

Unbound (Stealing the Thunder)

by *black9*

SI-OC in One Piece's world. The standard pack, adventure, loot, haki and whatnot. Don't want to spoil the MC actions, so I won't tell you anything more. Haki and superpowers will make sense, and I'll try to explain properly the workings of devil fruits in a system that is organic and more or less logical without going against what is explained by Oda, possible Spoilers. Extreme Au.

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Grinding

I honestly had been thinking about the One Piece universe for a while, it is vast, and the bullshit one can place into it is quite outstanding.

It is also a very difficult world to play with. Either one ends up following too close canon, or the MC becomes immediately overpowered, for this or that reason.

I am also trying to flesh out a character that says 'fuck you' from the get-go.

I doubt I will be able to portray the world Oda has gifted us, and surely I won't be able to match *This Bites by Xomniac*, which is simply perfect, and the only one fanfiction that isn't AU worthy of being actually praised. In a way, that one is a better-written edition of my own *Revolution* (my *Naruto* ff), and frankly, I read it in a single week, cursing myself for not having found that particular gem before.

Anyway, this is a very long term project, that I honestly believe will fall apart at some point, if only because I get bored writing about the endless series of islands.

Since my stories are from the POV of a more or less jaded character, they come out showing a bit more the dark side of the worlds they are written in. But... that's kind of the point.

There will be numerous scene breaks, since I have neither the patience nor the time to follow every single action of the MC, that's not to say that the jumps ahead in time will be meaningless or left without an explanation of the events that have occurred, simply, they will be overlooked in order to allow me to focus on the more relevant points of the story.

I'll try to work out the extremely vast and vague Lore of One Piece, but no promises. Feel free to point out what does not make sense in your heads and spare me your angsty outbursts. I don't own shit beyond my character.

Have Fun!

Betaed by parivo ozus 111

GRINDING

The sky was so blue it almost felt unreal, the few clouds were white and fluffy, roaming among the higher currents. The beach was a long stretch of white, fine sand, the waves quietly crashing on the shore. The ocean shone of a sparkling blue, mirroring the sky, occasionally broken by the white foam of waves breaking against the wind.

"It's different from what I remembered", I muttered to myself.

The body my consciousness was living in appeared to belong to a three years old boy. Red hair with matching eyebrows, irises as blue as the sea itself, and delicate features under the rightfully chibi-face. I was wearing a white cotton shirt and a pair of shorts. I had chosen to forego my sandals to feel the sand between my toes.

It was the first time my mother had allowed me to leave the house on my own, hence why I had chosen to mesmerize myself staring freely to the ocean.

From there my vague awkwardness.

I lived in a small village on a small island, curiously enough, the technology gap between the world I came from and the one I was in was mind-boggling: no school, no hospital. Those had been the first two things that made me realize that there was something wrong.

Have you ever been in a situation so utterly alien that even if you are seeing it, your brain can't elaborate it?

That was how I was feeling.

In my tiny, chubby hand, I was clutching a newspaper. What the fuck was wrong with the newspaper? Simple, really: it was a motherfucking news coo.

That had been the detail necessary to hammer in the absolute certainty of my current predicament: I was in One Piece.

If the manga, the anime, or a mixture of both along with the movies, I had no idea.

And honestly, it didn't really matter. I could have been reborn in the bible for what mattered, even if it would have been undoubtedly less fun. I could remember my previous life like a very vivid dream, and there wasn't a single event that justified my existing into the One Piece reality.

It most definitely was not a dream, simply because if you can think about being in a dream while you are sleeping, it's really easy to distinguish it from reality. At least this is always been something I could do.

Was I in a drug-induced coma?

It doesn't really matter, does it? I realized with freezing certainty.

Fortunately enough, I could recall pretty well the events described by Oda.

If my life was a paradoxical result of a parallel universe in which Goda chose to metaphysically break the fourth wall from day one, I... I honestly didn't know if I wanted a refund or not.

Are my thoughts the result of some dumbass typing on a fanfiction site in the middle of the night?

Do I have free will?

Would I realize if I didn't?

My three years old face contorted briefly into a snarl.

"What the fuck is the point of being born anew in a fucking magical-physics breaking-moral thwarting universe if I can't even do what I want?" I muttered under my breath, the breeze, and the waves covering my words.

At that moment, I knew. I felt, that like hell I was going to conform to whatever. I was in a world of monsters, they mostly walked on two legs, and spoke with a human voice, but they could burn an island whole, cover themselves in magic black mumbo jumbo that allowed them to do whatever. And that was without taking notice of the utter bullshit that was the World Government.

Slavery, corruption...an all-around dystopian world.

I knew that in a world where the islands were separated by deadly stretches of water one from another, the cultural and technological development would be inevitably stunted, even more, because the ones who actively controlled any form of official trade were the Marines.

Read: brainwashed-mercenaries led by inhumanly powerful beings that catered to the whims of a self-sustaining oligarchy that actively implemented slavery just for shits and giggles. Or zealots, that worked too.

If I had a lifetime of dedication I would have joined the Revolutionaries, it was only a matter of becoming strong enough to be noticed, they would complete my training and employ me.

But there were two problems.

One: I really couldn't be bothered to liberally incite revolution just because.

Two: If I already existed on the base of whatever Random Omnipotent Bastard, like hell I was going to obey to anyone but myself.

"What to do, what to do..." I realized that I was strangely calm after the revelation of having being drafted in the standard Self Insert - Other Character fanfiction that I had enjoyed once upon a time.

Is it because of the same R.O.B.? I wondered briefly.

I scuttered closer to the sea, the cool water washing my feet with every incoming wave, and sighed again.

"What is the point of asking myself this shit? It's no different than asking to the aether if Allah or God were real back on the earth..." And it was true, maybe I wasn't real, maybe I was only words on a page, maybe I was a dream of a superior being, or a drawing from Pif the magic dragon. It doesn't matter.

I would make my choices, from the distinct lack of general madness in the edited newspaper I knew that Luffy wasn't around yet.

Which only raises more suspicions on the origins of my existence here. But I avoided once again the topic.

Were I to find a way to join the Straw Hat Pirates only to have a repeat of his adventures? Were I to set sail on my own? To find and join another supernova? To stay civilian?

The only question I had a ready answer for was my last one: Hell No.

I was reborn in the small village on an almost smaller, rocky island where pebbles or sand covered the shoreline and a small forest covered the northern surface. There were less than twenty houses, which meant that everyone knew everything about everyone else, so I was already known at the strange, quiet child of Tomoe and Hitorama Izu, who apparently were my parents. That they were the only ones with Wano-like names on an island where everyone else was a Jhon or a Bob wasn't lost on me, so I could somewhat guess that there was a likely dramatic back story there ready to be learned... the only problem was... I couldn't be bothered to care. Not really, I was accepting of their care, but I had my life once, it had been the result of my choices and my history, accepting those two as my parents looked like a... slight? an offence? a crime, maybe? against who I was.

One doesn't simply decide to start from zero ignoring ll that made he himself: I wouldn't grow up looking up at my new

parents, caring about their dreams and whatnot. But I wouldn't lead them by the nose either. *Much better*, I thought, *to be disillusioned immediately from the idea of being my parents, than to be simply abandoned after years of attempts to build a sane parents-son relationship.*

I could only imagine what kind of pain and soul-shattering agony having a stranger as a son would cause into Tomoe and Hitorama, but again... they were strangers, I had no doubt I could grow fond of their care, and even grateful of their support, but it would be a lie built to my benefit, and why I usually wasn't against lying and manipulating for my own purposes, I despised the idea of pretending to be less than I was only to keep the two adults on my side.

I'll need to become independent first. I realized, *I'll keep them at arm's length until I can take care of myself, then I'll simply leave, no need to keep flaunting that I'm not actually their son in their faces.* I didn't enjoy the idea of inflicting pain in two random civilians, but if I were a father, I'd want to know that my child isn't really mine. I sighed, casting away the guilt for not being a normal child and resuming my self-reflection in a direction that I hoped would prove itself constructive.

The boredom of being reborn in such a place was not easy to describe, and there would be no point to it.

It was the first time I was allowed to look without interruptions to the sea, and I could feel it. The Call. The waves, the winds, the promise of living off of what you could fish, the challenge of the unending horizon.

I knew, that one day, I would set sail to the sea.

What would I do then was a mystery, but until I felt ready, there was only one thing I could, and should, dedicate myself to: training. Training my body because I wasn't aware Zoro held any special bloodline and I had seen him take a spectacular amount of abuse. Until my body grew enough, it would be running and swimming in the low waters, doing the bare minimum to help my 'parents'.

Now that I think about it, learning how to properly fish is an excellent idea. I noted to myself. Once I hit five, I would start with bodyweight and steadily increase it. I would push myself until I learned the bullshit skills of the CP9. *Or at least, flying and moving fast, these two are a must.*

Then...

I smacked myself on my forehead.

Haki

The utter bullshit everyone was capable of that made someone virtually invulnerable or capable of seeing the fucking future.

The overpowered skill that made anyone certified unbeatable on this side of the Red Line.

I sighed, my fingers slowly massaging my temples to soothe my raging headache.

I was years away from any form of actually magical mumbo jumbo, but there was nothing to it.

There was only one thing to do:

Grinding.

