthquake.

Kei lowered a hand and ran her fingers along Isobu's head as the rumbling stopped. Her eyes went distant again, then she rested her chin on her forearm. "So, you?"

Ace realized he was tense, and tried to forcibly relax. "Stress-testing, mainly. You saw how that went. Other than that, just, uh, seeing how you're doing."

Sabo nudged him with his knee, subtly enough that Ace was sure Kei didn't see it. Sabo knew as well as Ace did that he never just checked on anyone. Even seeing Luffy for the first time in three years had been prefaced by both the hunt for the ghost skiff and, after that was resolved, chasing rumors about Teach. He generally expected people to get along on their own, and Kei was New World strong.

All the same, her eyes narrowed very slightly as she looked sidelong at him. Still, Kei stayed slumped where she was while Ace's heart did its best to climb up his throat.

Sabo nudged him again, and Ace's hand itched to lash out right back into his brother's face, because this wasn't helping. But Sabo would probably see it coming with observation haki and oh screw it.

"I just… I wanted to ask you something," Ace blurted, before he could let his fears get the best of him. "I mean, I wasn't planning… Just give me a second."

Kei lifted her chin somewhat, but didn't otherwise move. "Take your time."

Ace swallowed hard. He felt like he was trying to talk his way out of being eaten by a monster, and the only reason he was coming out ahead was because it was too busy sunning itself to bother. Which was kind of ridiculous, given that Kei wasn't a monster, and Isobu was, and Ace was more nervous about the first person than the second one. But no matter how much he tried to tell himself that—that his fear was pointless—it all came back to people and their jeers and his fucking father.

Sabo's presence was probably the only reason he didn't chicken out despite himself. Sabo knew already, and he was Ace's brother.

Ace fidgeted for a while, toying with the sigil on his hat cord this time instead of his necklace. He didn't meet Kei's gaze or Sabo's, but every inch of him was wound tighter than a spring. Even after he turned the little demon emblem over for the fifth time, Kei said nothing.

But he wasn't going to walk away from this conversation without giving her some kind of answer.

Finally, after five solid minutes of silence and avoiding Kei's question, he said, "It's hard to… I don't know where to start."

"The beginning is generally best," Sabo said quietly, while Kei hesitated to suggest anything.

Ace swore silently, because it would have been easier just to tear the knife free, but… "Okay. Okay, I can do that."

There was a long silence, filled only by the sound of the ocean.

"Do you…" Kei hesitated, then offered, "Right after we met Yugito, you guessed some things and let me fill in the rest. Do you want me to try that?"
"No, I can do this." Ace set his jaw, fighting down a scowl, before he said, "It's about my father," spitting the last word.

Kei didn't say anything. She just waited for him to stop throwing sparks.

"Before I was born," Ace began in a low voice, "my mother carried me long enough that it killed her. But even before then, I was… My very existence was a sin." His hand clenched in a fist, sparks being smothered in his fingers. "If you talk to—if the wrong people find out—"

"The World Government?" Kei asked, her voice whisper-soft.

Ace's minute flinch probably told her enough. "They're…on the list." She hadn't moved, so… Okay. So far, so good. "How'd you know?"

"Jinbe told that story about the child hunts," Kei said, and Ace suppressed another shudder. "Your reaction was telling. But if you don't want to tell me, I won't ask you to. It's your secret."

"No, I want to—" Ace began, then cut himself off when he felt his voice start to get louder. No, he needed to be calm. If he started shouting now, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop.

Kei was one of the most powerful people Ace knew who wasn't on any pirate crew. And yet he wasn't afraid she would hurt him. Aside from her huffing and puffing over the box of paper from months ago, Kei had never even gotten angry at him in a way that made him afraid for his life. Hell, he'd blown up at her. And she'd agreed enough with what he said that there wasn't an argument. What would one extra fact—the piece she was missing—do to their bond?

Could she join the Whitebeard Pirates if she—?

Shit. If Kei rejected him and told—

Kei, oblivious to his thoughts, just said, "Ask away."

Or not so oblivious. She was watching him shrewdly as his feelings probably showed as clearly on his face as his freckles did. Though she didn't know a lot about the Blues the way he did, she was sharp. She could read people. She was from a place where not reading people was a really, really bad idea.

And Ace went back to the oldest question still clinging to his heart like barbed wire.

"What would you say…" Ace began, forcing himself not to choke on the words. Their familiarity was almost sickening. *I can do this, I can*—"What would you say if you met the Pirate King's son?"

The words hung in the air like smoke, clingy and cloying. If they were, Ace might have been able to ignore their weight and the sensation that he was standing on a knife's edge. Sabo was at his back, and he knew Isobu didn't give a shit, but a little voice in the back of his head kept insisting that this was the end. That this situation could tip against him in an instant, and it would all be over.

And yet to his own ears, the question had almost managed to come across as off the cuff, like he hadn't been building up to the question for entirely too long. Ever since the conversation they'd had about the clan wars, the surge of empathy when he realized that jinchūriki were treated like pariahs, the near-confession after Kei fixed Utakata's seal…

It was all building up to *this*, for Ace.
"If I met the Pirate King's son..." Kei sat back, then slowly raised her hand. Ace still tensed, half-convinced by the voice of doubt in his head that she could still strike like lightning. And, more importantly, that she would. "I'd raise my hand like this, then say 'Yo.' Just like I did when we met."

Ace stared at her, jaw dropping open before he could fully process her answer. His hands clenched into fists on top of his knees, and when he spoke, his voice shook. "D-did you hear what I said? Gol D. Roger's son. People say the man was a demon! The World Government—they'd call anyone with his blood a demon just for that. It's the most cursed blood in the world..."

"Really? A demon?" Kei gave Ace a knowing look, then patted Isobu's shell. As the huge turtle rumbled in what Ace realized, belatedly, was actually reassuring, Kei went on, "Then you're in good company, aren't you? I mean, you drew a line when Yugito and I were still mulling over how much we wanted to take out Teach, regardless of the lives lost. Whether we were planning on sinking the island or not, it really wasn't a question that should've been asked, was it? A real 'demon' wouldn't have blinked. And yet, I remember you dragging us both back from the edge."

"But—" Ace bit down on his knee-jerk response, trying to get her to understand the sheer scale of what she was dismissing. "But I don't—"

Sabo's hand met the back of Ace's head. When Ace glared back at him, Sabo shrugged innocently and said, "I'm just doing what you'd do if you caught me saying something like what I know you were going to say. And I didn't wanna hear the end of that sentence any more than Kei did."

There was another rumble from Isobu. Kei tilted her head to one side as though she was listening to him, then said, "Isobu says he won't tell his siblings if you don't want him to."

A drop of ice water crawled down Ace's spine. He'd known that the Tailed Beasts could all talk to their hosts without needing to open their mouths, but the idea that Isobu could tell the others whatever he wanted through the same process... Though his mouth felt dry, Ace managed to say, "Please don't tell anyone else. Not even Matatabi."

Kei bowed her head with her eyes closed, a solemn hand over her heart. Even when he racked his memory for the times he'd poked around Marine bases, he'd never seen someone act that formally toward him. It wasn't a gesture of loyalty like the Marine salute. It was a promise. "I swear I won't. Ever."

Ace blinked rapidly, turning away so he could wipe his eyes before the impending tears spilled over. He knew neither Sabo or Kei or even Isobu would say anything, but he had to. Around the knot in his throat, he whispered, "Th-thanks."

"Of course." Water bounced on the giant turtle's shell as he spoke in a tone that completely ruined the mood. "Now, I think we should return to the ship. If I must keep this boat in my stomach any longer, I may decide to keep it forever."

"Oh, hell no!" Ace shouted, stomping on Isobu's shell for emphasis, even if the turtle probably couldn't feel it. Even as a wild, relieved laugh kept trying to bubble out of him. He was free enough—safe enough—to have this argument, and it was great. "I just got it from Franky!"

"Do you really have to fight the turtle while we're still on his back?" Sabo asked, but he was grinning too. "You haven't relearned how to swim in the last five minutes."

"Shut up, Sabo!"
"Never!"

And then Ace had Sabo in a headlock and Kei was scooting away from them, toward the edge of Isobu's head. Her smile, from what little Ace saw of it before Sabo almost threw him onto his back, was bright even if it wasn't a true grin. It reached her eyes.

But then she said, while Ace had Sabo pinned via arm bar, "Don't make me turn this turtle around, kids."

"Kids? Who the hell made you the nanny?" Sabo demanded, though his voice was a little muffled by his cravat and Isobu's shell. Ace learned fast.

"Get over here," Ace said, and grabbed for her. "You're not getting out of—oh, seriously?!"

Kei had exploded into water before he could even get close, dousing them both with sea spray. Her laugh—more of a cackle—drifted up from somewhere around Isobu's jaw spikes, before Ace spotted her running across the waves toward Sunny at a speed that would have been uncanny even if she hadn't been ignoring physics.

"Cheater," Sabo complained as he snaked out of Ace's grip.

"Friggin' ninjas," Ace agreed. He sat up on Isobu's head with Sabo, then knocked on Isobu's shell.

"So, wanna help us catch her?"

"You are on your own."

"The seaweed is always greener in somebody else's lake," I sang under my breath, watching Saiken blow the biggest spit bubbles of his life to encase our ships. "You dream about going up there, but that is a big mistake..." I tapped my fingertips on the Thousand Sunny's railing. "Just look at the world around you, right here on the ocean floor..."

"We're not underwater yet, though," Luffy said. Though he'd been bouncing in place ever since we'd finally gotten within sight of the Red Line, he still made time to check in on everyone's adventurous spirit. "Hey, Kei, did you do this last time, too? Is that why you're singing? What's Fishman Island like?"

"Uh," I said, while Luffy continued to pepper me with questions. He didn't stop until I held up a hand as a silent plea for him to cool his jets. "Luffy, I didn't come through this way."

"Eh? Why not?"

Isobu answered with a rather dry, "It was easier to find an unoccupied part of the Red Line and climb. We didn't know where the Ryugu Kingdom was, or that there was a tunnel."

"The hell you didn't," Ace complained, bobbing down below in the now-repaired Striker II. He'd done two laps of his brother's ship before coming to a stop, satisfied with Franky's work. "I told you there was a way through without needing to do the next best thing to flying."

"And finding it would have taken more time," Isobu replied, as Saiken's latest bubble engulfed the Sunny and muffled his voice somewhat. While Ace dragged his new ride back into its dock, Isobu went on, "Now, we can all experience the moment together."

I eyed him. I'm sure you weren't thinking about that at all when we came through. We didn't even know what planet we were on.
You know that, and I know that, but I do not think it matters.

Still, while all of this had been happening, Luffy just stared uncomprehendingly. After a little longer, he shrugged to himself and wandered off, scurrying up the main mast and stretching to touch the edges of Saiken's bubble. "Hey, is this like what we might've got if we stayed in Salisbury?"

"Sabaody," Usopp corrected, even as he peered all around the ship for any signs of intruders. "And I don't think they'd welcome us back."

Even from the crow's nest, I didn't imagine he'd be seeing much given all the Tailed Beasts lurking in our immediate area. While Isobu's Hidden Mist genjutsu kept us from being spotted by anyone else, Isobu's physical shell, combined with the bulk of Saiken, Yang Kurama, and the bubble-bound Matatabi and Shukaku would make it hard to see past them. Even if Chōmei had charitably decided to keep watch in the sky above the Red Line instead.

"Rayleigh and Shakky and Hatchan and Keimi would, though," Luffy said, once again demonstrating his total lack of volume control. Or maybe my ears were just too sharp. "And Rayleigh was a coating expert or something, right?"

Too late for that now. Though if Luffy ever decided to come back to Sabaody, I hoped he'd be tough enough to take on whatever Marine contingent had decided to set up shop there. Given how many friends he'd made, though, I had no doubt that forces could conspire to make Luffy into the most powerful person ever seen on the Grand Line as soon as they had the opportunity. It was somewhat hard-coded into the nature of the entire genre we found ourselves in.

Not that I was gonna mention that to anyone.

In relatively short order, Saiken got his glorified wagon train organized to his satisfaction. With Revolutionaries, pirates, former prisoners, Tailed Beasts, and jinchūriki all ready to go, he linked each bubble to the next with a thorough coating of what was basically soap made of spit. Isobu moved slowly to flank the bubbles before his chakra surrounded the ones Saiken did not, taking up the burden of towing every Tailed Beast that wanted to travel in a separate bubble to avoid getting water everywhere. Saiken could handle all of us humans, since we were unfortunately equipped with the organs necessary to drown. Once our travel arrangements were made, we dove.

Naruto and Gaara joined me at the railing to marvel as the sea closed over our heads. It was one thing to swim. It was quite another to be playing at being a submarine with a ship clearly not designed for such shenanigans. The Straw Hats had lit every lamp in to get a better look at the depths of the sea, though there wasn't much to look at in my opinion. Visibility wouldn't have been great with direct spotlights, and even then, the main points of interest would still have been our Tailed Beast companions. Matatabi's fur glowed with a deep blue light that hardly did anything to the darkness we were steeped in.

"I wonder," Gaara said, as a Sea King with a face like a giant hairless cat approached and did an abrupt about-face upon spotting Isobu, "if our oceans have anything like this."

"If they did, how would we know?" Naruto asked, leaning over the railing with his arms dangling. "Most of us worry about how much land we have, not how much ocean we control."

Gaara made a vague noise of assent.

"At least the Land of Fire has a coast, Naruto," said Fū, as she wandered over from wherever she'd been running around before. She sat next to his elbow, grinning. "Hey, maybe when we get back
we can find a beach or something and hang out and look for mermaids!"

In a bubble this small, I didn't consider it a major concern to keep my chakra sense running on all cylinders all the time. The few things that could attack us would hit the Tailed Beast contingent first and die horribly. Fū still felt wary of me, sure, but apparently wasn't letting it stop her from hanging out with her friends. The rest could wait.

"Are they anything like in that story with the box?" Naruto wondered aloud.

"What box?" asked Gaara.

"Uh, there's a story of a guy…" Naruto paused, scratching his head. "Urashima Tarō? I think he rescued a sea turtle, and the sea turtle said he could visit the underwater mermaid kingdom…"

While Naruto butchered a childhood fairy tale for the benefit of his friends, Jinbe listened as well. Because Naruto couldn't remember the names of anyone involved aside from the main character, it ended up being the Epic Saga of Some Guy named Urashima Tarō and a Bunch of People. I imagined that if Naruto had remembered Otohime and the rest of the colorful cast, or the name of the kingdom, or the treasure, Jinbe probably would have wondered how the story of the Ryugu Kingdom's treasure had ended up in the mouth of a tiny child who knew nothing about ships. Naruto knew the story because Kakashi enjoyed reading to him and Tatsumaki when they were younger, and I was fairly certain Jinbe would have known it because he lived it. And I knew I could blame Kakashi for it, because the version I told had Urashima open the box to get his old age back on purpose, so he could be with his now-elderly wife.

So I occasionally edited the story to suit my audience. Sue me.

"Oh," Gaara said.

After Naruto explained how the protagonist of his story was reduced to a skeleton by his accumulated years, I was sure Jinbe's version of the magical box didn't function the same way. It didn't sound plausible even in this bizarre setting. Then again, he hadn't said anything to dismiss the possibility out of hand either. Probably for the best.

"Something wrong, Gaara?" Fū asked, swinging her legs over the railing as though bored.

She'd been as attentive as she could be during story time, but Naruto had a way of relaying stories that was more loaded with tangents than my thought process. Now that it was over, she could fidget all she wanted.

"Is Sanji going to be okay?" Gaara asked, drawing blank looks from Jinbe and me.

"Your crew's chef shouldn't be in any more danger than anyone else would be," Jinbe said, after thinking it over. "Unless there was something specific you were worried about?"


Everyone thought about that. There was really only one reason Gaara, of all people, would bring that kind of habit to our attention.

"...Like the kind total perverts get?" Naruto asked after a second or two, eyes wide. At Gaara and Fū's worrying silence, he said, "You're kidding. And he's, what, really into mermaids?"

Gaara and Fū just sighed.
Isobu's voice interrupted the teenaged plotters, saying in a mild tone that warbled in the water, "Oh look, another contestant."