Fishing

betaed with the help of parivo ozus 111

FISHING

4 years later

The boat was quietly rocking and the sea was impossibly beautiful, still of a blue almost black and scarcely lit by daylight. I watched with narrowed eyes at the regular ripples just fifty meters further towards the open sea, or as the locals called it: South Blue.

"They are swordfishes." My father said with a knowing tone. At my silent questioning glance, he elaborated: "They roam around the island for six months every year, they average 5 meters in length and easily weighing 650kg." His tone was... defeated, for lack of a better term. He, like my mother, knew that there was something wrong with me, that the relationship between me and my parents lacked the classic warmth of a household. Not that I wished for it.

In the village, everyone knew everything about everyone, and to avoid whatever possible scandal my parents and I had reached the silent agreement that they would take care of me just until I was big enough to go on my merry way. So I stared blankly at the man who acted more like a disinterested caretaker than a father, I looked at the school of swordfishes and back to our nets.

Why not fish those? The question was fairly obvious.

Like every day since I hit five, I was out with my father, fishing. Well, helping him fish at any rate. Actually, it was more like watching, asking questions and learning. Silent questions at any rate, since my voice resulted too unnaturally serious for a six years old kid.

Fortunately, the man seemed to appreciate my choice of talking the bare minimum and answered: "We don't need a swordfish." Which wasn't an answer at all, and I translated it into my mind as 'nobody is able to fish one', after all, humans weren't famous for their restraint.

The boat was fifteen meters long at the very best. The planks of light brown wood occasionally groaned against the current that would have pushed us in the opposite direction. There was a single triangular sail, which caused the mast to turn following the pulls of a rope, was furled up to ensnare the breeze blowing towards the island where we were returning to. It was always like that, summer or winter, each morning, way before dawn, my father would raise me and we would set out, reaching the border of the bay just before dawn.

Announced by the sky turning lighter shades of blue, purple and pink, the titanic fireball rose demanding attention and reverence, and that was our cue to come back, with a net tossed in the sea like a sack on both sides of the ship. For some reason, it was the best moment to catch the veritable shitload of fishes leaving the bay. It didn't make too much sense to me. But four other boats did the very same thing, so evidently, it was a reliable technique.

I lived on a little island, in a little village, in the middle of nowhere. That meant that in all my life I had never seen an outsider, and that the economy among villagers worked with trade more often than not. As a side effect, everyone knew of the serious, red-haired kid that didn't befriend the other three kids of his age.

Every villager knew that as soon as I completed the duties that my parents had saddled me with, I'd spend time on my own. And the folk of the island murmured like it was juicy gossip about the parents that did not share my red hair. *There is a tragic origin story behind me. Joy.* I sarcastically drawled in my mind.

Once returned to the village, I helped my father set up the stall on the pseudo-market in the middle of the village, and then I was gone. I ran on the sand, where the waves came and went, thinking about how I could progress and planning the rest of my self-imposed training. I focused all my thoughts in the direction of becoming stronger since there wasn't a single intellectual challenge on the island. That meant I either planned my training or reasoned on the possible logic behind the powers in One Piece.

My feet sunk in the wet sand with every step I took, but I was okay with it: it strengthened my legs and forced me to tilt my body this or that way to balance myself.

"The six superpowers of the CP9 sound like something I could take and improve upon." I reasoned.

"I sure as hell don't need the tekkai, since one must stay still to use it. So it's pointless. Armament haki will cover me there." I held my breath, a slightly stronger than normal wave breaking on my shins and splashing on my face. "Well, strengthening my legs as much as I can sounds important for both the..." I mulled over it.

What was the name of their Double Jump? I snapped my fingers once I remembered: "Geppou..." I panted a bit, talking while running was tiring! ..."The Moon Step: somehow it's possible to kick the air so hard that it makes you fly."

I wonder why one can't run on water with the same technique... but maybe the surface of the water is simply slippery? I'd need to experiment. "Then they have the... Finger-Poke of Doom, or Shigan, which only looks like a tekkai finger combined with their Soru." I nodded to myself. "The Rankyaku, and all of its variants. Similar to the bodily executed distance-cut that Zoro did with his swords." I recalled. I huffed, my mind hammering them together and trying to find a

common ground with other shit I had seen.

In particular, I envisioned the hellish training Zoro put himself through as a child. *Everything is based on raw strength, and it's not just that, but one can keep training and get stronger. There isn't an actual limit...* I realized. *However, I don't want to become a bodybuilder. Does that mean adding a lot of stretching? If only to strengthen my ligaments?* After a second, I shrugged: *Eh, I'll play it by ear.* I thought.

In Oda's universe, I had observed that there wasn't a thing such as superior martial arts prowess. It was all about throwing the biggest attacks. There was never a straight fight in which one had to use difficult, hard-worn manoeuvres.

That was also because of the limitless possibilities of the body. *What's the point in learning karate if you're so fast you can't be hit? Or if you have an armament haki tough enough to tank a meteorite?* And that was without considering that Mihawk could cut open the fucking sky.

So it was all about superior speed, strength, and Haki, at least basing myself off the manga. The longest fight between equals that had ever been portrayed had been Luffy vs Lucci: straight punches and kicks. Sure, they jumped all over the place, faster than a bullet. *Oh yeah, here people can dodge bullets.* I noted to myself. Another had been Zoro vs Kaku, in which the duo had exchanged long-range flying cutting slashes. Willpower was a strangely important thing. *Or was that just plot armor?* I wondered.

I had reached the end of the beach. Without stopping, I started climbing the rocks that led to the little forest on the northern shore. I ignored the pain of the cruel ground lightly cutting the soles of my feet, instinctively leaning this or that way to avoid the worst of the damage. The extraordinary feature that I hadn't take long to realize, was that in One Piece's world people healed fast. Every time I had pushed myself hard, my underdeveloped muscles barely ached on the following day. Light cuts and bruises faded in a matter of hours. *That explains the amount of abuse Usopp managed to survive taking on the Straw Hat crew, and how Zoro as a kid managed to lift boulders.*

I entered the 'forest' with a skip in my step. The tree trunks were hardly larger than me, and the canopy of leaves didn't manage to hide the sky. The grass, still wet from the rain of the day before, was a relief on my scratched feet. The cuts were several, but they hardly bled, and even if it stung like a bitch, it wasn't the crippling pain I would have suffered in any other reality.

The world had a definite cartoonish-anime-whatever build, my Other memories, blurry as they were, had a sharper tinge to them. For some reason, however, those were the ones which felt unnatural, the world I was into was... just? correct? adequate? matching the madness within? In my mind, what I could remember of my previous life looked like the manga, and what I was living now felt like actual every-day life. It was an unsettling feeling, how could a simple change of perspective made me deny the importance of my past? I had been real, I had fought tooth and nail for my accomplishments, like every other human being, and it was just... gone.

I watched my open hands, turning them this and that way, observing how the shade behaved. *Super mega High Definition...* I noted. Not that anyone but me would ever notice it, but I was glad that I wasn't in a reality with a pixel-based texture.

Lost in my thoughts, I soon reached a little clearing littered with straight sticks where I had previously tied rocks of varying dimensions to. If there was one thing I had learned fast during the last year, it had been that the wire used to fish was almost indestructible (only tension wise, as it was very easy to cut), how to prepare a fish for the market stand, and knots.

So my makeshift gym was full of varying training tools, several of which made liberal use of fishing rod reels along with the wire. I picked up a couple of roughly spherical rocks just a tiny bit too large to be easy to hold in my little hands and, keeping my arms outstretched, I started squatting as my life depended on it.

2 years later

I didn't realize it at first, but in a world where only the richest were allowed into proper schools, and only on the islands big or important enough to have one, in a society where scientific development was strictly monitored and implemented exclusively either for war or the luxury of Mariejois, I was the equivalent of fucking Einstein.

Well, not really, he had been a veritable genius. I was simply very knowledgable. More than anyone raised in a school anyway, and I had no doubt that schools were indoctrinating-factories for malleable brains.

I had first noticed it when I overheard a kid asking his father why it rained and the man had bullshitted something about the sky being sad and crying. Now, I didn't expect him to have Nami's understanding of the weather, but for fuck's sake! I felt the gulf between me and the folk of the island when I heard a dumbass grown-up mother who actually believed that the sea was alive and breathed, thusly explaining the tides. Ignorance was pandemic.

Which again, made some kind of sense. Ignorant masses are infinitely easier to control than educated ones, and if a very large chunk of the world's population hasn't got access to any form of standard unbiased education, the ones in charge don't have to worry about a sudden genius inventing a weapon capable of turning the world upside down.

After all, Srinivasa Ramanujan had only been discovered because he had picked up a random math book. If the same happened in the One Piece world with a kid who was a latent physical-engineer-genius, who knows what kind of shit could have happened. Given the casual level of QI spikes that allowed Franky to build himself as a cyborg while crippled and on death's door...

It also explained why the trio of Ancient Weapons made of Pluton-Poseidon-Uranus was so sought after, and why they were a credible excuse to justify the ban on investigating the Void Century. The general lack of technology reduced the risk of a sudden H-bomb going off near me, so I was mostly okay with it.

In any case, the best way to grow OP very fast was by eating a fucking Devil Fruit. And keep up with Haki, because it was bullshit. I had always been a strange kind of reader, the story itself had never been something I had ever really focused on, the magic mumbo jumbo running around instead...