Everyone on the ship suddenly got a very good view of an octopus-squid thing that was about the size of three Tailed Beasts put together, Yang Kurama included. As a yellowish bulk of tentacles and seagoing horror, it was almost impressive. With its beady eyes and wide grin—as opposed to a beak like a proper cephalopod—I was once again left questioning what, if any, logic went into the evolution of life forms in this ridiculous ocean. It waved all its arms, possibly as a threat. One of them even reached for Saiken's convoy, and therefore us.

And then Isobu opened his craggy maw and let out a noise that no turtle would be able to mimic, due primarily to a lack of vocal cords of relevant range. Everyone under the size category of "Colossal" in the area clamped appendages over their ears as he sang like a whale. Specifically, if I had to guess, a type of whale that ate krakens for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Except even as I was trying to avoid abusing my regeneration abilities any more than I already had (and Sanji swore audibly from the kitchen about Logias and grease fires), I was pretty fucking sure I recognized the song.

Really? You break out things from Pokémon at a time like this?

Are you jealous of my range? You were not going to win any awards with your mermaid song earlier.

Oh, shut up. You're no dragon bird.

I am a dragon turtle.

I gave up, and coincidentally Isobu stopped singing after the kraken inked itself and fled in the blind confusion. For a monster of the deep, it wasn't all that intimidating compared to my mental roommate. Odd, how I could say that about so many things.

"Did anyone else notice something odd about that encounter?" Jinbe asked, once everyone had stopped acting like their eardrums would blow out.

"Are you talking about the thing swimming away? Or the singing monster turtle?" Naruto wondered aloud.

"We could have made so much takoyaki with it," Fū complained under her breath.

Since we had kinda been depending on Sea King meat for most of our protein recently, it wasn't as though Fū's idea didn't have merit. But we could just as easily hunt up nearly anything else. Or wait until we could hit a restaurant, like law-abiding citizens.

…Pfff. Yeah, right.

"That is not what I meant," Jinbe said. He peered out into the darkness as the ink dispersed, frowning more severely than usual. "That was a North Blue kraken."

Fū stared blankly at him. "…What?"

"Kraken aren't normally found in this area," Jinbe explained, as the kids hung onto his every word. "We have Sea Kings, on occasion, but kraken prefer colder waters. Something is wrong here."

Something about the way he said it… "So, how long until we get ambushed?"
"Pardon?"

I shrugged. My logic didn't necessarily make sense, but Jinbe was a good listener. Maybe he'd be able to figure out what the heck I meant. "If there's something wrong down here, we're probably gonna end up in the middle of it. I mean, we're traveling with the Straw Hat Pirates, heading out to meet the Whitebeard Pirates, and we're carrying something like a hundred Revolutionary Army members with us. Even with Tailed Beasts escorting us everywhere, we're bound to run into something chaotic sooner or later. Actually, given that Fishman Island is directly below Mariejois, we're overdue for another fight."

Because main characters always were.

"The kraken didn't count," Naruto agreed.

"So says you."

"You didn't even touch it!" Fū yelled back, waving her arms to emphasize her point as Naruto shouted in agreement.

Gaara pretended he didn't know them.

"Unless you plan to run into and then attack the Neptune Army, I don't think that will be a problem," Jinbe said, a little taken aback. Then again, perhaps he had yet to experience the terror of dealing with a bored Naruto.

That was his could attest to the consequences.

But since the conversation didn't seem to be heading anywhere fast, I pushed off from the railing and decided to walk the length of the ship. The kids could pester Jinbe for stories and other fun things, since they hadn't been able to corner him before. So, to give him some time to stew and to prove Isobu wrong about my singing ability, I continued my song from before. "Such wonderful things around you, what more is you lookin' for? Under the sea, oh, under the sea…"

Fishman Island… I suppose if I had to describe it, I would have called it a fairy tale kingdom. Thanks to some giant tree or kelp, it was the only place on the ocean floor that had a free and constant supply of sunlight. With that in mind, fishfolk and merpeople of the past had colonized it, leading to the establishment of the Ryugu Kingdom at its base. According to Jinbe and Ace, who had been here before, the place had a whole district that was basically the most benevolent tourist trap on the planet. Given the bright or pastel colors literally everywhere inside the air bubble that surrounded the place, I could kind of see their point. It was like an aquatic Disneyland, but without giant anthropomorphic mice. Everything that wasn't based on coral architecture was held up by bubbles or smooth stone, and there were more types of fish and fish-people than anyone could shake a stick at. For all that I'd bothered Namur back when we first met, I hadn't had a clue about the true extent of morphology variations within a single sapient species.

Then again, this was One Piece. I honestly wouldn't have believed Whitebeard was a human if Ace hadn't taken the time, quite a while ago, to explain how big actual giants like Oars Jr. got. The baffling part of Fishman Island was that the people could be anywhere from the size of rabbits to the size of whales and still be called the same species. Or race, I supposed, since merpeople and fishpeople were apparently capable of producing either.

Anyway, that was my first impression. While I stared dumbstruck at everything along with the kids and the Straw Hat Pirates, everyone for whom Fishman Island was an old hat got back to work.
Speaking of old hats, though, it quickly became apparent that between the tremendous size range of the inhabitants and the general presence of really big sea life in the Grand Line, the Tailed Beasts couldn't get so much as a second glance. Giant turtles clearly existed, as did whales the size of islands and thus half-a-dozen giant monsters could almost be mistaken for locals. Jinbe's surprise at seeing Isobu in action had been limited to his strength and his speaking ability, not size or morphology. We'd made a habit of killing bigger things four times a week by then.

"I like this place," Saiken had said, once the Sunny and all the other ships were safely docked inside the air bubble that made up about half of the Ryugu Kingdom's territory. Sitting back on his haunches, he concluded, "It's a very pretty underwater island. Back home, you only get this many colors near the surface."

"That is because of the Sunlight Tree Eve," Jinbe had told him, and proceeded to explain the tremendous value of a source of constant, nourishing daylight that had been around for untold centuries. Basically, the Ryugu Kingdom was a coral reef, just farther underwater than any such place had ever been before.

But some of our number were more interested in other features, such as something known only as Bubbly Coral.

"Never mind that," Matatabi had interrupted, disappointing Robin and anyone else interested in history. She reached out with one flaming paw and nearly scared off a fishman merchant twice my height, then decided to lower her face to speak to him directly. "Tell me, can you create a series of bubble creations that would allow my brothers and me to travel safely through the city? I would quite like not to hurt anyone by accidentally stepping on them."

The merchant, with an eye for opportunity, had merely said, "Give me a minute to figure out measurements?" He'd looked down at the little branches of pink coral in his hands before blanching and calling for an assistant or fifty, but he didn't give up or refuse.

Matatabi purred. "Of course."

And that was how five Tailed Beasts cost us several hundred thousand beri in glorified pool rings.

"Look, Uta! I'm flying!"

"Try not to hit any buildings."

"You're not looking!"

"Bwahahaha!" Shukaku's laugh required everyone to cover their ears for a moment or two while he got it out of his system."You're as graceful in the air as you are on land, Saiken! Do a loop!"

"Kinda makes me wish Chōmei came down here with us," Fū commented, watching the Tailed Beasts do their best to frolic. It was mostly an exercise in not squishing people, accomplished with moderate difficulty and the occasional awkward twist in the air.

But it made them happy, so it was clearly worth it.

In human news, it turned out that Ace was kind of like a walking, talking, occasionally-flame-wreathed passport when it came to Fishman Island's customs check. Ordinarily, everyone visiting was obliged to have their ship inspected for who-knew-what by the local authorities, since people who traveled via bubble were the type who couldn't cross overland. Ergo, no Marines or World
Nobles. Everybody else fell under the Ryugu Kingdom's power if they wanted to move past the Red Line.

Except for the Whitebeard Pirates. If we weren't underwater, I'd have half-expected a ticker-tape parade of some variety.

"WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?!"

And it helped that we found Thatch and Marco waiting for us like a couple of airport valets almost as soon as the last of the Tailed Beasts floated off into the air. Thatch even had a sign, which jammed all the pirate flags of the relevant crews onto one banner.

In response, Ace leapt off the Sunny before we were even properly docked.

I didn't. Instead, I scrutinized Thatch's work. He hadn't included Yugito's band of marauding cat cultists, or the Revolutionaries, but only because neither of them had given him anything to work with. In the former's case, it was due to a lack of focus despite being a new pirate crew by some vague certification consisting of "well, why not?" on the part of the former fans. In the latter's, not being widely known was the entire point.

This did not save me from the group hug, because in the end I'd always been a pushover.

"Kei, hey, you're not excused! Get down here!"

Once Thatch let Ace go—and he wandered over to Marco with the banner draped around him like a feather boa because he could—I went down to meet my inevitable fate. The second I touched the bright sea floor, I was instantly swept up into a bear hug that I did my best to return without hurting Thatch's back. After we'd spun around a few times—and my feet failed to find solid ground three times in a row—I put my weight into controlling the arc.

The next thing Thatch knew, I was hugging him while also basically carrying him over one shoulder. So much for his height advantage. Jinchūriki strength won out.

"I knew you had it in you. I knew you could succeed in the Grand Line, no problem," Thatch said, once I set him down again. "It's good to see you again, Kei. And you even brought our wayward brother back home!"

"Hey, I went off looking for her first," Ace argued back, even as Marco ducked past him and held up a hand in easy reach of mine.

Fist bump! "So, care to tell us a bit of what you've been up to, Tidal Blade?" Marco asked, withdrawing his hands to his pockets. His half-lidded eyes darted to one side as the shadow of Yang Kurama's bulk passed over us, almost like an eclipse of an unseen sun. "...And what's with the giant floating animals? I'd only call two of them Sea Kings, and that's a stretch."

I smiled somewhat sheepishly. "It might be faster just to introduce you to everyone else. We're gonna be holding everyone up for a while, otherwise."

Sanji's mermaid thing notwithstanding, I'd learned a bit about Luffy's crew in a few cases. Since Whitebeard had confirmed that Fishman Island had a Poneglyph, Robin would be occupied from the start. The rest of the crew would undoubtedly find something in this brightly colored tourist trap to entertain themselves. Even if most local jerks probably wouldn't willingly pick fights while the Whitebeards were in town.

"We're gonna be here a while anyway," Ace said, "or did you think you were gonna get away
without a Whitebeard Pirate party?"

I had not, and ceded the point.

"Is this a thing?" Gaara asked, as he and Naruto swayed in time with the terribly off-key sea shanties being sung by the Whitebeard Pirates. "Until I got here, I didn't think 'drinking contests' were real. Only Zoro and Nami ever do it."

"I don't think it works as well with sake," Naruto replied, "because each bottle is so expensive. Unless you're Granny Tsunade or something." Naruto paused, blinking. "Wait, Zoro and Nami? I get Zoro, but isn't Nami too small for this?"

"I don't know. She drank a lot at Whiskey Peak and everyone passed out except her." Gaara frowned slightly in concentration. "Nami and Sanji said I couldn't join in; not that I wanted to. So, I just watched until Baroque Works tried to kill us."

"...Weren't you only on the crew for like a week?" Naruto asked blankly.

"Hah! That's nothing!" Fū grinned. Cackling outright, she continued, "By the time I was on the crew for a week, Aokiji almost killed us!"

Naruto and Gaara exchanged glances. Then Gaara broke the silence with a sigh and a, "She's right, too. I was an icicle for an hour."

That was the gist of the conversation from the dreaded kiddie table, anyway.

Suffice to say that when the crews all met up, they converged on the Moby Dick because it was by far the largest of the ships and proceeded to party as hard as...well, pirates. Specifically, the Whitebeard, Straw Hat, and Cobalt Lioness Pirates. The Revolutionaries were mostly along for the ride. And the free drinks.

Never let it be said that such a group lacked for opportunists.

All around the deck of the Moby Dick, pirates partied. Among the general carousing and off-key singing, there was one centerpiece to the whole shebang. And that centerpiece, lit with lamps and surrounded by the loudest partygoers of the lot, was an ongoing drinking contest. The defending champion was the old man himself, Whitebeard of the iron liver or something similar, and the crowd around him included his defeated challengers.

Ace was either asleep or unconscious, with his head resting on his left arm and a game of connect-the-freckles across his face, thanks to Luffy's rubbery hands. Luffy, for his part, snored with his head dropping off the table and onto the floor, somehow still devouring any scrap of food left in the immediate area in a way that drew stares when the crowd could spare the attention. Or had a piece of food swiped right out of their hands. The third brother, snickering with his hand over his mouth, did his best to complete the freckle constellation while the hand with a marker in it shook with his suppressed laughter.

And yet, the game continued. I was in it for the atmosphere, really.

"KANPAI!"

The show must go on.

"Just because Ace gave up doesn't mean I will, Pops!" Thatch said, grinning widely in the face of
the ongoing challenge. His face was flushed even as he grabbed the next cup.

"Ace passed out," I corrected, shaking my head slowly. While I'd been quietly matching Thatch and Whitebeard drink for drink, my face didn't show any signs of it thanks to Isobu's influence over my metabolism. The closest I'd gotten to an alcoholic flush was to grimace whenever I tasted the sake, but that was it. "Good thing the nurses are going dry tonight."

"Not for lack of arguing," Janey said, huffing as she observed the party. "Honestly, no restraint at all…"

"I'm not sure how you're doing this," Marco commented, leaning over to count the empty bottles by Nami's elbow. "You're what, six drinks deep? And Thatch has almost two feet and a hundred pounds on you."

"Hey, I earned my tolerance," Nami said, though she swayed when she tried to stick her finger in Marco's face. "Both of you can shut up."

Marco pushed her hand aside before her finger went up his nose. Then, "And you, Pirate Hunter?"

"Pff, whatever." Zoro, of course, was doing his best to match Whitebeard. "This is nothing."

"Gurarara!" Whitebeard guffawed, setting his own massive sake jug against his knee. "So many cheeky brats at once! Brings a tear to an old man's eye."

"KANPAI!" came the cry for the next round.

And the next.

And the one after that.

An hour or two later, the under-seventeen age group had long since lost interest in anyone over that age, and gone to find their bunks on the Thousand Sunny while dragging Luffy, Nami, and Zoro with them. Most of the Whitebeards, Revolutionaries, and miscellaneous pirates were sprawled out insensate on the deck, hiccupping or happily drunk without them. The division commanders were as dead to the world as Ace had been, except for Marco and his utter refusal to imbibe when he was immune to alcohol anyway.

"I don't believe it," Marco muttered as he surveyed the carnage. The party had put a huge dent in the Moby Dick's stocks, and yet it wasn't over.

Utakata and I were still keeping pace with Whitebeard.

Thatch, meanwhile, was hanging off Yugito's shoulder even as she hauled him somewhat to his feet. Unfortunately, the fact that he was so much taller than her made the prospect awkward at best. He was muttering the entire time, saying things like "An angel!" and "Pretty kitty," and so on.

"Before you drag him to sleep this off," Marco said, gesturing vaguely at the remnants of the party, "do you have any idea how they're doing that?"

Yugito tilted her head slowly to one side, raising an eyebrow. It was easy to see Ace's influence in that gesture alone. "Doing what?"

"Drinking like fish and not apparently feeling it," Marco replied, because if Yugito was drunk, he sure couldn't see it. And he knew she had been drinking before, at least until bowing out at about
the same time that Jozu and Blenheim had.

I hid a smile behind my cup. Yugito was making friends.

"I know I'm drunk," said Blamenco from the floor, "but I can't tell if you're drunk."

"You're not drunk," grumbled Fossa as he pushed his watermelon-striped hat down over his eyes. "I'm drunk." A pause. "We don't have anyone named 'drunk,' right?"

"I think I'd know if we did, if only for the jokes we'd make," Marco told him in a dry voice, and Fossa subsided.

"Oh, I'm sober," Yugito assured him. "I'll likely remember this for years."

"That doesn't explain how," Marco said.

Yugito shrugged. "Kei explained it as an inherent immunity to poison, which Utakata tested against Warden Magellan. Alcohol is nothing in comparison, though it means that none of us can get drunk even if we want to."

Marco blinked. "What."

"A long story that can wait until after the contest," Yugito replied, jerking her head in the direction of Utakata, Whitebeard, and me (which I meant I waved offhandedly back). We were the only contestants left upright. And even then, to my not-so-experienced eye, it looked like Whitebeard was starting to flag. "Could you tell me where I can drop Thatch before he starts drooling?"

"I…sure?" Marco said, mostly out of reflex. "This way?"

The next morning, bets had to be accounted for. While Marco was distracted by guiding Yugito and Thatch to Thatch's room so he could sleep off this round of liver abuse, we three remaining participants in the game brought it to an end. While Utakata grumbled about wasted years and uneared tolerances, I just said that none of them could remember who had won in the end. Our distinct lack of hangovers in the morning indicated a blatant lie, but no one except Marco would have called us on it.

And to be honest, he was too busy trying to figure out why and how Yugito had emerged wearing one of Thatch's spare shirts.

"…Seriously? You don't have your own clothes?" Utakata asked from across the breakfast table.

"Izo drunk-designed something," Yugito said with a shrug. "Something about not wanting me to wear Kei's old one?"

Utakata sighed. "That's not what I was really asking about, and you know it."

"Thatch called me a kitty-cat again," Yugito informed him loftily. "So I drew whiskers on his face and borrowed a shirt while Izo modifies my clothes." She arched an eyebrow. "Were you expecting a different answer?"

Utakata rolled his visible eye. That just about served as an answer.

"I might have, if he'd been sober while propositioning me," Yugito elaborated slowly, checking her nails before buffing them against her "borrowed" shirt. I wasn't sure why she bothered, since her tendency to grow them out at will meant that they somehow ended up flawless at the end of the
day. "But not like that."

Several of the less-hungover pirates choked on their coffee as the dots connected themselves. As she heard the reactions, Yugito made a face that resembled the figurative cat that swallowed the canary. She'd loosened up to the point where she was playing elaborate pranks on people, which could only be a good thing. At least until someone got clawed.

"Smug as hell, aren't you?" My voice was dry, but Yugito could read my tone well enough by this point that her smile remained unaffected. I reached out to point a finger at her plate, which was adorned with salmon spread on toast. "Did he promise you the first shot at the tuna?"

"I'm not going to hold a man to agreements made while drunk," Yugito replied. Under my and Utakata's stares, she relented after a brief battle of wills. She curled her fingers underneath her chin and smiled lazily. ". . . But yes, he did."

"Called it," I muttered. "Sheesh, they're definitely trying to recruit you."

"And I'm enjoying playing hard to get," Yugito said.

A distant voice shouted, "I knew it!" When all three of us jinchūriki tried to spot the culprit, no one admitted to it, or to any of their friends doing so.

"Kei-sensei," Naruto said, piping up from next to my elbow. He hadn't been there before, so his stealth training must have finally roused from its deep slumber. Pirates were a little too easy to get around. Naruto just latched onto me like a limpet and asked, "Who really won that drinking contest?"

"I told you, we fell asleep first," I said, unperturbed by the deaths of a dozen running bets.

"Bo-riiiing," Naruto sing-songed. "Really, though, who won?"

I sighed, then beckoned Naruto closer. I whispered the answer in his ear, to the obvious curiosity of the pirates. And the information Naruto heard prompted a mischievous grin.

He ran off to join his friends at breakfast with a cackle shaking his whole body. He bounced off Fū before they put their heads together almost simultaneously, plotting. If Gaara and Luffy got dragged into it, with Usopp and Chopper as collateral… Oh well.

"It'll be all around the ship in two hours," Utakata commented, shaking his head slowly.

"It should be fun," Yugito said, raising a glass of milk in a clear demand for a toast. "Kanpai?"

"What the hell," I said, and clinked my mug of coffee against it.

After a second's thought, Utakata added his tea cup.

Chapter End Notes

I was gonna include a bit about the Marines here, but This-Chapter-Is-Too-Long-Already-itis won out. Guess we'll need to wait a while to see what they're up to (but hopefully not as long as the gap between these last two chapters was).
I am thou, thou art I... Thou hast turned a vow into a blood oath.
It's Raining Men

Chapter Summary

Plot: Interrupt happy family fun time.

Chapter Notes

AN: Well, this sure took longer than I thought it would. I've been bouncing between WIPs so much lately that I had 6k in like four different things. This is just what happened to get finished first.

This chapter's song is "It's Raining Men (The Living Tombstone Remix)," originally by The Weather Girls.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I have a godfather and a godmother," Naruto said, bouncing in place on the old man's leg. Aside from when he was asleep—which didn't seem to be often—he had enough energy that he was never entirely still. And no matter the hour, it always seemed to run rings around even the strongest pirates around. "And a grandpa, and a mom and a dad, and my sister has a godfather and a godmother, too. Thing is, my grandpa's about twenty years younger than you, so I think I have an open slot for a great-grandpa!"

Naruto, unlike most jinchūriki, had several living relatives and potential guardians to take up any slack in his life. I was one of them, twice over, and was a major reason why most of the rest were still alive. I didn't ever see fit to admit that aloud, because some of those incidents had been too close to call anything more than luck.

"So, does the Third Hokage still count, or…?" I prompted, while Naruto contemplated his family tree in front of Whitebeard.

"Yeah, but for Dad's side." Naruto shrugged, twisting a damp lock of hair between his fingers. The paint had mostly come out after one forced scrubbing, at least. He and Thatch hadn't had time to grab glitter from anywhere, and the rest of the crew thanked their lucky stars for it. "I dunno if Mom would want to be your granddaughter when she's on Shanks's crew, though."

Whitebeard chuckled, with only a brief hesitation as though he expected to cough. While every nurse hovered and Janey spared a frown for everyone who dared get the old man worked up, Whitebeard set his huge sake jug to one side of his chair and then patted Naruto's not-quite-spiky hair with a hand the size of a trash can lid. "I would be honored to add you to the family. Or do you plan on adding me to yours?"

"I dunno. You already have a ton of kids, so there's not really much harm in a few more, right?"

I supposed that when it came to father figures, redundancy was better than not. I had Sensei and Jiraiya—sort of—as well as my biological father, though he'd died when I was younger than
Naruto currently was. Naruto also got to count Nagato and Yahiko in his corner, after a fashion, whereas I considered them more like cousins.

"I think it'd be interesting to be able to say you're my grandpa, even if Naruto can't," I said, while the other two puzzled over things. "Both of my sets of grandparents died before I was born."

Gaara tilted his head to one side, mimicking Yugito's thoughtful expression. "I think that may be the case with everyone here except for Naruto."

Given the global propensity toward armed conflict only large clans tended to have more than two generations alive at a given time. Or at least it seemed like it. I knew my maternal grandparents had been killed in a clan massacre and my paternal ones in a mountain accident, but I couldn't speak for most of my fellow shinobi because we also tended to categorically deny information to village outsiders. For all I knew, Han and Rōshi had thriving families to hide from Konoha's eyes. I was sure Utakata was an orphan, after a fashion, and I was certain both Fū and Killer B were adopted, but past that? After hitting a critical threshold of being stonewalled, I wasn't interested in prying.

"What is your policy on heroic poses?" Fū was asking Vista, flitting around the *Moby Dick*'s deck upside-down as she spoke. "Do they look better with swords?"

"I've never had to think up a heroic pose," Vista replied, "but I've seen enough Marine recruitment posters to know they do, in fact, look much better with swords. Have you ever read some of the weekly comics? Like Sora the Hero?"

"No?" Fū made a face as she righted herself. "And you're about to tell me I lived under a rock."

Vista denied it immediately, though not too well.

"I've lived under a tree and on a Sky Island, but under a rock would be a new one for me!" Fū grinned, dismissing the problem entirely. She whirled around in the air, then settled into a pose with her arms held out in a V formation and one knee tucked up to her chest. "Hey, Gaara, how's this look?"

"You look like an antenna."

"I'd like to see you do better!"

Gaara looked around at the excitable kids, then said slowly and to no one in particular, "What have I gotten into?"

"Dunno, but I'm with ya!" said Naruto, as he climbed down from Whitebeard's knee. "Fū, I bet I can come up with better poses than you!"

"You're on!"

While the three youngest jinchūriki decided to see who could be a Hero of Justice (and not make every pirate within half a mile laugh themselves sick), Utakata drifted over to me without saying much in the face of all the noise. While some of the more excitable crew members (read: Thatch) cheered the kids on, Yugito also slowly slunk to my perch.

"Not joining in on the kiddie games?" I asked them, shifting until I was in a meditating pose on the railing. Utakata was the youngest of us adult jinchūriki.

"I think they'd prefer if they were able to be carefree," Utakata said, shaking his head slowly. "We aren't qualified."
He was also a bit of a stick in the mud.

I eyed Yugito's crown braid and made sure she saw me doing it. "Well, maybe if you let them do your hair…"

Utakata ducked out of my reach before I could act in any way on that suggestion. "No way in hell."

"Not even for a little while?" Yugito asked, teasing.

"No one touches the hair!"

I had a funny feeling that the lot of us were becoming an extended family by osmosis.

Just in time for events to finally catch up with us.

Eventually shit hit the fan, because of course it did. Or the manure hit the windmill, or whatever other old-timey variation anyone around me would have understood. The point is that, much like a world populated by ninja and samurai rather than everything under the sun (and a few that were not), peaceful days never lasted among an ocean-going world of pirates. Back in Konoha, managing to get three or more months' reprieve from the rigors of random S-class threats wasn't uncommon, because it was an established village and ANBU didn't need to yell "Constant vigilance!" in the Hokage's ear when he was at least as wary and watchful as they were. The village's reputation generally did the rest, which meant most Konoha shinobi could generally expect to still be able to go home at the end of a mission and have the apartment still there. I knew I did.

Now, Whitebeard was more widely feared than the Yellow Flash, even if he hadn't personally visited death upon many of the people who trembled at his name. Their world was just too big for that kind of personal touch, and shinobi were basically confined to one continent on ours. Harming a Whitebeard Pirate was verboten, and the authority people would answer to was the man himself. Given that we were sticking by his crew, this meant we were probably about as safe as we'd ever been during this entire pirating adventure.

This did not stop complete assholes from causing trouble. But it started with something that, for the most part, wasn't our responsibility until we stuck our noses into it. And then it ballooned from there.

Because the Whitebeards were in a town under their protection, they tended to spread out and act like tourists as much as anyone else did, with the bonus that they were effectively pickpocket-proof by virtue of also being a bunch of scoundrels. With escorts from an older and more powerful crew, the Straw Hats and the Cobalt Lionesses had effective free reign if they were courteous. Some of Yugito's followers may have forgotten a few of their basic manners due to their time in prison (like remembering the buying power of beri as opposed to a grasping hand), but a few quick reminders from the locals and their pirating senpais smoothed the way. There weren't as many punches as one would expect.

The Straw Hats fanned out all over the place. While Zoro was busy challenging Vista to a fight—because of course he was—Nami, Sanji, Gaara, and Brook went shopping, and Robin took Fū, Usopp, Franky, and Chopper to find the Poneglyph, only Luffy stuck by the Moby Dick at all. Part of it was that Ace was introducing Luffy to all the Whitebeard Pirates. The other consideration was a very protracted (and distracted) discussion of crew strength relative to the challenges of the New World. As guests of the Ryugu Kingdom, we hadn't technically wandered back into the nastiest ocean on the planet just yet. Luffy, as the Straw Hats' captain, had to make the call for his crew in the end. I was still concerned that, aside from Gaara and perhaps Fū, none of them were ready for
the nearly vertical difficulty curve that awaited them past the Red Line. Actually explaining that to Luffy, though, was going take all day.

Then Ace threw Luffy hard enough to put a crater in the seafloor, which I considered an issue between brothers and left alone.

Jinbe disappeared, taking Koala along with him to meet the Sun Pirates when they docked a few hours after "dawn" broke. Sabo followed, with a token reassurance to Ace and Luffy that he wouldn't get lost or kidnapped or set on fire again—or at least not without them to either act as backup or point and laugh. The rest of the Revolutionaries decided to spread out, with Ivankov at the head, and descended on the highest-end fashionable shops they could find. I wasn't sure if they expected a discount or not, but perhaps it was just as well that they explored.

Anyway, that was the gist of the situation after breakfast. It seemed peaceful enough. With the Tailed Beasts floating around, even after their second and then third Bubbly Coral purchases, Fishman Island was effectively our new field trip destination.

Thus, Yugito, Naruto, Utakata, and I all decided to travel together. With no pirates (other than our friends) to worry about, we could go as fast or slow as we wanted, with no concern for anyone else being able to keep up.

"What'll happen after this?" Naruto asked, after we'd stopped our meandering around Coral Hill for a little bit.

"After what?" Utakata didn't appear to be paying attention, more preoccupied by the fraying of his coat sleeves, but none of us were fooled. Naruto had a way of worming into people's hearts.

"After whatever we're doing here." Naruto lifted both his arms to effectively encompass the entirety of Fishman Island, or perhaps the world. "Like, Kei-sensei told me we're gonna help you with your revenge, and once we meet up with Mom and Octopops, it'll be a piece of cake. But no one's found the Four-Tails anywhere and we're still running with pirates and Revolutionaries and stuff." He let his arms drop. "And I think the Straw Hats are gonna need to take a training mission for like a year if they wanna keep up with the rest of us. That means Fū and Gaara aren't going to be doing much if we don't go home."

"And to be honest, it was only ever a theory that we would go home once our task was completed," Yugito remarked, in a tone that was rather grim.

Not that I blamed her. "Or a hope," I agreed, looking down at the tops of my shoes. I crossed my arms over my chest and sighed. "I still miss everyone back home too much to feel like Gaara and you do, Yugito, but..."

"It's not worth worrying about now," Utakata said firmly. When I looked at him, his level stare gave way to something deliberately cold. He broke eye contact first, saying, "We've left an imprint here, but until we progress further, there is no way to know what the result may be. And I refuse to panic until we have something real to fear."

Spoken like a textbook veteran shinobi.

I didn't believe him for a second.

"Kei-sensei," Naruto interrupted after a second, "isn't that the place?"

Thatch had said something about a Madame Shyarly and her famous prophecies while handing out fritters at breakfast, and I was enough of a nerd that I wanted to hear the second major oracle of my
life in person. Gamamaru was accurate, but vague, and I wanted to know if the Mako shark mermaid was any different. Unfortunately, that meant we'd be visiting a hostess club during peak hours, so who knew if we'd ever get a chance to see her.

There was a line going around the block by the time we got there. Naruto craned his neck and stood on the balls of his feet, making a token attempt to see over a crowd that was mostly taller than him or floating in convenient bubble rings if they didn't have feet for locomotion. Utakata, despite having gotten his customized bubble wand from Usopp a few days ago, and being more than capable of outperforming the Bubbly Coral devices we'd seen, left our group's sole genin to struggle. Yugito looked like she wanted to at least ask how long the wait was going to be, but couldn't lower herself to actually asking anyone.

I hung back and was going to wait, and then things happened.

"I must lodge a complaint," Matatabi's voice said, ringing out across the entire city directly below her. She'd apparently followed us from the Moby Dick, accompanied by a miniscule clone of Shukaku as a passenger.

As everyone looked up, she lifted a rear leg past the bubble ring around her ribs and kicked behind one of her ears, dislodging something the size of a human torso. It crashed into the ground hard enough to imbed itself in the stone, and Yugito was the first to investigate after the crowd cleared out and the dust settled. No one wanted to be in the immediate area if the fire-cat got pissed off enough to put her size and strength to good use, after all.

Yugito, with her eyes flashing Matatabi's colors for just a second, tore the weapon out of the ground with all the effort she'd displayed when using Minotaurus's club. She hefted the oversized battle axe one-handed, testing its weight, before saying aloud, "She didn't see where it came from. Did any of you?"

That got a round of "no" from pretty much everyone in the immediate area, except the Shukaku clone. As Matatabi floated gently down toward Yugito, the clone hurled itself down from a great height and smashed itself into sand upon hitting the stone. I had to wonder how Shukaku had learned that tactic, which just spooked the locals more.

Almost instantly reforming itself, the clone opened its bear trap jaws and said, "I saw everything! It came from outside of the city."

Which was the ocean. It was probably safe to say the culprit was either a fishman or someone skirting the laws of physics with more bubble shenanigans. Possibly both—I hadn't gotten a chance to figure out how the hell sailing interacted with the whole "sealed into an airtight bubble to travel underwater" thing yet. It obviously did, and without Tailed Beast intervention for the most part, but I didn't know why.