I remembered the three admirals at Marineford extending their hands and producing some kind of haki barrier in front of Whitebeard attack: it was some kind of super armament, I was sure. I also remembered that Garp's 'Fist of Love' hurt Luffy without ever turning black. True, I had only seen him do so before the time skip, so maybe it had been a stylistic choice, but since we were talking about Oda, I seriously doubted it.

Speaking of bullshit powers, I had been one of those fans who believed Blackbeard ate first a Cerberus mythological fruit, followed by the Yami, Gura and another free slot. So that his three-headed animal had one bullshit power each. He was, however, way over my head. Teach was under Whitebeard protection until he managed to snatch the Yami Yami no Mi.

I realized that Oda had written a world in which there wasn't a weak fruit, only weak users, (or at least tried to, justifying lame powers with assigning them to lame people) but I knew I wasn't a very original kind of guy, so ending up with a random fruit, even without considering the rarity of the fact, would hardly help me. Sure, I could recognize some. The Bara Bara no Mi resembled a pineapple, the Ushi Ushi no Mi, Model: Giraffe resembled a cluster of bananas, while the Yami Yami no Miresembled a bunch of grapes.

However, I wanted a fucking mythological zoan. Or a logia, which had allowed Ace to go toe to toe with fucking Jimbe apparently without knowing armament haki. So gunning for a logia sounded the best option. *The problem is that they are all eaten.* I realized somberly.

Sure, when a Devil Fruit user dies, their ability is reborn into another similar fruit. Instead of growing from a plant, the ability simply regenerates inside another similar fruit as seen when Smiley "died" and the Sara Sara no Mi, Model: Axolotl transplanted itself into a nearby apple. "Which really powerful fruit could I manage to get my hands on?" I wondered.

The answer was fairly obvious.

"The bottom tip of a lightning bolt travelling from a cloud to the ground does travel rather quickly, although it travels at much less than the speed of light. A lightning discharge consists of electrons that have been stripped from their molecules flying through the air. They are accelerated by a strong electric field, a consequence of the big voltage difference between the cloud and the ground. They crash into air molecules on their way down and free other electrons, making a tube of ionized air." I recalled my old knowledge easily.

"The "leader", the first stroke of a lightning discharge, actually proceeds in steps - lengthening by about 30 meters at a time, taking about a microsecond (one-millionth of a second) to do each step. There is a pause between steps of about 50 microseconds. The whole process may take a few milliseconds (one-thousandths of a second), providing enough time to perceive motion. Most of the charge flows after this leader makes electrical contact with the ground, however. A powerful "return stroke" releases much more energy. That's not the whole story, however, a lightning flash may have only one return stroke or may have several tens of strokes using the same column of ionized air. It may seem to flicker." I grunted to myself, the burning of my muscles finally breaking through my wandering thoughts.

I let the two rocks in my hands fall and I rolled on the ground, panting.

Slowly, I got myself into a seiza position before letting my torso tilt back until my back was pressing against the ground.

I could feel the muscles on my thighs stretch under the effort, but I endured.

I had a plan.

6 months later

A rock tied to a wire smacked soundly over my closed eyes. **Smack.**

"Motherfucker!" I cursed, crouching low to avoid the next one.

I had understood that everyone could learn how to use haki, and it made sense: since it was basically willpower, and every living being had it. Still, Roger had been able to hear the fucking phoneglyphs. And people were able to hear the bullets flying, and move accordingly. So maybe objects carried over the will of the last user? It was worth investigating. Fujitora walked around without problems. Could he see the world through Haki of Observation?

I had built myself a Rayleigh-Color of observation Haki-trainer. Stones the size of tennis balls tied at different heights to the canopy over my head. I used a branch to set them moving, and with my eyes closed, I had to dodge them. It was a work in progress.

I breathed slowly, erasing the presence of the occasional goosebumps on my skin, the light rustling of clothes against my chest moving, the almost inaudible breeze outside. The only sounds that registered on my perception were the rustle of leaves, the ever-present crashing of the waves, my breathing, and my heartbeat. Soon, even those disappeared.

I had felt hot, between the summer sun and the exercise, I was sweating buckets, slowly, my body stopped worrying about cold and hot, there was only the fake silence of the absence of senses. I blindfolded myself, letting the surrounding darkness swallowing me.

At twelve years old, I lifted with nary a thought the barrel full of freshwater from the sand and dumped it in the eight meters long rowboat, checked the presence of harpoons, food, the extra paddle because who knows, and a tightly woven net. Finally, I pushed my mighty vessel into the water.

I fitted the rope lashings of the oars onto the thole pins and, leaning forward against the thrust of the blades in the water, I began to row out of the harbour in the dark. There were other boats from the other beaches going out to sea, I heard the dip and push of their oars even though I could not see them now that the moon was below the island.

Sometimes someone would speak in a boat, something inane as always. But most of the boats were silent except for the dip of the oars. They spread apart after they were out of the mouth of the little bay, each one headed for the part of the ocean where they hoped to find fish. It had been years since the signature fishing technique of the village held any effect. Throwing nets in the hope they would fill themselves while returning into the village simply did work no longer.

And the swordfish school had become wise to our methods when we tried to fish them, so they no longer swam near the surface.

I knew I was going far out as I left the smell of the land behind and kept going into the clean early morning smell of the ocean. I saw the phosphorescence of the Blue weed in the water as I rowed over the part of the ocean that the fishermen called the great well because there was a sudden deep of several hundreds of meters. There, all sorts of fish congregated because of the swirl the current made against the steep walls of the floor of the ocean. Here there were concentrations of shrimp and baitfish, sometimes schools of squid in the deepest holes, and these rose close to the surface at night where all the wandering fish fed on them.

In the dark, I could feel the morning coming and as I rowed I heard the trembling sound as flying fish left the water and the hissing that their stiff set wings made as they soared away in the darkness, I was rowing steadily and it was no effort since the surface of the ocean was flat except for the occasional swirls of the current.

I was letting the current do a third of the work and, as it started to be light, I saw I was already further out than I had hoped to be at this hour. I tossed the hook with the bait, letting the transparent wire unravel from his bundle since I needed it deep. I was holding the line lightly, looking for any difference in the pull it exercised. Out of nowhere, I felt something hard and unbelievably heavy. Likely, it was the weight of the fish, and so I let the line slip down, down, down, unrolling off the first of the two reserve coils.

As it went down, slipping lightly through my fingers, I still could feel a great weight, though the pressure of my thumb and finger was almost imperceptible. I was silently considering how I could apply my techniques to fishing, but I came up short.

Loyal to my training plan, I had focused on strength and agility, making my body a lean mass of wiry muscles. At twelve, there was a certain definition on my shoulders and arms, puberty had yet to properly kick in, but I knew I was strong.

I had no idea of how much weight I could lift, boulders didn't have tags with their equivalent in kilos after all, but I knew I was stronger than any other in the village. Someone had likely found my makeshift gym some months before and likely deduced my inhuman strength. Since then, even if scared by my unnaturalness, the villagers had been on my case.

"If you are so strong, you should do this and that." I mocked them. *Puah!* Opportunists, the whole lot of them.

I abandoned my previous line of thought in order to focus again on my self imposed mission: I knew that a huge fish had taken the bait.

Even when I felt him stop moving, the weight was still there. Then the weight increased and I gave more line. I tightened the pressure of my thumb and finger for a moment and the weight increased and was going straight down. *Straight down is no good.* I noted to myself.

"He's taken it," my father, teacher in all matters of fishing had once explained, "Let the fish eat it well, so the hook can gain a better grip."

I let the line slip through my fingers while I reached down with my left and freed the end of the two reserve coils to the loop of the two reserve coils of the next line. Now I was ready.

I struck hard with both hands, gained a couple of meters of line, and then struck again and again, swinging with each arm alternately on the cord with all the strength I could provide as I pivoted the weight of my body. Nothing happened. The fish just moved away slowly and I could not raise him an inch for fear of breaking the wire. *Annoying motherfucker.* The line was strong and made for heavy fish, so I held it against my back until it was so taut that beads of water were jumping from it.

I was strong, stronger than any twelve years old had any right to be, my hellish training had set the foundation for puberty to kick in. Strong enough to catch the fucking swordfish and get the villagers off my back. I needed to train, I had neither the time nor the patience to waste with fishing. The wire began to make a slow hissing sound in the water as I held it, bracing myself against the thwart and leaning back against the pull. The boat began to move slowly off toward the north-west.

The fish moved steadily and we travelled slowly on the calm water, I was only hoping that whatever fish I had caught wouldn't become bait for a fucking sea king.

I closed my eyes and spread my 'sensing'. It wasn't observation Haki, not yet. The end result should be something that fanned 360 degrees around the self.

Fucking Fujitora was blind but he walked around anyway without problems, didn't he? For now, the best I managed was the kind of tunnel vision that allowed Usopp to shot the green-haired kid in Dressrosa, even if it happened randomly and it only allowed me a few dozen meters of range beyond the one of my eyes.

It was enough: in my mind, I saw the fish swimming in the water with his purple pectoral fins set wide as wings and the great erect tail slicing through the dark. Somehow, I knew that the image shouldn't have appeared so clear if I had imagined it.