"I didn't know your eyesight was that good," Naruto said, even as he gathered the Shukaku clone into his arms.

"It is not," Matatabi said, pitching her voice as low as she could manage. "As I understand, Saiken and Yang Kurama spotted the initial problem. Or at least that is what they tell me."

Saiken, because he could twist his eyes any direction he pleased. Yang Kurama...might've just been out to steal credit. He tended to believe he was the best at everything just because he had nine tails and the ability to effortlessly squelch the rest of his siblings' power. Combined.

"Regardless of who saw it first," Shukaku's clone piped up, apparently eager to skate past that
issue, "someone just attacked you, Sister. What are we going to do about it? Can we kill someone?"

"How kind of you to ask first, Brother." Matatabi's tone dripped with sarcasm.

"The great Shukaku overflows with generous spirit!" said the clone, baring all his sandy fangs.

His goodwill extended almost solely to showing off to the tertiary benefit of others or in sharing kills. Whoever had thrown that axe was going to experience that truth first-hand if Shukaku got to them first.

"Well, he's a giver," I muttered, even as Naruto ran his fingertip along the edge of the axe. Since it was unlikely Naruto could hurt himself badly enough that he couldn't recover in seconds, I turned my attention to Yugito and said, "So, do we report this to the Neptune Army or to the Whitebeard Pirates?"

"We're guests of both," Yugito thought aloud, shooing Naruto away from the weapon with her free hand. "But the Neptune Army is closer. They may know why random weapons are flying through the air."

"Okay! Let's go, then!" Naruto said, and started off in the direction of the last underwater police station we'd passed. I was pretty sure there wasn't a separate local constabulary in this area, since Fishman Island wasn't much larger than Konoha, so it wasn't like we had better ideas. With Shukaku's clone in his arms, we adults let him run off ahead because the likelihood he'd actually be in danger was somewhat low.

Provided there were no more flying axes. Nonetheless, Matatabi floated on ahead, keeping an eye on the two fastest members of our group.

"Something's been bothering me," Utakata said while we walked.

Yugito and I both looked at him. But I spoke first. "What is?"

"I didn't notice last night, when everyone was drunk," Utakata began, clearly trying to remember the exact problem. "But this morning… If you cut about half of Thatch's pompadour off, and restyled it, do you think he looks a little too much like the Second Mizukage?"

Yugito frowned, probably trying to remember a history lesson or two. "I don't know what he looked like, so I'll take your word for it." Or not. And here I thought her observations would be profound. I supposed there wasn't much to work from. "But now that you bring him up, something else was bothering me about Thatch."

"Oh?" I prompted, as we passed a crowd of concerned-looking fishfolk, who were pointing at the axe Yugito carried.

"He has a Devil Fruit power."

Eh? "He does?"

Yugito nodded. "Marco specifically made me promise not to let him drown in a bathtub. Apparently, he's only had the power for two days and is still... learning the ropes?" Yugito shrugged, bouncing the axe on her shoulder. "I imagine learning while nearly unconscious through alcohol consumption would be a difficult prospect."

"Not that we would know," Matatabi added, for the sake of accuracy.
Utakata asked, "Do you know which power he has?"

Yugito was about to answer, but at that point Naruto trooped back over to us, still carrying the Shukaku clone. He was also followed by two fully-armored mermen, their tails wrapped in more of the same bubble rings that Matatabi and her fellow Tailed Beasts were using. They also carried two tridents, and each one of them was about fifteen feet…tall. Or was it "long?"

"Yugi, can Seb here see the axe?" Naruto asked, as one of the guards kicked his way forward.

"Of course," Yugito said, and lowered the axe into the police-merman's waiting hand.

"Your cooperation is appreciated," said the other one.

"So, where'd it come from? Shukaku said it was tossed from outside the city, but it was flying end over end like an actual person did it," Naruto said, as Shukaku climbed onto his back like a sandy monkey. "Is there some jerk who just throws stuff at the bubble all the time? Is there?"

The two officers exchanged glances, which probably told me more than they wanted us to know. The idea of flying axes and maybe even other items hitting people were not new ideas to the Neptune Army. There was definitely someone launching periodic attacks on the Ryugu Kingdom. But why? And why were only single shots being fired? If I was going to attack an entire kingdom, I'd either level the place with massive AOE attacks…or plan an assassination. Well, that wasn't a reassuring thought.

Could someone be trying, however ineffectively, to kill King Neptune?

"There is," said the guard on the left. "But it's not your problem."

"I would argue that, in fact, it is my problem." Matatabi waved her tails irritably. "I was the one who was struck in the neck. It was not something I expected to happen down here."

"We'd like to know what's going on," I said, before Matatabi could get more worked up. "While we may have just been targets of opportunity, someone did take a shot at us. We're within our rights to ask for a chance to pay him back."

"It wouldn't be right to get outsiders involved in our kingdom's security…” said Seb.

Utakata rolled his eyes. "Then what is Captain Whitebeard doing here? And even if you did forbid us from pursuing the enemy, because vigilante justice isn't something the king condones, we don't have to obey your commands."

"We are pirates," Yugito said, in a more thoughtful tone than she had bothered with on other occasions.

"Anarchy!" said Shukaku, with a savage grin on his miniature face.

Naruto's was slightly less bloodthirsty, because he didn't have the ability to manually unhinge the top of his head. "We'll get 'im for you!"

"You don't even know who you're looking for," said Seb, looking baffled at the way the entire conversation had gotten out of hand.

I was probably supposed to be saying something against the plot hatching in front of my eyes. Either as a responsible adult, or as an irresponsible pirate-ish person with no obligation to attacking terrorists when I worked with real ones. Sabo had laughed aloud when I let that thought out while
he was in the area, probably because it was true. Even if the World Government was a bunch of pricks.

**We never were much interested in the concept of a moral high ground, were we?**

*I think we can still see it from here—*

"His name is Vander Decken IX," said Seb's partner, clearly losing patience with his reticence. The lionfish-looking guard had an epic mustache that was probably too poisonous to casually trim, but twisted one end thoughtfully anyway. "He's a fishman, but he's been launching periodic attacks on the Ryugu Kingdom for almost a decade now."

Seb looked scandalized. "Leo!"

"I'm as sick of the cat-faced bastard as anyone," Leo snapped back at his fellow cop.

"King Neptune was already going to send Jinbe after him," said Seb, annoyed.

"And how long will that last? Jinbe's a pirate, so for all we know he's got World Government soldiers on his tail and—"

We slipped away while the pair continued to argue. I wasn't sure how they managed to miss the giant cat made of fire disappearing, but they did.

________________________________________

Things stayed quiet for a bit. Saiken slipped off into the ocean to patrol after we met up with him to report about the whole axe-in-head situation, squishing his way out of the bubble ring we'd bought for him and leaving it with Yang Kurama. Isobu joined him, citing the urge to swim in real water, and that ring was handed off to a large shark who happened to be passing by at the time. The Tailed Beasts were more annoyed than surprised to find other life forms living perfectly normal lives while also being the size of buildings, and sort of spread across the city after that.

Because there was relatively little for us to do—humans weren't supposed to interfere in the national security issues of fishfolk and merpeople—we headed back to the Mermaid Cafe. The cops had things handled, supposedly, so we were supposed to be tourists. Move on, everyone, because there's nothing to see here. Mind the occasional metallic precipitation.

"I think I've reached a new low," Utakata said after we'd arrived and finally gotten a table. The crowd from earlier had mostly cleared out after the incident with the axe, out of fear of being the next target, which meant we had the outside dining area almost to ourselves.

"We're like ten thousand meters under the sea," Naruto pointed out. "It's hard to get lower without hitting magma."

Utakata frowned at him. "Not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Yugito asked, toying with a cup of coffee she'd been (somehow) persuaded to try.

"Realizing that that mermaid has triangular teeth," Utakata said, nodding his head toward the waitress who'd taken our orders, who had the tail and teeth of a lemon shark, "has made me homesick." He sighed. "I remember thinking once that it was the most bizarre thing the Seven Ninja Swordsmen did to join, but…"

I patted his shoulder lightly, drawing a Look that said quite clearly he was not in a mood for false
sympathy. Fortunately for him, it was genuine. "I feel the same way about…a lot of things." If I thought too hard about all the things that reminded me of home, either by being too similar or jarringly different, I'd probably have had a breakdown by now.

Utakata grunted, proving that he was probably Uchiha if we went about fifty generations back.

"So," Naruto said, "do you think we're gonna need to find that guy and fight him?"

I eyed him. "Naruto, have you been bored?"

He squirmed. "A little?" When the rest of the table waited patiently for some elaboration, he eventually cracked, throwing himself down on the tabletop with little heed to everyone's orders taking up the rest of the space on it. Quite dramatic. "I pretty much only train, and sleep, and play with Gaara and Fū since none of you let us do anything unless you need our powers or our partners." He paused. "And we go fishing, but unless you're catching Sea Kings, that's boring too."

Were I an unkind soul, I would have probably told him to suck it up and enjoy his damn childhood already. After becoming shinobi, at whatever age graduation happened in our various villages, most of us lost our innocence almost instantly. Being bored was better than being horribly dead. And I was sure that Gaara and Fū were having fun being normal children for a while, since there were so many adults around with no preconceived notions of shoving them onto the front lines. Their Tailed Beast partners were also more able to intercept threats in this form than they otherwise could, further reducing the risk of "excitement."

Instead, Yugito said, "Well, we could organize a…"

"Finish that sentence with 'tournament' and I will throw this in your face," I told her, holding a balled-up napkin in one hand. Not the greatest threat in the world, but I had my reasons.

"Chūnin Exam?" Utakata suggested, smirking.

Jerk. Anyway, my reasons went thus: I thought tourneys and the like were pointless, especially when I wasn't around to see my students kick ass. In the same fashion as a suburban soccer mom, I had no interest in competitions where people I cared about weren't both in it to win it and actively doing so. Otherwise, I was just one minivan away from full domesticity.

And I wasn't about to let Naruto get too involved in any dangerous situation before I could protect him. What protective instincts I had were honed by years of my day job being "protect this family with your life, literally." I'd probably figure out how to turn them off sometime after he picked up the toad summon contract.

We passed the time with more idle chit-chat (and Naruto did his best to fling a napkin in Utakata's face using every underhanded trick he'd ever learned), until it was time to put the tea party supplies away and get down to brass tacks.

"Miss," Yugito said to one of the waitresses, "could we please see Madame Shyarly? At her convenience."

"Sure!"

The casual response deflated Yugito's formality faster than anything I'd seen so far. It also got us an audience with the preeminent precognitive person in this place, so we were all inclined to just go with the flow.

While every sage (besides Jiraiya) and mystic I'd ever heard of (besides Gamamaru, who forgot my
name twice in a single conversation) had seemed to prefer pushing for a lot of pomp and ceremony, apparently Madame Shyarly wasn't really concerned with that. Instead, the Mako shark mermaid—complete with the teeth—awaited petitioners in a back room of her cafe, sort of like an office if ordinary managers' spaces were full of brightly colored pillows, ornaments, and coral sculptures. In the corner of the room, resting in the hollowed-out shell of a giant clam and exactly where a stereotypical pearl would be, was a crystal ball the size of a human head.

Madame Shyarly lowered her pipe from her mouth, blowing a ring of smoke that made her resemble Gandalf in my humble opinion. Her nails were painted blue to match her tail and deep, dark blue eyes, and her hair was so dark it was nearly black. Under her hood, she was paler than any human I'd met, except for Nagato, and was looking at us with an expression best summed up as "dawning realization."

As Naruto reached back to toss a throwing knife through the smoke ring, possibly as a personal challenge, Madame Shyarly looked down at the lot of us and said slowly, "So you're why my vision hasn't come to pass."

"Which vision was that?" Utakata asked, hand on one hip.

Next to him, Yugito was tilting her head to the left in obvious curiosity. I didn't know if Kumogakure had people running around who could see the future, but for all I knew they had several. I'd never been able to read as many of Obito's espionage reports as I might've, in hindsight, probably needed to.

Oh, come on. This was like meeting Gamamaru all over again. I knew perfectly well that we jinchūriki were foreign to this universe—because that little detail was rather hard to miss—but to be a psychic null for a second time in a single lifetime was pushing things. I wasn't immune to fate or anything, but I'd noticed that people who were renowned to be prescient tended to ignore or overlook my influence as a rule. I was predictable by normal means after the fact, though.

"I saw a great battle at Marineford," Madame Shyarly replied, her single visible eye seeming to bore into Utakata's stare with equal intensity, "where the Great Pirate Era would end with Whitebeard's death…and a new one would be born from it to shape the world."

"Dramatic," Utakata said, stone-faced.

…Now that I thought of it, it seemed like I knew too many people who wore their hair the same way.

"Hey, did you see the Great Pirate Era coming too?" Naruto asked, while I stayed silent.

Madame Shyarly nodded. "Yes. You might say it cemented my fame." She cast a thoughtful look at her crystal ball. "But my visions take place anywhere from the next day to within the next year. There is still time."

I winced. Time for a bunch of pirates to get killed at Marineford, or time for Whitebeard to die?

Knowing the art of making such predictions? Both.

Gamamaru told Kakashi he'd make friends with a tree.

Which, fortunately, you already had enough context to understand.

"Can you predict if we're gonna find someone?" Naruto asked. He adopted his dad's thinking pose, with his hands clasped behind his back as he paced the length of the room. The adults (including
me) were too amused to stop him from putting on a show. "See, we're trying to find a guy named Rōshi, and his partner Son Gokū. But as far as we know, nobody's seen any of them, and there's this loud jerk who keeps yelling at us whenever we meet someone new or something." Naruto sighed loudly. "So, can we know if we're gonna see him at all? Or if someone else will? Or do you need a description or something?" A thought occurred to him. "Or can you tell us if this is the way we go home?"

Utakata, Yugito, and I all winced, probably for different reasons.

"The future is often a terrible thing." Madame Shyarly took a long draw from her pipe, watching Naruto give his little presentation. "But perhaps…"

When someone who was about fifteen feet long decides to move in a relatively small space, everyone else tended to get out of the way. Madame Shyarly didn't, but the waitress mermaid who'd been floating around the edges of the room sure did. She scooped up the crystal ball with tremendous care, using a bubble ring as a cushion, and sent it bobbing through the air toward our only available seer.

Once the crystal ball was safe on her lap, Madame Shyarly dismissed the waitress and coiled around the apparent focus for her powers. Gamamaru had owned a crystal ball, too. Only it had been about…three meters across? More? I couldn't remember.

"Think this will work?" Naruto whispered to Yugito.

"Hush," Yugito whispered back. "Be patient."

**If this fails, there is always the possibility of employing one or more of my siblings to find them.**

*We don't even know if those two get along well enough to stay in the same place.* I tried to keep my expression mild and inoffensive, because I didn't want anyone to ask what was on my mind. It said nothing good about this entire adventure that we'd finally gotten to the point of asking an actual psychic for help, discounting the Tailed Beast bond as the already-present cognitive chicanery that just came with the territory.

Madame Shyarly opened her cat-slit eyes—which neither Yugito or Matatabi had, though that was beside the point—for just a moment, meeting our gazes one at a time, before her eyes rolled up in her head and she flopped backwards in a dead faint.

And lo, cutting through the air like a goddamn air horn, all of us staggered as a very familiar voice made itself known.

**YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED.**

**THE FOURTH DRAWS NEAR.**

**GATHER THE NINE.**

"All right," Utakata's voice said into the ringing silence, while we picked ourselves up off the floor. He had both hands pressed to the sides of his head, in what looked like a failed attempt to preserve his eardrums from the disembodied god-wannabe. "When I see whoever *keeps doing that*, I'll kill it."

Naruto sprang to his feet, assisted by either youth or a hilarious regeneration rate. He caught the
crystal ball before it could overturn its bubble and hit the floor, then set it on the couch next to our prophetess. Then he patted the mermaid's equivalent of a knee, saying, "Madame Shyarly? Hey, are you okay?"

"I'll get help." Yugito was already gone before I could turn to respond, so I let her do what she wanted.

As for me? While I was fishing around in one of my many pockets for a hand fan I'd borrowed from Izo, I happened to hear a noise that sounded like crick.

And I looked around for the noise at the exact moment the crystal ball cracked into two neat halves, as though split along an invisible seam.

"Oh, that's not good," I said, even as I passed the fan up to Naruto so he could wave it in Madame Shyarly's face. While there were few records of ominous warning signs in Konoha history, I still remembered the Third Hokage's oversized face back in the original timeline and the crack that had formed the day Orochimaru killed him.

Even if I didn't believe in omens, the timing was a little too perfect.

Utakata, for his part, had already made a water-filled bubble not unlike the Water Prison technique, and was converting bits of it into mist for Naruto's fanning efforts. While Madame Shyarly hadn't fainted due to heat exhaustion, it was apparently the assumption we were going to operate under until Yugito got back with help.

Which, thankfully, she did in record time.

In the end, we four jinchūriki ended up not getting a prediction from Madame Shyarly, because she was a little too unconscious to tell us what she'd seen before the disembodied asshat slapped us all silly. It was perhaps premature to say that it was responsible for her condition, and for the crystal ball breaking, but there was a saying back home that was unfortunately accurate.

"Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, and thrice is enemy action." However, this is more of a...fifty-seventh occasion. We have known for months that there is a consciousness hiding at the end of our adventure in this world.

And now it's inflicting collateral damage, I thought grimly as we headed back to the Moby Dick to consult with Whitebeard. Even if none of us really answered to him, formally, he was the closest thing to a Kage around. He was also the oldest native to this planet we could really speak to, which we assumed meant he'd know a thing or two about...everything. Silly, I know.

Possibly not as silly as Tailed Beasts floating around like balloon animals.

Yugito spotted the problem first. "...Why is Matatabi sitting next to the ship?"

Naruto didn't even pause. Instead, he leapt thirty feet straight into the air, missing a passing merman by inches. When he landed in a froglike crouch, he said, "Matatabi caught a bird."

Aw, crap, was my first thought. My second was, Body Flicker.

"A little help?" Ace called to me as I arrived in a blur of chakra-assisted speed and smoke residue, one hand caught in the chain-like ornamental feathers of Marco's phoenix form.

And the phoenix himself was pinned under one of Matatabi's paws, with just enough space to
wiggle his head and shoulders free to glare at all of us. His half-lidded, frustrated expression would have been a little easier to interpret if his face didn't end in a beak today, but I'd spent enough time around Tsuruya to understand. At least Marco hadn't caught on to my relative familiarity with and tolerance of being whacked in the head by an irritable bird as a sign of affection.

Firebird caught under a fiery cat, with ineffective assistance being offered by a fire-man.

I probably could have sorted out all three of them with seawater and a spray bottle. Instead, I leaned back until I could look Matatabi in the eye and stuck out an arm, stopping Yugito as she arrived under the strength of her own Body Flicker and ran into me.

"Oh," said Yugito, as she took in the scene.

"Yeah, 'oh,',' I grumbled.

"The commentary is appreciated and all," Ace said, "but Marco's going to peck our eyes out if we keep him here anymore." He let go of the phoenix's feathers and then patted Matatabi's paw without getting burned. "So, Matatabi, do you mind letting him up?"

Matatabi lowered her head, ears flicking. "Am I to understand that this is someone we know?"

"Yeah," said Ace. Still crouched next to an increasingly irritated Marco, who was clearly wondering why no one was just lifting Matatabi's paw, Ace went on, "I was just telling you about some of the titles our crew has, remember? Maybe I should've broken out everyone's wanted posters…"

"Oh. My, that's different." Matatabi withdrew her claws and let Marco up, lowering her face still further until she was nearly in a hunting crouch of her own.

Fwoosh! And then Marco was human again, brushing likely-imaginary dirt from his jacket. "You," he said, pointing an accusatory finger in Ace's face, "were enjoying that too much."

Ace stuck out his tongue at his crewmate, which Marco didn't get a chance to call him on, because that was also the exact moment that Matatabi leaned her muzzle forward and licked the back of Marco's head with a tongue the size of an SUV, sending him crashing face-first to the ground.

"What was that, sandpaper?!"

Ace was too busy laughing to bother answering.

Yugito shoved Matatabi's nose away, helping Marco up with her other hand. "It seems that our friends do resemble animals in ways other than just looks."

"I'll say," Marco muttered, even as pale blue flame repaired all the damage Matatabi unintentionally caused.

I do not.

Says the one who gave me a persistent fear of lying on my back.

That is just common sense.

For a turtle.

Though that was the kind of conversation that made me wonder what ill-fitting instincts my fellow
jinchūriki carried, I shoved the idea aside. Instead of continuing to argue with Isobu, I said in a more formal tone, "Commander Marco, is there any chance I could speak to Captain Whitebeard?"

"You know you're allowed to call him 'Pops' like the rest of us, right?" Ace asked, probably ignoring the way Marco spared a second to glare daggers at the back of his head for the total lack of assistance from earlier.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "That's not the real concern here. I have a few things to report, and some of this is…awkward."

We knocked out a seer by accidentally telling her to look at something that could look back. This is the same seer, by the by, who predicted that you'd have a Great Pirate Era after the death of Gol D. Roger. She also happens to be currently banking on Whitebeard's death in battle at Marineford, which we shinobi probably had something to do with averting. And now her crystal ball is broken and hell if anyone knows if she can still predict anything. On top of all that, the godlike thing that keeps us here on your planet? It's about as useful as fish find bicycles, so fat chance of getting anything helpful there.

_My morning?_

**If you reduced the sarcasm by half, you could—** Isobu fell silent abruptly.

Not a great sign. Iso—

Then his chakra flared hard enough to draw everyone's attention for the better part of three or four miles. For normal people, it was probably akin to a sudden wave of mortal terror. For jinchūriki, it was more akin to a warning klaxon.

In front of my eyes, Ace and Marco both staggered as though a sudden cold wind had blasted right through them, driving each man to one knee with the sheer force of undirected murderous intent. A full dozen crewmen on the ground around us, previously laughing at Marco's misfortune, collapsed into heaps with their eyes rolled up in their heads. And that was only the men I could see. From the sounds of screaming across the city and the sudden, sympathetic flares of alien chakra from each of the Tailed Beasts from their positions all around Fishman Island, it became clear that the situation was about to cascade. The air inside Fishman Island's borders warped under the weight of their rage, sending my eardrums popping.

And with his own chakra cutting through the noise like a knife, Utakata's voice bellowed, "SAIKEN!"

Yugito's strength—sharper, brighter—hauling on Matatabi's, even as the giant cat bared her needle teeth for everyone to see, her fiery fur climbing higher along her spine and both of her tails. Across the Ryugu Kingdom, the others were trying to haul their Tailed Beast partners back from the edge of feral rage just like I was attempting to do with Isobu, with two exceptions. And they were important ones.

Fū was trying to calm Chōmei, who was still above the ocean's surface and buzzing the waves like an angry, impossibly huge helicopter.

And Saiken was broadcasting more surprise than anger, while Utakata made up the difference all on his own.

Of the pirates, Marco recovered a little before Ace did. He was on his feet, placing one already-burning hand against Matatabi's quivering foreleg while his other went straight to his temples to
fight a pounding headache. "What the hell was—"

Whitebeard was striding out onto the deck, followed by his attendant nurses, but he was one of the only people tall enough for me to see from this low angle. Jozu was another, and he was already leaning somewhat unsteadily over the edge of the railing to shout down, "What happened?"

I heard Yugito try to explain, but I'd already turned my attention to the actual problem. While I doubted anyone else could feel the specifics after that blast wave of angry chakra, I was still sensitive enough to fluctuations regardless of that brief sensory overload. As such, my hand darted out almost without my knowledge, tugging on Utakata's jacket collar with enough force that I might've throttled him if he wore an actual shirt.

"Summon him," I snarled, even as Utakata struggled to shake off the influence of so much Tailed Beast chakra.

It was worse than genjutsu—at least that would've meant we could have snapped ourselves out of the mental feedback loop with pain.

Even if I could feel everyone, Isobu most of all, I could also notice a distinct lack of one of our strongest team members. Saiken, despite hurtling toward the center of Ryugu Kingdom as though Chômei had pasted a pair of wings to his slimy back, wasn't angry. At most, he felt baffled at both his circumstances and the vicious backlash his siblings were directing at the world for them.

Saiken had always been a little slow off the mark.

A barrage of images from Isobu let me know the gist of things long before Saiken figured out how to right himself in midair—and by then, we could already see him hurtling toward the palace in the distance.


Utakata shoved his long sleeve back, already drawing a knife along his skin before he even asked, "Why?"

Good. "Because," I said in a harsh voice that hardly sounded like me, even as Isobu shoved as much imagery as he could into my mind to explain his reasoning before it was too late, "Saiken met our axe-thrower. We need to kill his momentum, now."

Because there wasn't any convenient flaming cat between Saiken and civilians, not like with the axe. Saiken and Isobu had back-traced the trajectory and the distance that the axe had originally traveled in order to find who'd thrown it, and I had a theory that it worked in a straight line. More or less. Matatabi's position, earlier, must have been directly between the thrower and Princess Shirahoshi, only Vander Decken IX couldn't hope to out-mass Yugito's fiery partner. Thus, the axe had stopped moving.

Saiken would not.

Utakata's scowl deepened as he made his hand seals, fingers blurring. I had no doubt he was getting his own explanation from Saiken even as he half-listened to me and my Isobu-voice bossing him around, and stepped back as far as I could before Utakata's Summoning Technique went through.

BOMPH.

First, Utakata disappeared into a cloud of chakra smoke that made everything near it look like a
toy, ship included. Then the *Moby Dick*’s slot at the dock became a little more crowded, because Saiken emerged from a cloud of chakra-based smoke with his googly eyes waving as though to indicate disorientation. I could just barely see the edge of Utakata’s coat, because he was on top of Saiken’s head, but I could definitely hear him make very clear that whatever had happened out there in the deep blue sea was not to be repeated. At length.

"It didn’t hurt, Uta," said Saiken, interrupting in his boyish voice. "It was a little confusing, maybe. I mean, I heard the little fishbowl talk about a princess or something, but what does that have to do with not being able to swim any direction but backwards?"

I left Utakata to figure out how to explain the problem.

"No, Uta. I won’t do it again," Saiken replied to something I didn’t hear.

"Still waiting on that explanation," Marco said, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"Which part do you want to hear about first?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. To be honest—which was not necessarily something I’d be with Marco—I still hadn’t had time to fully absorb what had happened. There was a good chance I wouldn’t at all until things calmed down. Especially not with more Whitebeards crowding around for story time.

"The Conqueror’s haki might be a good place," Jozu suggested.

"I believe I can explain that," Matatabi said. "You are referring to the explosion of anger that can almost kill on its own, yes? It is a form of chakra focus that we know as either 'killing intent' or 'murderous will.' Many humans of sufficient strength are capable of pale imitations of our power, but ours, I am told, remains in a class all its own." She idly licked one of her paws, smoothing her fiery fur as she thought her way through the next part of the story. "There are cases of Tailed Beasts being linked to deaths of weak-hearted humans, or so Yin Kurama once said. I imagine he found the information more amusing than not."

"Sensei can make anybody sit up and pay attention," I put in. "And I have my own version. There are some people who can paralyze others with a look…"

"Uta," said Saiken, before any of the pirates could ask things. "The funny fishman said 'Death or marriage.' Am I supposed to marry him since I’m not dead?"

"No, Saiken," Matatabi said, while I heard Utakata swear aloud before she could drown him out. "He was likely talking to himself." Matatabi paused. "Come to think of it, I am no more sure than you are if we can die."

"But he said—"

Shukaku’s sand clone had a meaningful contribution, of course.

"BWAAHAHAHAHA!"

Like I said.

"I…don’t think we’re even talking about the same thing anymore," said Naruto, neatly summing things up in a few words. He scratched the side of his face. "Uh, anyway, yeah! Killing intent is a thing a lot of shinobi can do if they’re strong or scary enough. Tailed Beasts just get all of that, plus this creepy feeling that you and all your friends are bugs under a magnifying glass."
Yugito cocked her head to one side. "Not…inaccurate."

"We may be a bit too used to this," I admitted, while the pirates looked at all of us like we'd dropped in from another planet.

Which we had.

"HEY!" said Shukaku, having recovered from his laughing fit. "Some jerk tossed Saiken halfway across town. We're going to kill him! Unless the rest of you have some idea that's better than the one devised by the great Shukaku!"

Ace squatted next to the sand clone and said, "Letting the Neptune Army turn the guy into paste seems like a better one." When the little demon clearly made a Face, possibly even one that corresponded to his default physical features, Ace added, "I've heard of this guy before. Captain of the Flying Dutchman. He was harassing Fishman Island the last time I was through here, too. But seriously, it's not our problem. Humans aren't supposed to interfere."

Matatabi paused with her paw next to her face. "In what reality are we human? Because it is certainly not the one we currently occupy."

Saiken lowered his bulbous head and said, while Utakata continued to mutter a string of curses under his breath, "…So does that mean I should tell Chōmei to tell Fū to not beat up the fishy person who tried to kill her, or…?"

I hate my life.

Isobu chose that moment to respond before the situation got too out of control. Get an appropriate amphibious biped out here, and I will make sure the perpetrator of the attack on Saiken hates the remainder of his pathetic life more.

I considered my options. Then, to fight off the rising headache, I explained everything that had happened over the last half-hour to Ace, Marco, Jozu, and Whitebeard, and washed my hands of nearly everything to do with Fishman Island.

Namur got loaned out to Jinbe for about four hours as they chased down Vander Decken IX and made him regret being a terrible person. More terrible than most pirates, anyway.

And then it turned out Fū had uncovered a conspiracy within the Neptune Army involving some group called the New Fishman Pirates, who had pissed off the three younger jinchūriki all in one go and therefore gotten a beatdown from Shukaku. There was probably more to it than that, but really, the main diversion of the afternoon turned out to be the near-mythical stealth grandpa. As opposed to the giant grandpa named Whitebeard that we were all more used to.

Though the man in question would probably have given a decent go at breaking my jaw if I'd said as much to his face.

See, while the rest of us had been off having adventures (such as they were), Luffy had been embroiled in an ongoing argument about whether his crew needed training. Which they did. And five minutes to the second after Luffy finally relented and agreed to maybe take a break from pirating to train up, an old man appeared on the gangplank.

The first hint I had of his presence, since I wasn't paying much attention, was a somewhat scratchy voice saying, "What does it take for an old man to get a towel around here?"
I looked over the railing I'd been sitting on, with Naruto sitting in my shadow and chafing under my "don't leave my sight" order. He at least took the time to feed all the snails while essentially trapped under my thumb. Figuratively. With the fact that Whitebeard had taken his customary seat on the deck, meaning shockwaves were basically on tap even if jinchūriki weren't, I wasn't as worried as I might've been otherwise.

I heard the whispers among the crew almost before anyone jumped to accommodate the old man who was, in all likelihood, younger than Whitebeard. The Dark King. Gol D. Roger's right-hand man. Quite possibly the third or fourth strongest senior citizen in the world, behind Whitebeard and Sengoku and Monkey D. Garp. People denied him his discounts at their peril, and anyone with a survival instinct stayed the hell off his lawn.

"Crap," said Ace, ducking behind a railing as soon as he realized who'd arrived on deck.

"You're being weird," Naruto told him, crouching slightly behind him in nearly the exact same pose he used whenever he was perched on something he oughtn't. His brows were scrunched together as he peered past Ace's knees, frowning. "Who's that, anyway?"

"OLD MAN RAYLEIGH!" Fū and Luffy shouted at the same time, barreling into the old man only to, respectively, miss when he ducked past her and get flattened into the deck like a rubbery pancake.

"Hey, Ace?" Naruto tugged on Ace's belt loop to get his attention. Once Ace was looking down at him, he asked, "Why're you afraid of him?"

Because humans are strange.

*You interact with how many people, again?*

I do not see your point.

"'M not," Ace said, though he sounded more sullen than argumentative.

Naruto scrunched up his face to convey skepticism. "Then I don't see why you're hiding."

I hadn't told a soul who Ace's biological father was, so it wasn't like Naruto had been given a bunch of hints. The kid was just empathetic enough to read people like a champ. Neither of us would push too much.