Haki was willpower. Simple as that. The color of observation, the so-called Kenbunshoku Haki, granted users a sixth sense of the world around them and limited precognitive abilities. Users of this Haki could sense people's presence, strength, emotions, and intentions. An advanced level of Kenbunshoku allowed the user to see a short period into the future, Katakuri taught me so.

It was the will to see, to know, to be aware, meshed with a 'passive' mindset not different from a meditative state which allowed the events around you to impress themselves on your... *spiritual force*? Something around those lines.

Thanks to said observation, I was very sure that the swordfish had understood what had just happened, and instead of trying to run, he was charging my fucking rowboat with all the strength a fish of its dimension could muster.

Shit. One thing is to tire a fish with a hook and then killing it, another is battling against half a ton of rage and bad manners. I rose from the plank I was seating on and took a paddle. I wouldn't have a second chance.

My focus closed on the fish, I could feel it. For the first time, I could say that it wasn't my overactive imagination.

A moment before his deadly sword pierced the bottom of my boat I slammed the paddle in the water, improving as much force as I could.

Two things happened: one, the paddle broke. Two: the boat lurched sideways, almost pivoting under my feet.

Then the water exploded. One thing is having a rough idea of what five meters mean, another is having a measure of the enemy through Haki, a third is to see half a ton of bat-shit crazy killer fish almost impale your rowboat.

I knew that if he were to fall sideways on me he would have killed me.

I didn't hesitate a single second. I grabbed the harpoon and lodged it under the head of that monster just as he was falling, pushing with all of my worth.

Between my strength and his weight, it was dead before he was halfway down.

Fuck you sunnova... I kept silently imprecating and throwing curses until I managed to secure the titan in a way that wouldn't topple the boat nor impede my movements too much.

So, with a swordfish wrapped into a tightly woven net to avoid other fishes taking a bite, I secured its head on the end of my rowboat and started going back home.

For a single moment, I had felt it, like a ripple, something that I had been looking for for years, both the Observation and the counterpart for which I had no talent at all: Busoshoku Haki, a single whisper of it. But now I finally knew what I had been looking for.

I smiled. Fishing could be good.

Unplanned fieldtrip

UNPLANNED FIELDTRIP

Six months after my first solo fishing expedition, I was sitting on the edge of the cliff, hidden from view by the lackluster 'forest' which surrounded the area. I sighed.

I should have been more careful about the news, I suppose. I thought.

I let the wind rip the news out of my hand and flip it down the cliff.

Jinbe agreed to the World Government's terms and became one of the Shichibukai.

At least I have a rough timeline. I thought.

I was likely born roughly around Gol D. Roger's execution, but even so, being more precise would be impossible.

The only timeline I had ever read placed Jimbei as a Shichibukai 12-13 years after the execution of the King, and it wasn't like there were much news that actually made an impact published on the heavily redacted paper.

"Maybe being more attentive to the news would have made me realize sooner the 'when' I was, but it didn't actually help me, I was still stuck on the island.

I turned my back on the open sea which opened from the feet of the cliff and returned to the center of the clearing: the oak tree was old.

It was fairly obvious, if only because of its incredibly vast canopy or the wide area covered by its gnarled roots.

My punch didn't care.

It slammed in the trunk, the bark crumbling in a circular pattern around my fist, the branches above shaking a bit from the energy I had transmitted.

I pulled back my hand, noticing that my knuckles were barely reddened by the blow. It wasn't haki, not by a long shot, but it was *something*.

My extensive experiments had brought forward three fundamental points: Haki was willpower *and* life force, it was easier to use in a situation that the user perceived as potentially lethal,

The natural questions to follow were *what* is willpower and life force.

Well, willpower, the kind necessary for Haki, for all that the word explained itself, it's more easily achieved against impossible odds. There is no such thing as 'peacefully' awakening haki.

My training with the rocks tied to strings had refined senses such as balance, hearing, and touch, so it had been a good starting point. Feeling the air moving against your skin before the rock that moved it impacted against your nose was a very marketable skill.

However, the real kick had been my very short battle against the swordfish. I had been sure my life was in peril, and the self-imposed hellish training I put myself through had placed me just on the edge of awakening it.

Awakening Haki was like learning you had an atrophied muscle that contracted on his own from time to time. The rest of the work consisted of reaching the same mindset that enabled the 'switch' from unconscious and rare use to an aware one.

What was the life force? In Dark Souls terms, your soul was bigger than the others. In average terms at least. Strong mind in a strong body and all that.

A strong mind didn't mean smart, it meant focusing on an objective, dedication.

"Constant hard work brings results." I muttered to myself.

Lifeforce was, in short, the *absolute* will to live. To endure. The certainty of being 'tougher' than anything the world could throw at you.

Armament Haki was about being *certain* about the result of either your attack or parry. I was *sure* that my next punch would break through the tree.

No. It will break through the air itself. I thought. Winding myself up.

I breathed slowly, I inhaled, and exploded forward, my fist colliding with the tree.

Something rippled from within.

There wasn't any room for doubt or afterthought. The hit wouldn't even redden my skin, *I* was punching *it*, not the other way around.

My other arm was slung in the opposite direction, I didn't need to keep up a guard of any kind. Why would I?

My fist was going to hit, and there wouldn't be anything left that could retaliate or need another blow.

Something *rippled* from deep within.

My fist impacted, and the trunk exploded.

I held on that feeling marveling in it. I watched my knuckles, which shone of an inky black.

I *smiled*, I managed it three times in a row, I knew it was maybe too soon, but I was going stir crazy.

I walked over the cliff and let myself fall.

It wasn't an extremely tall structure, so I had to righten myself barely a second into my free fall. It was exhilarating, the air whipping around me, my clothes made the sound of a helicopter in my ears.

Once my feet were pointing down, I kicked. Watching as the sea slowed down its mad dash to reach me.

It felt like my feet were tearing through paper.

Again. Like I was pushing through mud.

Again.

The speed of my descent was suddenly slowed down, and finally, I *pushed* myself back up.

It was impossible, and yet it worked.

Fuck you physics #1. I dryly thought.

Both my legs hammered down when gravity started to claim my form again.

And I *jumped* up.

It didn't make any sense, and yet it worked.

Sure, I needed both legs to do it, and it would leave me shivering with cramps after only a few uses, but I was *motherfucking flying, bitches!*

Three jumps later, I landed in a heap in the clearing from which I had jumped off a minute before.

I hissed, crumpling forward and massaging my tights. "This is absolute murder on my muscles." I groaned.

The sheer impossibility of jumping off entailed brought me back to my more general considerations on the nature of the world.

There are two kinds of reality. I decided. *One in which the will of sapient species overcomes matter, and one in which it doesn't*.

Clearly the existence of Haki placed the One Piece world squarely in the first category, it also implied that with enough strength of will and hard work, anyone could claim the title of apex-predator of the world.

But how does jumping off-air works? I wondered, starting my stretching exercises.

Tekkai was the equivalent of the Shaolin technique of contracting muscles to protect oneself. Brought to a magical extreme, nonetheless with a 'logical' starting point.

The others, however, were different beasts.

Well, nothing for now, I'll think again once I've mastered them. I pushed aside that avenue of research.

It wasn't as cut and dry as 'believe it and it will happen', otherwise people could fly without needing to kick the air.

Maybe the air is a non-newtonian fluid? I speculated. After all, it behaved like a solid only when one kicked hard enough.

No, if it was the case the air would stop bullets as well... I shot down my previous hypothesis and started walking towards my parents' home.

Fluids are strange in this reality and as such are easier to compress? Maybe kicking the air is simply compressing it under your feet? I shook my head.

It was undeniable. "Physics happens only from time to time here..." I grumbled.

With that, my hope to understand Oda's mind's inner workings disappeared.

I reached the house where I had been living with my parents and entered without knocking, joining my parents in the biggest room we had.

Well, the house itself was all on the same floor, had a square plant, with narrow windows here and there.

The walls were made by concrete, and once more I realized how baffling the distribution of knowledge and resources was. After all the village had a doctor more or less competent, who was delivered drugs twice each year when the single merchant who lowered himself with working for our sleepy island made port.

Still, the boats were made of wood. *Wood!* Fucking hell, nobody seemed to know Archimede's law. *But then again, important people likely have the best resources. And if I were a part of their tyrannical government I would do my best to limit the possibilities of transport.*

Hell, I was still surprised about electricity and batteries. There where flashlights but not DAE power hearts on the roads. *Bah.*

"Who are my real parents?" I hammered on the two adults.

"We... we don't know..." my father answered. It had been months since I last heard the voice of my 'mother'.

"I'm guessing you just... found me?" I prodded.

"Your father took up a floating chest in his nets, you were inside, it happened just after..."

"The Pirates' King's execution, right?" I asked, *Also known as the marine's genocide of all the children under one-year-old.*

They both nodded fearfully, and if I had ever nurtured any doubt about my parentage their expressions all but confirmed it.

The fact that at almost 13 years of age I was just as tall as my father, added to my vastly different features, were only unnecessary confirmations.

"I'll leave the island as soon as I'm ready, I don't suppose there was my name written in the chest, was there?." I said succinctly. I couldn't be bothered to endure another single day on the island.