And Ace's response to Naruto was to ruffle his hair hard enough that it almost qualified as a noogie, so clearly Naruto had played his cards just right. While Naruto got his hair turned into something messier than mine had ever aspired to be through the power of static electricity, I turned my attention back to the main deck, where Janey had dumped a pair of beach towels over Rayleigh's head without any ceremony.

"What are you doing here, Rayleigh?" Janey asked, while Rayleigh grumbled and grumped. "Last we'd heard, you'd just come back to Sabaody after a six-month disappearance."

Fū alighted on Jozu's shoulder and stuck a finger in the air to make her point. "And he fought Kizaru to help us escape that place!"

"The sand squirrel did most of the work," was the somewhat muffled reply from Rayleigh. Then he emerged and I finally noted that he certainly wasn't sporting gills. Did he *swim* all the way here?

I must tell Shukaku that one.
Do me a favor and don't until we're outside the blast radius.

Rayleigh shook his tangled and salt-encumbered hair out, splattering Janey by accident though she didn't seem to mind. He set the towels in her arms, then cracked his knuckles as he looked down at Luffy, who'd gotten back into a sitting position and was grinning up at him. "So, tell me, did someone mention training?"

Oh god. This was what Gai would be like if he was fifty years older, wasn't it? Fifty years and a beard and—

Gai is more enthusiastic than anything. This man is...something else.

I sighed inwardly and closed my eyes. For good measure, I pinched the bridge of my nose. Are you just blatantly watching and listening to my thought processes right now?

Yes. Also, you should know that Kokuō has finally decided to spare us the timidity and self-deprecation and instead travel in our direction.

Eh? I blinked, while Rayleigh, Ace, and Luffy all started to talk at once in the world outside of my head. I thought Han wasn't interested in leaving that island. And Kokuō was safe enough there, wasn't she?

Isobu scoffed. This may surprise you, but when human parents leave their offspring in the hands of strangers, they are generally expected to retrieve them.

Cut the crap, I snapped. What happened?

As I said, the parents returned. The child no longer required a guardian.

I might've responded more harshly than was deserved, but Isobu sent me a brief flash—hoofs striking sand, waves beneath one's body like a soft and longed-for bed, gut-churning homesick ache for a familiar face—and...I almost got it. The sea wasn't precisely Kokuō's home, given the equine components to her physical structure and the little detail that we were on another planet, but she missed the other Tailed Beasts.

They were her family. A man who spent months on end caring for a child who just needed a friend...someone like that could never turn down a heartfelt plea for home, could he?

Isobu sent me the impression of a nod. Or at least the sea in his mind's eye bobbed up and down. There you go.

The three-way argument between Luffy, Rayleigh, and Ace was getting louder, so I focused harder on Isobu's presence to blot it out. I needed status updates from people who, unfortunately, I couldn't always keep track of via normal means. The god-thing in Madame Shyarly's cafe mentioned Son Gokū and maybe Rōshi getting closer—maybe to Fishman Island or to us, but that distinction is so close it doesn't matter. Do you have any idea where they might be?

No. Kokuō didn't know either. I would assume they have been traipsing around the ocean like the feckless Fire-natured duo they are, or else they are trying their luck separately. Isobu blew a brief stream of bubbles in a sigh. They never gave the impression of being close.

Great.
"And you," Rayleigh said, pointing squarely at me and drawing me back into the conversation. "You and your friends have kicked the hornet's nest, haven't you?"

"Which one?" I asked, resting my hands on my knees. "Impel Down, Marineford, or something new?"

"Try Mariejois," he grumbled. "Which, in case you're as bad at geography as this knucklehead is," he added, as he stretched Luffy's cheek about a foot out from his head, "is directly above us. I don't know what you were thinking, but Conqueror's haki like that doesn't go unnoticed."

"What's that mean?" Luffy asked, though his voice was a little muffled.

"It means," said Whitebeard as he got up from his chair, "that we are about to be attacked by every Marine they can bring to fight us."

Everything they'd tried to deploy at Marineford. Every admiral, every petty officer…

**Well, we can't say we didn't ask for it,** I thought dryly. The Impel Down incident and the posters had been nothing less than a pair of well-placed thumbs in the World Government's eye, for what likely seemed like utterly trivial gains. We were wanted, now, and not in a sense that spoke of emotional fulfillment.

Though Utakata could look at it that way if he chose to.

**I can see their ships before they see me. So can Chōmei. If they think they can avoid being spotted, they are wrong,** Isobu remarked in a low tone, a whisper even by psychic standards.

**I don't think their goal is to go unnoticed, Isobu. Pretty much the exact opposite.** Governments liked the idea of shock and awe even if they didn't know the specific words I used for those tactics. A show of overwhelming force was just what the Marines needed when facing off against the power players, now.

I took a deep breath and patted the group's snail-wrangler on his shoulder. The one without a snail on it. "Naruto, it's time to call your mom again."

Chapter End Notes

You know, I'm not sure the words of Kei's last line have been said with quite so little dread ever before.

Also, an announcement: Ocean Stars Falling will be coming to an end sometime in the next few chapters. It's almost time to put the pirates behind us again. For a while. Or until I get the bug again. :p
Chapter Summary

Everyone: Go to war.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is "Courtesy Call" by Thousand Foot Krutch. I personally always thought of it as "Overkill," but Google tells me otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kei

The ships used by the Marines and other World Government forces were not teleporters. They weren't even equipped with turbines or propellers. Whenever they needed to move large numbers of personnel and materiel, they needed to do it by boat and in huge numbers, and that meant they only ever went as fast as the slowest ship in the sailing armada. With so many troops concentrated in and around Marineford, even if the Warlords had apparently been dismissed due to lack of objectives, it would take time to turn them around.

That didn't mean they were slow, strategically speaking. But it did mean that we had more leeway than one would have expected from a force facing a modern army.

And that meant we could get the Straw Hat Pirates the hell out of the way with time to spare, just by putting Saiken on the job.

"But—"

"Into the bubble, please!"

A lot could happen in twenty-four hours, which was everyone's best bet regarding how long we had until doomsday. And not the kind with green-robed flying robots and a man in a metal mask.

Luffy and his crew were forcibly escorted away from Fishman Island by Saiken and Rayleigh. Luffy may have wanted to fight alongside Ace, but not that long ago Admiral Kizaru had rolled in and gotten right down to handing the Straw Hats their own asses. Almost terminally. Instead, since they still wanted to be involved, they were going to be one of two sets of scouts who were not to engage the enemy if at least halfway feasible.

Gaara and Fū had different marching orders, not that I expected them to listen. I'd never wielded any authority worth writing home about over the two of them. If they were staying with the Straw Hats, and the rest of us lived, they could find us later.

As for the Revolutionaries? While no one could have pried the Whitebeard Pirates out of their territory with the world's largest set of pliers, the Revolutionaries did have a commander who could
overrule everyone at Fishman Island. Sabo promised, instead, that he and his crew would keep the Whitebeards updated on events via Kuromushi and Naruto's collection of transponder snails, even if they had to skirt rather close to Marine detection range until it was all over. For better or for worse.

Meanwhile, Isobu laid a false trail of regularly spaced (but erratically powerful) blasts of killing intent where Yang Kurama didn't bother, resulting in a pattern that—according to Chōmei—looked like a giant eyeball when viewed from above. I didn't bother asking why they'd chosen it, even if the resulting pupil-approximation didn't center on Mariejois. I was almost afraid it was something subconscious, relating to their distant and forgotten past, and they wouldn't be able to answer. Nonetheless, the giant invincible monsters were doing their best to buy us a little more time. In between lounging around and arguing with each other like the gaggle of siblings they were.

And lastly, the Whitebeard Pirates. Who, of course, were about as tractable as the pure, distilled essence of mule. They weren't going anywhere if their people needed protection, and damn numerical superiority for its arrogance in thinking it meant anything to the Whitebeard Pirates. Fishman Island was their responsibility. There were over a thousand of them even before the allied captains made it to the battlefield, and the old man's protective instinct about justified all of that confidence. They'd be the numerical backbone of any defense while the Tailed Beasts would dominate if we were counting by mass. There was a cheer and everything.

I personally took that kind of enthusiasm as a bit of overconfidence on anyone's part, but I'd been keeping most of my commentary to myself while the "strategy" meeting went on.

I had a basic grasp of tactics, because every shinobi did and there was an advantage to understanding how standing armies thought and fought, but it wasn't like it was my job. Not nearly for the first time, I wished I could call on Sensei or Kakashi. Sensei because someone to double-check my conclusions was sorely needed. Kakashi, instead, because he could do both that and because I just missed him. I'd never claimed to be a bastion of calm in a chaotic sea, even if the chaos was doubling down on its strength in the meantime.

Meditating didn't help much when I was sitting on a spar just above the actual overenthusiastic pre-war party. Or when I was really just moping.

Once the furor died down a bit below me, Ace hopped up onto the same chunk of mast that, once upon a time, he'd accidentally tossed me to while trying to be helpful. That had been a long time ago—but not, perhaps, as long as it felt.

"I'm going help with Aokiji," Ace said, when I only waved halfheartedly in greeting with my left hand.

I sat up a little straighter, eyeing him. We knew all of the admirals were coming our way thanks to the power of snail wiretapping, but everyone had put aside the idea of who would fight which admiral pretty early on. Or so I thought.

"Ever done it before?" I asked, since I knew I sure hadn't.

Honestly, the sheer scale at which the famous Blue Pheasant could produce ice was absurd. I'd thought once already that Kaito would have been grinding his teeth in jealousy at the ease at which the admiral would freeze everything within his range, but that seemed to be part and parcel of being a Logia. Massive AOE attacks, regardless of the exact substance involved. The auto-parry could be bypassed, sure, but Jozu had said admirals tended to haki mastery to counter that little problem. Kind of a pain in the ass.
"No," Ace said, "but no one ever really knows what'll happen when two Devil Fruits go at it until it happens. Remember what Luffy said about that lightning Logia?"

"Yeah, I do." Rubber—which was a Paramecia, and therefore the least predictable—beat lightning. When that story had come out during a game of dice, there had been jaws hanging toward the deck all across the ship. "Ace's baby brother" was garnering a reputation lickety-split. "So, you're thinking fire would counter ice."

"It sure as hell won't stop magma," Ace said, shaking his head. "So I'm leaving him to you guys, even if I don't want to. Kizaru's harder to stop, but Marco and Thatch volunteered for taking him out. The rest of us are gonna have to fill in depending on who the Marines send—if they're even willing to square off against us this far from Marineford. And hell, maybe Utakata might actually let other people in on his brawl with Akainu. Doubt it, though."

I wouldn't have bet on it either. "If he does, I'll back him up. We've fought people like Akainu before."

Though I'd only ever sparred with Rikuto. He'd never once tried to actually kill me. Utakata's sparring matches with his wife were probably more informative, because he was guaranteed to have had more of them. Again, though, there was probably not much of a chance he'd let an actual enemy with Lava Release survive their first encounter if possible. It would be like shooting his own foot. And Mei would probably have laughed at him.

"You sure?" Ace asked. If he knew I was putting up a bit of a front, he was faking ignorance well.

Screw it. "No, but I'm old enough to know the outcome isn't assured. We have a lot of cards to play, but our goal is to get out without anyone dying on our side. It may well be impossible." And, wonder of wonders, I didn't make any further jokes about card games while in the presence of a man whose entire original pirate shtick was based on exactly that pun.

On a more relevant note, while the Tailed Beasts were about as concerned about Marine lives as humans were about the lives of ants, some of us at least pretended to be decent people. I didn't want a massacre, but the Marines didn't seem to understand that their blood on the water was the best possible outcome for them. It was like waiting behind a breakwater, if the individual drops that made up a wave had all been human lives.

Lambs to a slaughter.

Lambs that can spit lava. Save your sympathy for our humans. The rest can rot in the sea for all I care.

I sighed inwardly. Yeah, that was about what I deserved for my woolgathering. "Ace?"

"What?"

"Don't die, okay?" I reached over and gently punched his right shoulder. "I'd hate to bury a brother."

Ace inhaled sharply, then jerked his head away. "Yeah, well...same here. Losing a sister, right after getting one... I don't want that to happen either."

I unfolded my hand and left it on his shoulder. "Are you crying?"

"Like hell, you sap," Ace said, whipping back around though his eyes were indeed watering. "It's... Thatch must be chopping onions."
"Liar," I said, and Ace nodded ruefully before reaching around with his other hand and clasping my forearm.

"See you on the other side, Kei," Ace said, and his voice didn't wobble through sheer force of will.

"You know it," I replied. Before I headed down belowdecks to catch some shuteye before the Marines arrived, I spotted Yugito heading up and pointed her in Ace's direction. She didn't thank me, because she never did, but I could have sworn she smiled for just a second before going after her fellow pyromaniac.

I woke up some hours later with Naruto dozing against my leg. Which was the last peaceful moment for quite some time.

Kuzan

Kuzan, as he was called by very few of his comrades among the Marines, was not looking forward to deploying against the Whitebeard Pirates. The captains on down hadn't been briefed on the exact suspicions the World Government had about the shifting tides of power over the past six months, pertaining to both the Red Hair Pirates and the Whitebeards, but Kuzan was an admiral. He had a very good idea of what they were going to face. Hence his lack of enthusiasm—not that he ever had much to spare.

The Moby Dick's vast white figurehead made the ship unmistakable for anything else, and the ship wasn't alone. In the few days since the Marines had been tipped off about the ship's location (finally), forty-two ships had joined the Whitebeard flagship, including Moby Two and Moby Three, which made Kuzan look sidelong at Borsalino's black snail-endowed wrist. There was no way the pirates could have arranged this defense—or perhaps just a fleet—without snail calls. But Borsalino, as ever, couldn't be bothered to give enough fucks to tell anyone. Which was why, today, the Marines were going into this battle with nowhere near as many troops as they needed to guarantee victory.

The problem with the situation was twofold: One, the bottleneck created by ferrying troops to Marineford couldn't be easily compensated for when it became clear the pirates weren't going to take the bait. Not that the Marines had any bait to tempt them with anymore, with Fire Fist's death in Impel Down. What Whitebeard would do in the midst of a paternal rage was different if he had a reason to embark on a rescue mission. Kuzan had no doubt that, by now, the old man was aware there was no one to save.

That led directly to number two: Whitebeard's decision to flatten G-5, instead of any other fat targets like Mariejois itself, meant that the old man knew damn well what was what. Ordinarily, he could have run a shockwave through anyone and anything set his mind to destroying. But G-5 was a precision strike. The old man might've been angry, but it was a keen anger. He knew exactly who was to blame for the death of one of his sons, and he was going to take his revenge on his terms.

Kuzan generally didn't care whether pirates were smart, because for the majority of them it hardly mattered. Whitebeard, though... Whitebeard was a problem for the entirety of the Marines to deal with, preferably with a three-to-one numerical advantage.

Which, thanks to a solid half-dozen factors, was not going to happen.

"Sir, the—it's the enemy," said one of the captains, who were supposedly prepared to give their lives to defend the World Government from pirate upstarts. Listening to his voice shake, however, didn't fill Kuzan with confidence about his abilities.
And then things went to hell.

Utakata

Across the entire battlefield, the jinchūriki all got their cue at the exact same moment.

Now!

Utakata and Saiken took point. They took their point directly to the trailing end of the Marines' formation.

Fog rolled in like an airborne tide in the wake of Saiken breaching the surface, his high-pitched shriek almost seeming to drive the false weather phenomenon forward. Ultimately, the two things were unrelated, but it didn't matter. Everyone on the battlefield felt the moment the fleet almost quailed in the face of such a horror. And only one side was fully primed to take advantage of it, so the chaos began the moment the Marines had their line of sight to the Whitebeard flagship obscured.

Utakata made his grand entrance, bursting from the waves in a reddish, semitransparent silhouette that hit one of the trailing Marine vessels and flipped it straight into the air by hammering on the stern from below. As he rose through the air, riding the rudder as though it was a mere stage feature in a grand acrobatic performance and he was the star of this circus. A click and a ka-chak, and his bubble wand snapped out to its full six-foot length and its head unwound into an arrangement of nozzles that looked almost like the head of a flower. At the back of the Usopp Special, water trailed back to the sea and a mess of tubes funneled the ammunition through the world's third least-likely effective weapon.