"Shino-kun... no, there wasn't." My father shook his head.

Yeah, like hell I'm going to keep that name. I rolled my eyes.

Discovering my skills had been interesting, but the constant grinding was starting to damage my sanity, I turned my back on them and went to the boat I had bartered for 8 swordfishes with an old fisherman whose last grandson died during a storm.

The old man had made enough to live in peace his last years on the island, and I had my ticket to leave the island.

Six months later, I sailed.

It took me that long to grow confident enough with my sailing to dare the open sea, even if memorizing a star chart had been super annoying, learning how to use my self-built sextant had proven challenging.

I used a protractor, some string, paper clips, some tape, and a foot-long ruler.

Honestly, I had been surprised to find a protractor in the village, but I wasn't going to refuse Lady Luck when she kissed me.

I tied a string through the hole in the protractor's base, I cut the string to about 7 inches and tied a weight such as paper clips to its other end.

Taped the straight edge of the protractor to the ruler, about half an inch from one end.

On a clear night, I held the ruler up to my eye and sighted Polaris (the star at the end of the Little Dipper's "handle") down its length. Measured the angle at which the string hanged, and subtracted the number from 90. The result is the angle of Polaris' altitude above the horizon. Polaris is directly above the North Pole, so its angle corresponds to my latitude.

In the Southern Hemisphere, I only needed to replace Polaris with the southern celestial pole. To find it, I used the constellations Centaurus and Crux. Drew an imaginary line between the two brightest stars in Centaurus, then another line bisecting it. The point where the bisecting line crossed a line drawn through Crux was the southern pole.

To navigate, I had to measure the latitude before I left home. To return, not that I wanted to, I only needed to stay at that latitude while traveling either east or west, depending on which coast I firstly sailed from.

It didn't matter how many lives I had or how many worlds I traveled, the universe seemed to be built in the same way. *This parallel universes thing bears some exploring.*

Checking again after a couple of weeks, I determined that the sky was bullshitting me. *The stars had fucking moved.*

So I wasted a month on a sextant completely useless.

I ended up bargaining for a compass and preparing myself a sun-compass. It was a simple disk of wood with a straight nail sticking out in the middle. Dropping it into a bucket of water, I could check my route with the shadow cast by the sun against the nail.

I had never believed I would end up using such an approximative method. I had grumbled in my head. But it was only a failsafe for my actual compass.

The ship was twelve meters long at the very best, made of once light brown wood that had been darkened by the years. It was a simple cutter, with a single mast and mainsail.

Only, the mast was further aft to allow the jib and staysail to be attached to the head stay and inner forestay, respectively.

It was bloody fast when I managed to catch the wind just right, but I managed to sail against it.

I left the bay just before dawn, pointed towards the rising sun, and mentally prepared myself to a couple of weeks of monotonous sailing.

The west blue wasn't as 'weak' as the east one, but it was still pretty tame. Besides, I was *flying* on the motherfucking waves.

I eyed the compass I had secured on the tiller, I just needed to go east.

The closer island was a long one that stretched itself from north to south, so I would slam against it eventually. I had food and water for a month, and that was without considering that I could fish something along the way.

My first day passed without great difficulties, the sails casting a comfortable shade on me during the mornings, and the sun trying to cook my back during the afternoons.

I wisely chose to stay dressed, no need to defy the summer's UV.

I was barefoot, with baggy trousers that reached my calves and a linen shirt with a V cut deep enough to show the world my sternum and long, wide sleeves.

I didn't care about copyrights of any kind, so I had a wide straw hat to hide my red mane from the sky. It was roughly made and had a triangular structure, resembling more the Hokage's hat than Shank's one, but it did its job.

Shitting overboard while keeping the boat in the right direction took some effort, but it was manageable.

Cleaning my own ass was a bit tricky, but doable.

Eating, either from the ration bars or canned stuff, was a chore I dutifully performed each morning.

Drinking water (five parts water and one part wine, since leaving pure water in a barrel for too long would have caused fungi of some kind to develop), was annoying, but I drank two liters each day.

I had on board two barrels, eighty liters each.

As I said, I was overequipped for my travel.

After the first couple of hours of sailing without issues, I cast my line off starboard, keeping it less than ten meters deep, I didn't want a big catch after all, and it was more out of habit instead of necessity.

Then the boredom hit pretty hard. I watched behind me, Swordfish Island, home of the now proud Swordfish village, *They didn't exactly shine for original thought.* I drily commented.

I left behind memories of gruesome, endless training. Like hell I was going to turn back.

In a few years, I could likely polish my skills a lot more, to the point where I could kick a sea king around, at least a little one. But the Sea Called.

It was a strange feeling, I had felt it when I was a kid and I had just discovered that I was in the One Piece world.

It was... actually freeing, feeling yourself soaring over the waters.

Sure one could actually fly with the Geppo, but *this*, it wasn't far behind.

With a satisfied smile, I checked the skies, perfectly blue and cloudless.

I made a ring out of the line I threw out and I slipped the tip of my middle finger in it. I tied the tiller in position, and I settled down, soon enough falling into a light sleep.

Being alone in the open sea without back up meant taking every shut-eye possible after all. It meant being always aware,

it meant *daring the world to take you down*.

I awoke several hours later when the line I threw started tugging my finger.

With only one eye open (*I was dreaming something nice goddamnit!*) I fished up a red sea bream.

I took out a little switchblade and killed the fish quickly, before cleaning it and tying what was left to the hook.

I ate it raw with a sprinkle of salt, before tossing down what was left. I would catch something else eventually.

I glanced around, noticing that the air had stayed the same and the sky was still cloudless.

I checked the course and smiled satisfied.

The magnetic poles somehow did change randomly only on the grand line and in the new world, so I was in the clear.

I settled down with a smile, too energized by my nap to immediately fall asleep again.

I brought the hand not tied to the line I was using for fishing in front of my face.

I breathed slowly, letting the rocking of the boat lulled me in a trance-like state.

I closed my eyes and *observed*.

I felt along the line, the head of the waves breaking against the boat, the constant rustling of my clothes, the minute groaning of the wood.

Everything was good.

Several hours later, I had donned a black raincoat, the plastic-like material shielding me from the nightly cold air. It was doing a surprisingly good job, considering it was an oversized thing that I could actually wrap myself into.

The night was almost pitch black.

Almost.

The moon was barely a sickle, and yet it shone brightly over the horizon, her light shimmering over the vast expanse that was the west blue.

I had no idea of what kind of winds one could have at higher altitudes, but they must have been strong and going in the same direction, since I still had to meet a single cloud.

Anyway, that let me see the stars.

Oda had utterly failed in portraying the sheer vastity that this world was, and I guess drawing in black and white meant it was difficult to report such a starry sky.

I kept circling between sleeping and training my haki for the whole day, and at some point, I decided that silence was bothering me.

"Corrina, Corrina,

Gal, where you been so long?

Corrina, Corrina,

Gal, where you been so long?

I been worryin' 'bout you, baby,

Baby, please come home.

I got a bird that whistles,

I got a bird that sings.

I got a bird that whistles,

I got a bird that sings.

But I ain't a-got Corrina,

Life doesn't mean a thing."

So, among the constant ruffling of the wind and the rhythmic sound of the sailboat cutting the waves, I introduced Dylan to the West Blue's night.

I was grateful that my compass had fluorescent markings, allowing me to check it without troubles, sparing me the effort of needing a flashlight.

Corrina tired me. It was never one of my favorites.

So, I started another song.

"Another day that doesn't end

Another ship goin' out

Another day of anger, bitterness, and doubt,

I know how it happened,

I saw it begin,

I opened my heart to the world and the world came in!

Hello Mary Lou,

Hello Miss Pearl,

My fleet-footed guides from the underworld,

No stars in the sky shine brighter than you,

You girls mean business and I do too!

Well, I'm the enemy of treason,

Enemy of strife,

Enemy of the un-lived meaningless life,

I ain't no false prophet,

I just know what I know,

I go where only the lonely can go!"

"Hoot."

What? I froze.

I lit my lantern and tied it to the mast, before ducking under the sail and closing in on the sound of flapping wings.

A fucking seagull had dropped on the head of the ship.

No, not quite.

It was an owl.

How, in the nine hells, did an owl manage to land on my boat in the open sea? I wondered.

A choice immediately hammered on me: eat it, but it would have required finding a way to cook it on board of my very small boat (a boat that didn't have a kitchen) or keep it as a symbol of good omen, my old literature lessons coming through the haze that my memories were.

No wait, that was an albatross, wasn't it? I corrected myself.

"Hello?" The choice was quite obvious.

"Sqwee." The bird replied, hobbling slowly to its feet.

"That's a nasty cut, I can clean up the wound..." I tried to offer the bird, noticing the blood that slowly shone through its breast feathers.

Somehow, it managed to use the feathers on its wing to flip me off.

Okay, what the actual fuck? I'm actually talking with a bird? I rolled my eyes, trying to not consider the fact that I went mad in less than a day.

An image of wolves talking down the Straw Hat crew using Chopper as a translator flashed through my head.

Exactly how smart are the animals here? I wondered. Again, there was a side character... a starfish or something, that

could talk. So I wasn't sure.

It couldn't hurt to try, could it? I wondered.

I walked back to my position and fished out of the water the carcass of a fish I had been using as bait, before returning to the stranded owl and tossing it the food.

"Knock yourself out, that one is on the house. But if you want more, you'll let me check your wound." I warned, before returning to my position.

I checked the route and the weather like it was already second-nature, before settling down and tossing another line out of the board.

I turned off my lantern before closing my eyes, and I *observed*.

It was infinitely easier with living beings, so, even if it was absolutely dark, I could picture the owl perfectly.

The bird's feathers ranged from tawny-buff to a pale creamy gray, showing a dense freckling on the forehead and crown, stripes on the nape, sides and back of the neck. There were dark splotches of a pale ground color on the back, mantle and scapulars.

A narrow buff band, freckled with brown, ran up from the base of the bill, above the inner part of the eye and along the inner edge of the black-brown ear tufts.

The rump and upper tail-coverts were delicately patterned with dark vermiculations and fine wavy barring.

The underwing coverts and under tail coverts were colored in a similar manner, even if they were more strongly barred in brownish-black.

It's primaries and secondaries feathers were brown with broad darker brown bars and almost black tips, with irregular grey lines.

The facial disc was tawny-buff, speckled with black-brown, there were so many feathers on the outer edge of the disc that they framed the face. The chin and throat were white with a brownish central streak. The feathers of the upper breast had brownish-black centers and reddish-brown edges except for the central ones which have white edges.

The lower breast and belly feathers were of a creamy-brown that blurred into an off-white with a fine dark wavy barring, on a tawny-buff ground color.

The legs and feet (which were feathered almost to the talons) were likewise marked on a buff ground color, even if more faintly. The tail was tawny-buff, mottled dark grey-brown with about six black-brown bars. The bill and feet were black. The irises of his eyes were of a scary bright reddish, blood-orange, and its gaze unnerved me. I bet it was its intention.

"Wow," I muttered to myself. I hadn't realized that my progress with observation haki allowed me such a clear vision of the animal. After all, it didn't work nearly so well for the fishes that I caught in the past.

What has changed? I wondered.

Soon enough, I pushed that revelation aside in order to return to my song.

Well, Dylan's song:

"I'm first among equals,

Second to none,

Last of the best,

You can bury the rest,

Bury 'em naked with their silver and gold,

Put them six feet under and pray for their souls!"

My voice had cracked not long before, and it was difficult to keep singing in a way that didn't make me want to kill myself in shame, but I managed.

"What are you lookin' at,

There's nothing to see,

Just a cool breeze that's encircling me,

Let's go for a walk in the garden,

So far and so wide,

We can sit in the shade by the fountain-side!"

The owl had stopped gobbling down its meal to add a wonderfully off-tune: "Hoot."

"I search the world over,

For the Holy Grail,

I sing songs of love,

I sing songs of betrayal,

Don't care what I drink,

Don't care what I eat,

I climbed the mountains of swords on my bare feet!"

Soon enough, the moon dropped off the horizon and the sky turned off a golden pink in the east, announcing the imminent dawn.

I had returned to my routine of sleeping as much as I managed for brief intervals, occasionally checking the route and remaining ready to pull up the line in case I fished something, and I happy to notice that the owl had hopped its way to me during the rest of the night.

I looked at it, taking in it... *his?*... prideful posture.

"Can I check your wound now?" I asked.

"Hoot." He flapped its wings and landed on my thigh, begrudgingly accepting my attentions.

"So..." I started, while delicately sanitizing the wound with a cloth imbued in an alcoholic solution.

"Are you male or female, by the way?" I asked just to do some conversation.

It flapped its wings angrily, its *fucking sharp* talons digging in my thigh.

"Gaah!" I screamed, "I got it, I got it, you're a manly male, now drop it!"

"Hoot!"

"Yeah, well, fuck you too." I grumbled, looking over its wound once again. I had forgotten that people in this world healed super fast, and it was reasonable to assume that, unless it was lethal, it would eventually heal.

As soon as I finished, he hopped its way among the barrels, where he closed his eyes and settled down, likely to sleep.

With a sigh, I lowered the oilcloth I would use as a makeshift tent during a downpour, casting the retreat of my feathered friend in a deeper shade.

An owl could do with a pair of sunglasses, I guess. I imagined the eagle-owl with a pair of stylish Ray-Ban, and couldn't hide a grin. It would be hilarious.

A week later, I was facing a conundrum.

"Kuro?" I offered.

"Hoot!" That was a no.

"Akatsuki?"

"Hoooot!" That was a dismissive no.

"Kakashi?" *Fantastic, now he's offended.* I sighed, he was a real nightmare...

"Hey, how about Akumu? Goes for nightmare, you know!" I tried once more.

The snobbish owl ruffled his feathers and gifted me with a stink eye.

"Yoru Ryōshi? Night hunter?" I tried.

The owl turned his back on me before creepingly turning his head backward, staring at me impassively.

Well, that is new. I thought.

"You like Ryōshi but not Yoru, uh?" I guessed, we had been at it since dusk, I had gotten pretty good at reading his

answers, and now the moon was at its peak in the sky.

The owl bobbed his head up and down. *Good enough.*

Then I had a flash of genius.

"Listen, I need to choose a name for myself too, give me your opinion, maybe we can find something that works for you too." I offered.

Another bobbing of his head. *We're getting somewhere with this silent communication.* I thought.

"Uzumaki D. Is the surname I'd like." I stated, it was a super cool surname, not that I wished for the world nobles to find out I had the D. (and I snickered when I heard my double entendre). "As for a name..."

I shrugged, before freezing, a malicious grin blossoming on my face.

"Davi, Davi D. Uzumaki." I laughed.

I just stole Roger's gimmick, and nobody could deny it.

The owl was watching me with a shrewd expression, and one more I wondered how much did he actually understand.

"Ryōshi is a good name, but what about your surname, hm?" I returned to our first problem.

"Eh, fuck it, I dub thee Ryōshi Uchiha." I chose.

Instead of narrowing his eyes and berating me for my presumption in choosing without his consent, he turned his head to stare ahead of the boat.

A second later, I heard it.

KRABOOM

The thunder rattled my bones.

I took out a little telescope and I berated myself for getting distracted in choosing our names. A fucking storm was in full swing ahead.

"Yeah, I'm not entering there, I don't care if the D. die with a smile." I grumbled.

I winded back up the line I threw starboard to fish and secured the few things that weren't already tied in place.

I pushed the steering bar, bringing the storm on my left, ducking under the sail when it turned from one side of the boat to the other.

I zipped close my raincoat, closing the hatch that led to my provisions, my straw hat tossed inside.

I tried to get a read of the winds ahead, but I wasn't Nami and as such, I wasn't gifted with a magic ability to read the weather (plot armor fuck you).

A tense half an hour later, the winds pulled us in. "Hold to something Ryōshi!"

I noticed the owl's talons sinking into the old wood of the boat, and then I was whirling around the boat.

I pulled down the mainsail and tied down its base, I didn't need it rolling and slamming me in the enraged sea, I fastened a rope around the mast and secured it around my waist.

My cutter had only one characteristic: it was fast. It couldn't tank a water gun from a lvl. 2 Squirtle, but it was fast.

That meant that the only viable strategy was the equivalent of using a surfboard to ride out a tsunami.

And that was what I did.

I howled, challenging the waters, the sky, the lightning.

I was on the edge of a razor. One misstep was all that was needed for me to die.

I was terrified.

There was no help.

I was alone.

No miracle in sight.

My lantern barely managed to shine through the downpour, seeing the incoming waves was out of the picture.

There are few things more terrifying of being in the middle of a storm. I couldn't see, but I felt my loyal cutter climbing up the mountains of water and free-falling after each cliff.

I couldn't see... so I closed my eyes, and I started laughing.

With my eyes closed, I pushed and pulled, steering the boat along the raging waters and sneaking out of the avalanches of sea foam that threatened to swallow us whole.

Time lost any meaning, as well as direction, there was only the need of riding the waves.

I climbed out of a crashing wave, and in the absolute darkness that was my mind, I saw the following to waves, too close to be climbed, too near to each other to use the lull of one to avoid the next.

I howled in laughter, lowering the second sail and tying it down with a knot that would come undone with a simple pull. I smiled maniacally, unzipping my raincoat and stuffing an indignant owl inside, before zipping it back up and letting the tiller to the whims of the water.

I grabbed the rope that secured me to the mast and jumped on the side of the boat.

I straightened myself and tensed the rope.

I opened my eyes in time to see my soon to be gone lantern lighten a wall of water.

In the moment it hit the starboard of my cutter, I pulled backward, filling my lungs and preparing myself to use each shred of my considerable strength.

The boat rolled.

My back hit the waters with a slam, and I was down, my heart hammering in my chest.

I felt the first crest surpassing me while I was about to be completely upside down.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

One second.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

Two seconds.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

Three seconds.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

Four seconds.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

I climbed the opposite side of the boat, my feet slamming into the wood like scalpels.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

I was standing on the keel, the rope running from the mast to my side.

I pulled on the rope as hard as I could,

Four-point five seconds.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

The strength of the wave hammered my face, and I pulled on the rope, leveraging all I had and letting the sea work in favor of my efforts.

Five seconds.

The boat rolled again, and once more was underwater.

I kicked the water, reverse engineering the Sanji's Blue Walk on the fly.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

Five-point five seconds.