Not that it mattered.

Utakata, while Saiken sprayed a jet of water with enough force to cut a different battleship in half, swung his arm out as though directing a symphony. Iridescent bubbles flooded the air, growing the farther they got from the source and slowing as they went, blocking the fleet's retreat with a blanket of deceptively dangerous sea foam that just kept spreading.

He had no idea if the Marines had any current members with bubble-based powers. He hadn't asked. He had a lot of chaos to cause, after all.

Utakata eyed the distribution of the fleet, then raised his weapon in front of his face. One hand rested knife-edge first against the nozzle, as though part of a choreographed ritual dance. "Water Release: Explosive Bubble."

The explosions were almost beautiful.

Utakata landed amongst the foamy mass in the wake of the blasts, bounced twice off the ocean's surface and bits of ship, and then rode a bubble the size of an elephant out of immediate range of Marine cannons. The Marines didn't have the ability to lower the barrels of their island-killing guns far enough to fire directly at him. Even if they did, there was no guarantee gunpowder weapons would cut through a chakra cloak that had and would continue to shrug off anything less than a second jinchūriki.

There was screaming coming from the ship he'd overturned, and it lasted until one of Saiken's tails caused such a wave that the wreckage was entirely engulfed. Utakata paused long enough to watch the powder magazine burst under the pressure of the bubbles that were spawning almost on their
own, like an infection the ocean itself couldn't shake.

Uta? That was only a little ship.

Then we'll have to bag a bigger one, won't we? Utakata sent a brief flash of vicious satisfaction through the link, and was rewarded by a tendril of not-so-benevolent laughter that hardly suited Saiken's bright and guileless personality.

Or maybe it did, because ultimately Saiken, too, was a Tailed Beast. He hoarded his sympathy for a rainy day as much as any of the others did.

"The Carnation Prince!"

"It's the pirate who attacked Impel Down!"

"That man's bounty is—Vice Admiral, he's too much for you!"

"Get out of the way, you sniveling cowards!"

As Utakata watched dispassionately, a Marine from one of the ships leapt off the slowly angling stern of the ship. He was making a bizarre kicking motion, which seemed to result in improvised flight to some degree. As long as he kept kicking the air hard enough to make it forget it was supposed to be dropping him like a stone.

Having seen Fū in action recently, and Marines of some skill in the somewhat more distant past, Utakata was less than impressed.

Saiken was about to turn around to swat the impertinent human out of the air, perhaps just as a show of force, but Utakata shook his head at the same time that he sent a wordless negative to his partner.

Let the Marine think he had a chance in hell. Then Utakata would discipline him like the dog he was.

In fact, this Marine seemed to be a literal dog. As the man continued to hover by sheer force of will and flailing reverse-kneed legs, Utakata eyed him with somewhat more interest. What he had assumed was a hat of some sort now appeared to be a genuine set of floppy dog ears. Underneath another hat.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Utakata asked, without especially bothering to raise his voice.

The man's bared teeth were even based on a canid's. Utakata had spent enough time looking at Yang Kurama's gigantic mug to know that much. "You're facing Vice Admiral Dalmatian of the Marines, pirate scum! You may be Carnation Prince Utakata, but you're a mere bug to be crushed by the power of the World Government!"

"I take it you know of my most infamous crime."

"Know of it? Some of my friends were killed there by your act of terrorism!" Vice Admiral Dalmatian brandished a sword that was probably longer than Utakata was tall, point held steady and directly at the shinobi's nose. "You're the architect of the bloodiest massacre in World Government history, and that will not stand!"

"You missed the part where we at least let the Marines go. And recruited most of the prisoners who weren't utter blights upon the world. Can't say the same about the jailors, but as far as I'm
"You and your pet abominations have made fools of us for the last time!" snarled the man who was, really, all too much a loyal attack dog to ever call someone else a pet.

I don't like him.

Agreed. And this conversation was a mere distraction on the way to the real prize. With that decision made, Utakata stepped back onto the bed of foam and let his bubble wand briefly slip out of his fingers. And then he started making hand seals.

Vice Admiral Dalmatian was still posturing when the Water Dragon Bullet wrapped around him and dragged him into the depths and, far below, Isobu and Kei's deadly underwater trap.

Utakata didn't have many scruples in combat. When dealing with people whose weakness was the grip of the sea, and whose countermeasures involved a great deal of concentration, his interest in humoring their delusions of power had long since withered to nothing.

With the other ships trying to maneuver to get him in their sights, Utakata followed the doomed vice admiral down into the dark with Saiken close behind him. He needed a bit more time to make sure their next strike was just as effective as their first, and his first turn was finished.

As they dove, Utakata and Saiken passed their other-village counterparts—Isobu and his human host, Kei. The woman almost saluted him, two fingers raised in a greeting, before the red glow of her chakra cloak engulfed her and both of the Three-Tails set shot toward the surface.

Utakata eyed the rapidly-drowning Marine, still sinking faster, and raised a hand.

The Water Dragon Bullet shifted, darkening to jet black as it swirled around the man. Utakata didn't look when the ink-tainted bubble imploded, scattering gore for the sharks to consider later. He knew enough about the effects of his ninjutsu to be sure of the effect.

You should have left me some, Saiken remarked, his stalk eyes shifting away from the mess and back toward the blue light filtering down from above. The shadows of ships looked miniscule from here, visible only between the passes of Isobu's pumping tails. Sooner or later, the sizes would even out.

Utakata had a perfect shot at the unguarded back of a woman who had, more than once, ruined his life by existing. And he wasn't even tempted to act on it.

It was funny, really. Utakata had never been able to grow close to many people in his life, and had done his best to stay out of the conflicts that involved prospective masters yanking on his chain to see if they could get him to perform. He'd known he was being manipulated by the Mizukage, by his friends, even his master. Even so, he'd tried to stop caring so damn much once he realized the world could and would tear his heart out if he gave it a chance. The Tidal Blade had, unintentionally or not, been a vital component in his childhood misery just by surviving long enough to take Isobu from Kirigakure.

And here he was, working alongside a woman he'd spent the better part of a decade despising with what remained of his misplaced, withered sentimentality. She'd never even met him before Banaro, and offered her hand in friendship despite her own misgivings about his loyalties.

Here he was, having lived the closest thing to a pressure-free life he'd ever known, among the kinds of criminals he might've once destroyed without a second thought. As long as the pay was
good. Shacking up with former slaves who worked the seas as highbrow, flower-themed bandits. *Caring* about them to the point where their loss tore him open like nothing had ever managed since Yagura's death. Since Harusame's betrayal.

Here he was, whiling the hours away in a sea of blood-soaked vengeance when, back home, Mei would probably be showing by now. Utakata didn't even know if she'd ever decided on a name. He hadn't been there. He was missing months—had *been missing* for months—and for all he knew, the child was already in Mei's arms back home, perhaps prematurely, having never met the spectacular absentee father he was turning out to be.

*Rosema, Carline, Liliana*— Utakata shook his head to still his thoughts, sending bubbles streaming around him in his agitation. *Can't do anything for them. Nothing's left except killing their murderer.*

*And going home to welcome a new member of the family. Wait for me, Mei.*

Utakata blew out a bubble, distantly glad that the chakra cloak took on Saiken's water-breathing properties. By now, Kei would have located the primary powerhouses of the enemy force. All she really had to do was make a giant target of herself, which would be easy as long as she stuck by Isobu's side up there.

Then they'd be able to really get started.

Utakata waited for long minutes, watching orange light blot out blue as the Whitebeards' vanguard began to confront the enemy. He kept still as Tailed Beasts split the fleet.

And the moment the seas began to boil as lava slipped beneath the waves, Utakata had him.

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**Isobu (and Kei)**

*It'd probably be crass to say it out loud, Kei thought wryly, directly to Isobu, but I think the Marines must be the most misinformed and doomed army this side of the Charge of the Light Brigade.*

*Do tell.* Isobu had trawled through enough of Kei's esoteric knowledge to have a basic grasp of the reference. Commanders with grudges against one another, a lack of useful reference points, vague orders, and then a whole bunch of perfectly useful lives were wasted running directly into the teeth of the enemy.

Though Isobu was of the opinion that the teeth here were rather more literal than in Kei's original explanation, he could see her point. Still, it was nice to have her voice flowing through the bond while they worked. He didn't even have to send any bloodlust back to motivate her.

*They assumed we were independent agents, unaffiliated with the Whitebeard Pirates,* Kei explained readily. She directed a Wind jutsu in the direction of a smaller Marine ship and, once the air hit the unfurled sails, tipped it on its side as though it were caught in a sudden hurricane. *They assumed you were unthinking monsters. And, though I'm sure it got back to them, they never figured out just how dangerous you are.*

*It is always nice to be appreciated for the strength one brings to bear.* Though, failing that, *being fatally underestimated is an interesting consolation prize.* Isobu swatted a Marine vessel directly into the ocean with one tail, smashing wood and canvas and expensive metal into so much scrap. Kei pointedly did not ask about the men who had crewed it.
She was learning.

*Oh, hey. Doesn't this guy—?* Here, she sent an image of a hulking old human, with a semicircle scar all around one eye and gray hair from beard to impending bald spot. He wasn't as large as Whitebeard, but he was at least triple Kei's height. *He kinda looks like...if Ace or Luffy were way, way older.*

**Still a Marine. You know he will attack both of us on sight.** Isobu had allowed Fossa to paint a Whitebeard symbol on his belly in ship paint, but no one really had high hopes that it would last past the end of this battle. Even if no one got past the shell, they hadn't time to make sure the chemicals dried properly. Isobu could already feel it flaking.

Kei paused, a sign that she was listening. *But if he's dangerous...he'll get anywhere near Naruto over my dead body. But I'd prefer if it was his.*

**Where is that boy, anyway?** Isobu wondered, though he knew where Yang Kurama was hiding in the crowd. Smaller chakra signatures were harder to spot in the chaos of melee combat, even if he was only one of ten who ought to have been around.

Kei's thoughts stalled as she directed a Water Dragon Bullet at a known enemy in a yellow suit. She was too experienced fighting little pawns to slow down, physically, but Isobu felt the spike of panic through their bond. His tails might've twitched and a Marine ship may have collapsed under their weight. He wasn't concerned with something so minor.

Isobu instead directed his thoughts toward his siblings. It was like how Kei felt when she opened a door to shout out a window, at least on occasions when that occurred. **Where did Yang Kurama's host go?**

Distantly, he felt Yang Kurama stir from his apathetic slouch in the remaining mist, ears pricked. **What? The boy was just here—Naruto—**

"**NARUTO!**" Kei's voice broke through the burgeoning worry, as her fear bled out and was replaced by a familiar protective anger.

And then the sea flipped on its side, and Isobu exerted his will like a cracking whip to keep the shift from disturbing Kei. She was already strong and reckless enough—*just*—to ignore such a change in the battlefield and storm straight into the fray, but that didn't mean Isobu would allow the situation to devolve further. One of them had to keep a proper perspective in this fight. As the next best thing to invulnerable, and given that he was not small enough to be as delicate as Kei's task required, he had his role.

Isobu bellowed a wordless challenge to the panicking Marines, his voice reverberating in his chest and out into his sea and up toward the uncaring sky. **I have things handled here. Go.**

**On it. Cover me!**

While his speaking voice had almost always been what Kei called "boyish," or at least didn't seem to match his size or nature, Isobu thought she appreciated that his roar was perfect for him. He'd caught more than one silly, whimsical fantasy of pretending to stomp around a make-believe city in his mind, though the blue bear-creature she based her fantasy on was more adorable about it.

He could definitely be a distraction. Even with a V1-cloaked jinchūriki in their midst, the Marines would not be able to ignore a Tailed Beast blitz.
Sister, if you wish it…?

Matatabi's mental voice was a laugh, and her voice rose in a yowl in the real world. **Of course.**

**Don't forget about me!** Saiken called, sending the wobbling view from his eyestalks.

And so a plan was hatched. Perhaps a fraction of one. Twelve percent, no more.

Isobu split his attention between causing havoc and tracking Kei's thoughts. As always happened with their sight-sharing ability, her impressions were almost as though he experienced them himself.

"Naruto, what the hell?! I told you to stay back!" I grabbed the blond menace by the back of his jacket and tore him off the pink-haired Marine he'd been showing what-for, because of course this kid couldn't stay out of trouble and let the adults do the smashing. There was evidence of Naruto's mob-style fighting all over the deck in the form of bruised and battered Marines, of whom a blond with mushroom hair was the worst-off.

"You can't leave me out of this, Kei-sen—"

I didn't have time for this shit. "Yang Kurama's heading this way, and you're going back with him. You're too important to get hurt here."

"You," said the Marine everyone had been ignoring. "You call yourself the Tidal Blade, don't you?"

I stood up to my full height, which didn't really hold a candle to this guy. Why was it that every admiral I'd actually seen was at least ten feet tall? There had to be some unwritten recruitment rules about people build like bears, barrels, or a combination of both. On stilts.

"Yeah, that's the face on the poster," said the old man. I wasn't sure who this guy was, but the conventions of this universe would demand his name before I got a chance to.

"At least I got to pick mine." Hang on. Over the last few days I'd gotten a chance to hear more of Ace's childhood—bits thereof—but coincidence cast a shadow over anyone associated with Luffy with the weight of Plot. And I knew there was another Monkey running loose in the ocean. Time for a shot in the dark. "Wouldn't you say so, Hero?"

Isobu sighed internally. Kei's train of thought—odd phrase, that—made a habit of logical leaps that didn't make much sense to anyone else.

The man's face twitched, but it was quickly rendered less relevant when he smacked his fist into his left palm, exactly like Luffy did on the few occasions I'd seen him pump himself a fight. We hadn't made much of a habit of leaving Luffy to his own devices when, inevitably, one of the Tailed Beasts ended up intervening first.

Yeah, this was the grandpa Gaara and Fū had talked about. The same one that had met them at Water 7 and actually intimidated Straw Hat Luffy. If Gaara hadn't told me that, I probably wouldn't have believed it possible.

I didn't crack my knuckles. One-handed, the effectiveness of the taunt was vastly reduced, and I knew a bad cause when I saw one. Sometimes. Instead, I gripped Naruto's jacket and continued to tug him backwards despite his dragging heels.

"Naruto," I growled in his ear. "Go back to Yang Kurama before I throw you off the ship."
And before the kid could call my bluff, I let go and gave him an encouraging shove so he wouldn’t see how worried I really was.

**Do you need me to provide an escort?** Isobu asked, since Kei seemed to be biding her time until Naruto left to draw her borrowed sword.

*I’ll pay you a thousand ryō to eat this kid and not let him out for an hour,* was Kei’s frustrated reply. While she was disciplined enough to know her duty was, in the end, to protect Naruto over all other considerations, Isobu did not see much point in her neglecting her own safety either.

**Money is meaningless. Especially when I can do that for free.** Yang Kurama could gripe about that when the situation was resolved in their favor and the Marines were resting eternally at the bottom of the sea. Until then, he could suffer the consequences of his negligence.

*I got as far as getting Naruto against the railing before the Marine from before—the Hero they used for recruitment and Roger’s old rival—made his move.*

**Oh sh—**

"**FIST OF JUSTICE!**"

—*it!*

*I dragged Isobu’s chakra up, trying to redirect force like I had with Teach—*

"**I DON’T THINK SO!**"

—At which point the old man redirected his momentum practically mid-swing and uppercutted me into the air. Isobu’s chakra tails had already forced clamplike structures around the ship’s upper deck and railing, and the ship shuddered under the strength we were exerting on its structure.

Not that I was hurt, but being the Bozo-the-clown in this scenario definitely hadn’t been on my to-do list today. Even if I just—

—Tuck legs in, arms out, wait for the *snap*—

*I hit Monkey D. Garp’s ship square on the stern, shaping my V1 cloak into a wide, flat disk that barely cared about air resistance. The momentum I’d retained even after having to take that hit was still immense. As such, I needed to expend it somewhere and the ship deserved a little better than that. As did the Marines on it.*

**No, I was going to turn his ship into a catapult.**

It was at this point Isobu chose to assist Kei’s efforts in a manner more tangible than even the Tailed Beast cloak and, while doing his best to smile despite his lack of facial expressions, swept his left tail in an upward arc. A dozen yards away, a column of water in the shape of a scaly-mailed fist punched up from below the ship’s bow, just as Kei hit the stern.