I was once more on the deck, freeing the secondary sail and rising it in position.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

Six seconds.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump

I grabbed the tiller, and pulled, carefully balancing between where I wanted to go and where the sea was bringing me, rocketing down the side of the veritable mountain of water that had just rightened my boat back again.

Breaking my only way of directing the boat would be extremely stupid, so I was forced to use my weight to present either flank to the enraged waters, the tiller helping only minimally.

I unzipped the raincoat lightly, revealing an extremely pissed out eagle-owl that had turned my right side in a groovier.

A bleeding one.

Adrenaline. I thought, recognizing why I wasn't feeling any pain, and I laughed even harder in the face of the storm.

I ignored hunger when it came.

I endured the strain of the muscles.

I refused to give in to the killing headache that was hammering me between my closed eyes.

I distractedly took notice of the greyish light that managed to shine through the storm before it blurred again into absolute darkness.

I accepted the fact that Ryōshi had made a nest between my raincoat and bloodied shirt.

At some point, I manage to use tape to secure gauze on the deep puncture wounds on my side.

I was too out of breath to howl in laughter, but I kept grinning like a loon.

I drank rain and seawater, washing it down with the freshwater-vine mix I had in my canteen. Until it was empty, that was.

Finally, like leaving an obscure cave, I left my roof made of black clouds, my ears still ringing from the incessant hammering of the thunders.

As soon as I was sure we made it, I took notice of the sun's position. It was setting.

I survived in the storm on a cutter for the whole duration of the night and the following day.

Then I frowned lightly, remembering the changes of light that I faced during the storm.

"Holy shit, we pulled through like... forty hours of the stormy sea..." I was gobsmacked.

Carefully, I re-established the route, or at least I pretended to, I had no idea of where I was. Once more, I gave my back to the setting sun and tied the tiller in position.

I ate my fill from my untouched rations and drank a liter and half of water, before changing my clothes with dry ones and wrapping myself in my trusty raincoat.

"Ryōshi," I called, taking in the ruffled form of the eagle-owl. He was still spooked, but not worse for wear. "Wake me up if some shit happens."

Once I saw him bob his head up and down in acceptance, I closed my eyes and fell in a deep slumber.

I had slept through the whole night and half of the following day, waking up occasionally to steer us a bit in the right direction.

Luckily enough nothing relevant had happened.

I went vastly off course during the storm, and I had honestly no idea of where I was, even if I knew that I had been dragged north of my previous route.

The sailboat was, surprisingly enough, still whole. Sure, the mast kept creaking ominously, but it wasn't something I could do anything about.

I had to change my clothes, the first ones I had worn when I left the island just... smelled. And simple saltwater didn't seem to be able to wash away the smell.

So I donned a very similar outfit, only my linen, baggy pants were now tinted black, and I had to tie a red sash on my waist to keep my oversized shirt to roll down to my knees.

I had cut the sleeves short enough so that my hands were always free, and in a flash of genius, I had tied one as a

blindfold around my eyes.

For three days, I tried to fall again in that omniscience-like state that had allowed me to ride out the storm, without success.

Until a day: "Hoot!"

"What?" I asked, annoyed by Ryōshi's interruption, *I was almost there goddamnit!*

"Hoot!" he was insistent, I frowned and took down my blindfold.

I looked around, knowing without needing to check that the route was correct and that there weren't any storms looming over my head.

Then my eyes fell on a ship.

It was clearly pointing to intercept me.

It was close enough that I could see it without a telescope.

Flapping proudly over its middle mast, a jolly roger was screaming its defiance to the world.

"Well, shit." I correctly surmised.

Capitain

CAPTAIN

The pirates incoming had a caravel, only a couple of masts on it, and I knew that in a straight up race in a storm I would win.

My cutter was just that *fast*.

Then the oars were pushed out of the sides of the somewhat bulky ship, and I knew I was out of luck.

I didn't know why they would try to hunt down a little ship such as mine, but, while I didn't particularly care to find out, I knew that they only needed a single shot to sink me.

So I prepared as well as I could.

I donned my trusty raincoat and started sliding stuff I would probably end up needing in my waistband.

My butterfly knife, several meters of line strong enough for deep fishing, hooks of various measures.

I didn't hide those things, they would hardly let me on their ship with any kind of weapon after all.

"Ryōshi, perch yourself somewhere where they can't see you, the sun is about to go down, they won't be able to see you." I warned my feathered companion.

I ignored his head bobbing in assent, busy as I was drinking as much freshwater as I could, using it to wash down several ration bars, then, wary of the possibility of anyone of them keeping an eye on my preparations, under the guise of wearing my triangular shaped strawhat, I tied a couple of smaller hooks in my hair.

Never know if I had to find a way to open a locket after all.

Then I heard it.

A low boom, followed by a whirling sound and a spray of water.

"Warning shot. Got it." I sighed.

I took down the sails, and let the cutter slow down. I was doubtful they would actually shot down my boat, since a single successful cannonball would be enough to destroy whatever loot they could expect to farm from me, but well...

This was still Oda's world, I didn't expect anybody to be strictly sane.

Sure as hell I wasn't.

I was nervous, but not overly scared. I eyed warily the approaching vessel, looking at their jolly roger. It was nothing special, a straight sword with a cross guard ramrod straight behind a grinning skull.

"I wonder what it means." I murmured.

Several pirates were grinning down at me, few were on their masts, furling their sails, there was a randomly shouting stuff at each other.

"... just a kid, I tell ya!"

"Middle of the blue with with a boatsail? It's a marine trap!"

"What's wrong with your beain, AI?"

"You are!"

I spotted a couple of them facepalming at the sharp wit.

I was surprised when I recognized a few female voices, but evidently, in a world where people were randomly selected to be 7 meters tall (I'm looking at you, Kuma) or unreasonably strong and chrismatic, gender equality existed.

Even if every woman after the time skip had a D cup, long legs, killer ass, and impossibly slim waist... I corrected myself. But then again, maybe every writer gleams a different reality and portrays it in a personalized manner, and Oda is japanese...

"Oi! It's only a kid cap'tain!" A voice shook me out of my musings.

"Then bring him up!" it echoed a disappointed voice.

By the time the caravel had docked the much smaller cutter, the pirates had tossed a rope down from their deck to mine.

"C'mon kid, you heard the cap'tain, climb up!" a man gruffly ordered me.

I held back from rolling my eyes, even if I twitched slightly when I saw a couple of grunts climbing down to presumably raid my trusty cutter. I didn't have any stuff that held any worth for anyone but me, but it still irked me. It was *my* worthless shit.

I was about to jump over the railing when the man who relied the captain's orders grabbed me by the scruff of my raincoat and tossed me on the deck.

I sqwawked in surprise, having been too focused on the nameless grunts stealing my shit to keep an eye on my surroundings.

I landed with a roll and I was immediately standing, tossing an annoyed glance at the man who had just manhandled me.

Constant vigilance my ass! I silently berated myself.

I looked around, taking notice of the crew that I kindly classified as NPCs in my head, before looking at the captain of the vessel I had been tossed on.

"Heya kid." She smiled threatengly at me.

Or at least, I believe she tried. After surviving the storm, her maybe bloodthirsty expression didn't quite make the cut.

I had felt more danger from my first swordfish. But then again, it had been almost a year before.

So I flicked my hand in a half hearted gesture: "Heya." I deadpanned.

The woman was in her thirties, brown hair cut short messsily stuffet under a bowler, red lips parted in a smile, a crooked nose that clearly had been broken multiple times, a scar on her left eyebrow, brown eyes, and the biggest rack I had ever witnessed in my current life.

Istinctively, I took a step back, something gleaming in an arc a few centimeters from my nose.

"Her eyes are higer, kiddo." a man grumbled.

I turned my eyes to the standard mook with an annoyed expression, before dismissing him and looking back at the captain.

She laughed: "Ye got spunk, kid, I'll grant ye so."

"So... what now?" I drawled.

I was pretty sure I could take them on. Any couple of the pirates put together couldn't hope to trap and cheapshooting me.

The whole crew... *Meh. Then I would need to find a way to steer this ship all by my lonesome, so it wouldn't be in my best interests.*

"Heh, dunno, never been big on killing kids, but business is business, ye understand?" She drawled.

I eyed her knee high boots and brown trousers, which more than likely hid powerful muscles, before trailing my eyes over her hips and arms.

I tilted my head, her clothes looked a tiny bit oversized, and her cheeck bones were a tad too prominent for it to be comfortable.

"Your crew is starving, isn't it?" which would explain why they would be so desperate as to assault a single cutter in the ocean, and it didn't speak well for their over all performance.

"Shut it kid!" a mook behind me tried to punch my head. I leaned sideways and slammed my elbow in his side when his momentum brought him into my range.

He fell with a wheeze.

And nine kinds of hell exploded on deck.

Guns were pointed at me. *I can feel the line the bullets will take.*

Swords were freed from their sheates. *I am faster than them.*

I looked at the captain with an ennoyed expression. "Hooold!" her voice stilled her crew.

"Joshua attacked first and without my orders, he deserved it." She blankly reminded them the hierarchy.

"And kid, touch another of my men and I'll squash ye, ye got me?" She turned on me.