"**This seems personal!**" I shouted at Garp, landing on a broken railing and forcing it to stay solid through the power of wishful thinking and Isobu’s strength. "Don’t tell me you bought that pack of lies!"

It took Isobu a second to remember that, in fact, the world at large believed Fire Fist Ace was dead. Having never labored under that misapprehension, but being familiar with Kei’s brand of protective anger, let him slot the Marine’s reaction into place only after a little more thought.
Is this not the same grandfather who left Ace to imprisoned within Impel Down?

*Probably. Unless Ace has another one floating around.*

Then I do not see why he resents us for—

A distant cry heralded the arrival of Matatabi, Yugito, and a column of fire that could only belong to the exact pirate they were discussing.

—not killing his grandson. Had we left him there, the results would have been the same from the Marines' perspective. The only difference between the faked death we crafted and the version this Marine would have bowed to is a matter of timing.

Kei sent a shrug, either out of a lack of desire to explain or an inability to do so while being attacked, so Isobu shook his head slowly. Humans were very strange.

---

**Yugito**

*This is a far cry easier than that swimming business,* Matatabi told Yugito in a faintly pleased tone. Though she was far too large to be stealthy in any conventional manner, the fog laid by Isobu and Saiken had a way of compensating for that problem.

*I'm just surprised it took us all this long to teach you to walk on water.*

Yugito couldn't say that Kokuō's contribution to their pool of information didn't help, but it was almost pathetic that it had taken until her intervention to innovate for the sake of the Tailed Beasts. The dolphin-horse was perfectly capable of swimming, but, unlike the other Tailed Beasts with Water natures, could run even faster. It probably hadn't occurred to Saiken or Isobu to even try to walk on water, and the chakra control required to do so didn't translate between beast and host. It had something to do with the lack of a proper chakra system in a creature made of the stuff.

To think that Kokuō still wouldn't arrive for an hour. She and her partner were going to miss all the chaos they had contributed to.

"You can talk out loud if you want," Ace said from behind her.

Yugito looked back to see him scratching the base of Matatabi's ear. Though her partner didn't give a satisfied rumble out loud, it was only because the fog couldn't swallow such a loud sound any more than it could muffle cannonfire. Yugito could still feel it through their bond.

"Once we get there," Yugito replied. She tapped her sharpening fingernails against her knee, leaning back only to find that Ace had scooted closer. Her back bumped against his side, and he looked like he was fighting down a grin when she looked askance at him.

"You nervous, Yugi?" Ace asked.

"Not remotely," was her reply. At least, not about the battle.

Ultimately, she had no doubt that their side would win. Sure, she had assessed the majority of both the Whitebeard Pirates and the Marines as mere cannon fodder with delusions of competence. And sure, she had no interest in allowing a single one of the more vulnerable members of their army—or her "crew"—to be hurt more than necessary. Yugito wouldn't be surprised if, in the end, the jinchūriki ended up breaking the Marines. Making it so they'd never be a world power worth considering again.
No, she was worried more about the aftermath. Kumogakure was all too familiar with the idea of what Kei referred to as "won the war, lost the peace." The words hadn't fully clicked until Yugito thought about it, but winning overwhelmingly would do some interesting things to stability. No one, to her knowledge, was at all interested in ruling over the ashes that would be left behind. And if Yugito didn't go home, she'd have to live with the consequences of everything done here.

If she did go home, she would still have to grit her teeth and bear it. But the village would understand at least some of it, as long as angry Marines weren't crawling up onto their shores or making demands. That would bring up questions Yugito didn't think she especially wanted to answer.

Scrutiny from C, at least, would be difficult to avoid.

"Do you ever think about what'll come next?" Yugito asked, before the silence could become too comfortable.

Ace's brows furrowed for a few seconds. "In general? Or specifically about the battle?"

"Either."

Ace paused to think about it. Then, "I try to live in the moment. It's not worth getting worked up over stuff that hasn't happened yet." Ace had tucked his legs up toward his chest as he spoke, which meant Yugito could take his arm in hers. Smiling faintly, he went on, "Living with your head too far in the future or the past detracts from the now. And I want to enjoy all of this."

That was a defense mechanism if Yugito had ever heard one. But his thoughts had seemed lighter over the last week or so, though, so perhaps he had a point.

As interesting as it is to listen to the two of you dance around each other, the mist is beginning to come under attack, Matatabi reported, lowering her entire body toward the surface of the sea in preparation to spring. Isobu reported our target's location. Are you ready, dears?

When Yugito paraphrased the remark for Ace's benefit, they both got to their feet in preparation for the attack. They'd be flanking the Marines, preferably taking out Admiral Aokiji—or at the minimum terminally distracting him—before he could stall the rest of the attacking side with his ice powers. Sure, pirates could simply walk across fields of ice, but the Whitebeard ships were better off if they could maneuver. At the very least, they could be of some use attacking the ships that didn't carry admirals.

"What're you gonna do so we don't get a repeat of Banaro?" Ace asked, even as flame started to crawl up his spine.

Yugito smiled, though perhaps not pleasantly. "Fire Release is not the only card I have to play."

Ace quirked an eyebrow, an almost predatory smirk beginning to form on his lips. "I'd love to hear about it."

"My village is Kumogakure. In the Land of Lightning." Yugito clasped her hands and, as she drew them apart, white-blue sparks jumped between her fingertips to form a tiny cage of electricity. The cold glow lit the space above Matatabi's head more subtly than Ace's orange flames, but it was enough to cast their features into sharp relief. "I have options."

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

Yugito nodded as she flattened the sparks to nothing against her leg, then turned to face the
impending break in the fog. She trusted Matatabi's ability to coordinate with her watery brothers, but the second their plan finally hit the enemy, there would be a reckoning.

Speaking of, Saiken's high-pitched war cry was already going. There couldn't be that much time left before the game was up.

Ace ran his fingers through Matatabi's blue-black flames, scratching a little above her golden eye. "What do you say, Matatabi? Think it's our turn to steal the show?"

Matatabi purred, sending a vibration all the way down to her paws. Yugito hid a smile as Matatabi's muscles bunched and the giant cat lowered her head in preparation to spring. Isobu and Kei had eyes on the enemy, and apparently the distribution of fog and how it was being dispersed told them exactly where Aokiji was waiting. Though the specifics were somewhat lost in translation, Yugito grasped the core of the argument.

Their target was directly ahead.

Brace! Matatabi was already in the air before Yugito could repeat her remark aloud, but by that point it hardly mattered. She skipped the formalities and flattened Ace to Matatabi's head with one arm, in case he was caught by surprise, lengthening her nails to keep him safely in place.

From his startled huff, followed by a wild laugh muffled in Matatabi's fur, it worked out for the best.

"Never thought you'd get to ride a giant cat into battle?" Yugito teased.

"Ha!" Ace planted his hands on Matatabi's head, pushing free of the flames, and said, "Since I met you, this isn't even in the top ten of the weirdest things I've lived through."

Interesting. "Sounds like a challenge."

Any further conversation was destined to be drowned out by the oncoming storm. Matatabi's leonine roar was a major factor in it, teeth bared and claws out in a spectacular threat display. Not that she needed it—but it did serve as an adequate distraction as Yugito and Ace slipped from her back and met their first ship in a blaze of glory.

Ace opened the festivities, cocking his arm back as orange flame swirled all around him. Still in mid-leap, he aimed directly down at the ship below them. "FIRE FIST!"

Yugito was never one to stay in the background. Mindful of Ace's proximity, and his admitted lack of interest in experiencing electroshock therapy, sparks flew wildly around her bandage-bound arms until she brought her hands together in a move B had dubbed "The Thunderclap." Not that it needed a name beyond, "Lightning Release: Indignation!"

Thunder boomed, cannons blew, and the Marine battleships were suddenly gone and replaced by flaming wreckage of two different types. Though she shed the lightning quickly, Yugito's grip still made Ace wince momentarily before she was twisting in midair and hurling him toward a safer spot than open water. If it so happened to be another ship, with another wooden structure ripe for destruction, that was merely a bonus. Yugito, for her part, was bashed in broadly the same direction by one of Matatabi's flailing tails, tumbling freely through the air.

She was surprised to find herself laughing, almost hysterically. This was the rush they'd been looking for. Running and hiding was all well and good, but sometimes a jinchūriki's blood sang for something far less pragmatic.
She'd missed this. And from the sound of Ace's breathless shout of fierce joy, so had he.

**I have this section under control.** Matatabi batted an exploding cannonball out of the air and into a Marine ship, sending the humans on it into a panic over friendly fire. **Go. Fight to your heart's content.**

Yugito may have smiled. She was too busy chasing after Ace to be sure, but still sent a thought directly to Matatabi: **I will.**

Their enemies would *burn.*

---

**Thatch**

Thatch peered over Marco's shoulder, looking down at the eye in the middle of the swirling mist. While clear skies directly above the Marine fleet was a blatant sign that something was screwing with the weather, Thatch was pretty sure they weren't going to guess "giant monsters with powers normally reserved for Devil Fruits" as the answer to their suspicions.

"I hope this works," Thatch muttered under his breath, though Marco had the approach covered.

Flying with the sun at their backs would ruin the vision of any Marine without observation haki who tried to look up, and Marco had used this particular tactic against them plenty of times. But not against this many.

And not while carrying someone who, at most, only had hearsay and a few days of experience to work out how his Yami Yami no Mi powers were going to interact with anyone else's skills. He'd already managed to cancel out the Devil Fruit powers belonging to Marco, Ace, Ace's kid brother (not that the guy noticed), and even Pops, though in each case it left him open to attack with whatever else they could manage. While Yugito and Ace's stories told him that Teach had been able to create suction intense enough to rip a town off its foundations in one fell swoop, but Thatch hadn't quite drummed up the recklessness to try that around people he *didn't* want horribly dead. As it was, he was going to get by on swordsmanship and his ability to cancel out other powers. Haki would have to make up the difference.

Marco tilted his head, half-lidded eyes focusing in Thatch's direction for just a single, uncomfortably long moment. Marco couldn't speak when in his full Zoan form, for some reason no one had ever been able to figure out, but Devil Fruits were always a grab bag of weird. The only other Zoan on the level with Marco was the Fleet Admiral, but Sengoku's other form was human anyway. Ish.

"Am I thinking too much?" Thatch asked, scratching the base of his pompadour. "Only, well, this is the first time anyone's tried taking on the Three Powers all at once. Even if Buddha isn't with them, s'far as I can tell. Makes you wonder if he just decided to fuck off into retirement after everything that's happened so far. I would."

Marco's long-suffering look was just as condescending in bird form as when he was human-shaped.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep your feathers on." Thatch tried not to lean too far to one side, in case he unbalanced Marco's flight path, but a quick glance was enough to confirm what his observation haki was screaming at him. "I'd kill for a visual transponder snail right now…"

The Tailed Beasts… Well, though Thatch didn't agree with the idea that they were Sea Kings with entirely too much power, he could sort of see why people would think that way. His first
impression of them had been one of silliness and joy as the group cavorted around Fishman Island without a care. Arguing with the locals like equals, pranking Marco unintentionally, chasing down jerks who were threatening their fun. All of those were perfectly respectable pirate things to do.

The Marines didn't get to see that side of them. Going by the rising smoke and the waves of terror that were even now trying to crawl up Thatch's spine, hundreds of meters away from the actual fight, he had to imagine the carnage was as bad as Ace had warned them.

Marco circled, wings beating only occasionally as the heat from Akainu's lava kept battering them with random thermals. The ocean's surface glowed in places, hissing clouds of steam boiling up from the water as Ace and Yugito added their fires to the mess. Neither of them threw off Marco's flight path nearly as much as the nastiest admiral around, but it was a bit frustrating to be tossed back onto Marco's feathery back as he maneuvered.

"See him yet?" Thatch asked, clambering back upright.

Marco, rather than answering with his voice, snapped his wings shut and threw them into a hair-raising dive with no warning whatsoever.

Thatch swallowed his shriek on the way down, though it was a close call. Marco's wings flared, both in terms of fire and in terms of flight, jerking them to a virtual stop just before they'd have hit the sea like a egg meeting a street. Two more quick flaps sent them skidding across the chaotic sea-level air, weaving between ships as death met the Marines from every direction.

Thatch only jerked once, forcing Marco to dodge a cannonball he might've shrugged off without thinking about his passenger. Not that either of them couldn't have survived, with haki, but there was such a thing as taking stupid risks even for Whitebeard Pirates.

Of course, now that they were in the thick of it, Thatch could finally see what Marco had probably spotted instantly—and just then, Kizaru's yellow blasts of pure light slammed against Isobu's thick shell as the turtle swam around the periphery of the battle. It didn't appear to bother Isobu at all, but tracing the spots in his vision back to their source let Thatch know exactly where the most apathetic admiral was standing.

The only sign anyone gave of even noticing the impending duel was when Kei appeared, surfing past on a bit of wreckage as Marco flew by, and lobbed a water dragon in the direction of Kizaru's ship before running to attend a different part of the battle. Thatch thought he saw an iron ball the size of a ship hurtling in her direction, but then Marco poured more effort into speed and made the world blur. Whatever happened next, Thatch silently wished her what luck he wasn't reserving for himself.

Because, of course, Thatch held onto Marco's glowing feathered neck for dear life. Or, considering who they were about to face, perhaps "avoiding even more imminent death" was more accurate.

"Anything to say before we do this?" Thatch asked Marco, as they drew within range of Kizaru's ship and the laser light show.

Marco didn't bother with that. Instead, he and Thatch landed squarely mid-ship in the middle of Kizaru's command and started laying waste to the Marines there. By the time Thatch was carving up the enemy with his cutlass, Marco had already un-transformed except for his wings and had already kicked two of the sailors overboard.

"Th-those are Whitebeard commanders!" wailed someone, thought Thatch wasn't really bothered to find out which of the Marines was doing the screaming.
No, he only had eyes for the Admiral staring impassively down at them from the stairs.

Thatch had never really had strong feelings about Borsalino, at least beyond the usual for World Government bullshit purveyors. While the oldest of the current crop of Admirals, the man in the yellow pinstriped suit was always the type to hang around in the background. Terminally lazy (for other people's sakes), the wielder of the Pika Pika no Mi had a reputation among pirates as something north of Akainu, but south of Aokiji. He didn't give enough of a damn about concepts such as "live capture" and "civilian casualties" for anyone's taste, but Kizaru's lack of ambition or follow-through was most of what distinguished him from the walking, talking, cigar-chomping volcano a few ships north of them.

It didn't make him any less dangerous.

"No need to worry!" said a different Marine, with a higher-pitched voice. "We have the admiral! What are some pirates in the face of one of the strongest Marines?"

Thatch didn't take any further note of him except to memorize his relative location. That was the important bit.

"Well, old man? Want to back that up?" Thatch called out, lifting his free hand to cup his mouth. He didn't think Kizaru looked impressed by two Whitebeard commanders, but then, the man never did.

Marco, of course, had already punted the offending Marine overboard without Thatch's input, but what else were brothers for? Aside from backup in the kinds of fights that could easily kill everyone involved.

Must be Tuesday, Thatch thought as Kizaru finally, finally turned in their direction.

Kizaru didn't tend to smile. The man twisted his lips like he was thinking about the question, ever indecisive, when Thatch snapped a hand out and the world turned upside-down.

Marco could adapt to the changed circumstances with his wings, but in the end gravity had everyone else by the collar. Even light.

Time to teach Kizaru that lesson.

Chapter End Notes

I think that'll have to tide you over for now, at least until I get my actual computer back and/or buy a new one. Yeah, the good ol' laptop is dying a fan-related death, or so it seems from the number of times it's been in the shop this month. Hopefully, it'll live and I'll be able to get back to writing in between frantic job shenanigans.

This is my first time writing a multi-unfamiliar-POV chapter of a single battle where the timeline overlaps so much. I hope it still makes sense!

Next chapter preview:

"IT'S THE RED HAIR PIRATES!"

"Oh, no. You're not that lucky. How about, oh, I don't know..."
The world glowed red, and laughter like cruel, ominous thunder rolled through the waves.

Just. ONE.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!