Acting as uncaring as I could, I cleaned my left ear using my pinky (not that I needed it, I was very careful with persona hygiene, thank you very much) "I sailed out to be a pirate, if you have a chart I can likely lead you to my island, it's out of the way and has food, if nothing else." I offered.

"Ye'd lead us to yer home? Ye know what a pirate is, don't ye?" The captain asked.

"It's never been my home." I shrugged.

She stared at me for a few seconds, annoyed by her difficulty at reading my blank face.

"You can read a map?" a man with bags under his eyes wondered.

"I have eyes." I blankly answered.

The captain snorted: "Kid, we don't pick up strays."

I rolled my shoulders, then I moved.

A whipping movement with my left arm saw a fishing hook tied to a transparent line wrap itself around his neck, the metal biting deep into the man shoulder.

With a twirl, I made the line form a noose around the neck of the crook I downed before. I pulled, leaning backwards and letting a sword cut where I would have been.

I bitchslapped the man who attacked me, behind my hand there was the strenght of my shoulder, the twist of my back, the turning of my waist, and the leverage I could exercise on the wooden deck.

He fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

The next one was in a headlock before Luffy could say 'Pirate', and by then I had my back to the mast.

I tilted my head sideways and a bullet splintered the mast behind me, and with a simple push, the man I had in a headlock ate the second one.

Observation Haki was bullshit.

I weaved on my right, pulling sharply on my fishing line and using the man (which was now turning purple) as an obstacle that made trip another incoming one.

I dropped the line and shot forward.

My foot rammed into the wood of the deck, cracking it, and I passed another incoming NPC, my hand slipping to her waist and taking her pistol.

I wordlessly pointed it to the captain and shot.

If this were an important character, plot armor would have jumped in under the shape of luck, jamming my pistol. Like a retired member of Roger's pirates suddenly saving your ass from an admiral, or having eaten a fruit that grants you immunity from the clearly OP logia that you are facing.

She clearly wasn't important. I dryly noted in my head, watching her brain splatter on the deck.

"NOW!" I thundered. "WHO IS IN CHARGE?"

A man charged me, sabre swinging and a patch on his eye: "I am you motherfuck-grk-urgh!"

And fell with a crushed windpipe.

"Okay little shits, let's try again, WHO IS IN CHARGE?" I was hoping they would get it soon.

After a tense moment of silence, a woman dropped her sword and raised her hands in surrender, a move suddenly mimicked by the the rest of the crew members.

I nodded. "Good, who is the navigator here?"

Another woman came forward, pale under the tan, black short hair and dark eyes, she was in her twenties. She, like the rest of the crew, was absolutely freaked out by my display and casual death.

"I am Uzumaki Sarah, capitan." she said.

Damn. So the name is already taken? What the fuck? "John." I deadpanned with the first name anybody would use to be incognito.

"Really? Only John?" she tried to joke, but it was clear that she wasn't really focusing on my words, her eyes glued to the bodies I had left on the deck.

"Davi D. John." I amended, intentionay slurring the D. inside of my chosen surname. *I like my little game with the D. even if I don't know what the fuck it means.*

"Do you have a chart room?" I asked.

When she nodded demurely, I grunted approvingly: "Okay, the rest of you finish bringing up provisions, do you have a cook?"

"We had one..." One of the NPCs gestured towards one of the corpses on the deck.

"Okay, bring me the fishing stuff from the cutter, as soon as you're ready tie the cutter to the stern." My voice carried over without issues.

"Say your goodbies to the deads, when we have a route we'll start moving." I told them before following my new navigator "Oh, and there may be an owl around, kill it, and I kill everyone, got it?" I tossed over my shoulder.

Sarah led me inside the caravel after a shiver of fear, and while we were walking inside I asked: "Sarah, How many men and women in the crew?"

When she didn't answer my voice whipped: "Sarah."

I didn't shout, it was unnecessary, but the vaguely annoyed tone I used made her streighten her back.

"Uh, 15 men and 7 women, t-t-that was b-b-before today, sir." She stammered.

I didn't bother making her calling me by name, even if being called 'sir' gave me the creeps, if it made her remember our positions on the hierarchic scale, I was okay with it.

"Lots of people for a ship of these dimensions." I noted. The bigger the crew, the bigger the space needed for food, and that was without considering the need of water. I was aware that the bigger ships had a sistem of filters that managed to lower significantly the salinity of water pumped directly from the ocean.

When the woman didn't answer, I continued: "Your cook was shit wasn't he?"

After all, a cook was in charge of rationing the food, so either it was his fault they ended up hungry, or their navigator was absolute shit. In that case, I would notice soon.

The following half an hour was dedicated to not so subtly questioning Sarah, who had a killer ass, by the way, and silently reprimanding myself. *I understand why navigators are such a rare breed.*

The storm ended up dragging me south, *very* south from my original route. Keeping going west would make me miss the island I had been aiming for completely, so, in a sort of roundabout way, the pirate ship had been a blessing.

"So, how come you look poorer than dirt?" I asked Sarah while we were charting the route to Swordfish Island.

Her hands trailed along the surprisingly well made map of this piece of sea, jabbing lightly a cluster of dots: "There was a merchant route East of the Jagged Teeth, this cluster of rocks. Ee used to harass the ships, they would flee in its maws and end up being sniped down by half of the crew."

Well, it's not a completely dumb method. I was begrudgingly surprised: "What went wrong?"

"Another crew kicked our ass, and then we crossed a Marine Capitain." She replied, a light shiver clearly reporting her fear.

"Let me guess, you were lucky, and the marines focused on the other ship." I deadpanned.

A silent nod was my only answer: "How long have you been on this crew?"

"A couple of years." She shrugged.

"Do you know how long ago the previous capitain has first sailed under the jolly roger?" I needed to know which kind of relationship there was between the pirates, if a loyalty born from greed, necessity, live or whatever.

"Not really, I'm guessing... four? Five years ago?" she answered, her hands busy measuring and scribbling things like degrees on a scrap of paper.

Not having a proper ship, I never really learned how degrees translated from a drawn route to the helm. I realized the hole in my education. *I'll need to learn.*

I nodded quietly, checking if the orders for the helmsman checked out with my understanding of the map.

"How fast can this ship go?" I asked.

Sarah frowned, trying to figure out the reason behind my question: "It would depend on winds currents and whatnot, wouldn't it?"

Yeah, I'll need a better navigator. "Haven't you been on this ship for two years already? How can you not know how fast..." Then I stopped, going over the charts we had on the table.

While there were thin lines arranged in squares over the islands, I noticed the utter lack of *parallels and meridians over the sea* **HOW THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW THE DISTANCE BETWEEN ISLANDS?**

I frowned heavily: "Why this map hasn't a scale?"

"You can't buy those, they're for marines only." Sarah raised an eyebrow, her fear over the red haired demon who had taken control of the ship.

"How do you know how long a trip lasts?" I asked dreading the answer.

"Well... I mean, if I've done it before I got the timings written down, or I follow someone else's log book. Even if those are hard to come by..."

It would explain why Krieg was so desperate for the journal of the one legged cook... And why people just stored their hulls with food, a cook who rations properly the food is important. And I can see what kind of monumental dream Nami has got. My mind started working on the problem.

How do you even measure distances without a satellite? Knots tied at regular distance over a rope. I found the solution.

That means that every trip must be done several times to measure the average distance. And since pirates do not know the distances they sail, they cannot even know their speed of travel.

It was a scary thought, one that gave adventuring through the seas a whole new meaning.

"People actually set sail only because someone told them there is another island in that direction." I mused out loudly. *Granted, I did it too, but I knew that the merchant came from there, so I had some kind of proof.*

"You said that half of your crew was stationed to ambushes on the Jagged Teeth." I spoke, "How many people actually manned the ship?"

"Just to make it sail?" She clarified, and at my nod she went forward: "Six, maybe seven, the captain only shouted orders from the helm."

Maybe I should thin the crew, there is strength in numbers, and for now they see me as an enemy. I scratched my chin thoughtfully, making my way back on deck, finding it surprisingly devoid of corpses, with all my stuff more or less neatly piled near the middle mast.

My eyes jumped up, taking in the Skull over a pistol and a sword. *Not original indeed.*

I watched Sarah walk her way towards the helm and starting twirling it a bit, I took a deep breath than I reminded them our respective positions: "WELL WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? I WANT THE FOOD PROPERLY STORED AND THE SAILS UNFURLED, AND I WANT IT DONE YESTERDAY! MOVE YOUR ASSES OR I'LL LIGHTEN THE CARGO TO RECOVER SOME SPEED, AND BY CARGO I MEAN YOUR USELESS BODIES!"

Maybe not so surprisingly, the merry band of mooks and NPCs shot towards their positions, while I made my way back towards the kitchen.

You can't rule with only fear. I nodded to myself. But fear and full stomach? It was a valid starting point. We would raid Swordfish Island, and I would drop down the useless members of the crew during the trip.

Roaming

ROAMING

Wetport was a respectable, well built trading hub on the west coast of Saltyhand Island. The island itself was nothing special, if not for its cave of salt. In fact, in the valley between a couple of mountains named White and Stone, there was a cave which opening resembled an open right hand.

Inside said cave, there was a deposit of salt of a quality far superior to the one that could be extracted in the salt flats. It was of a beautiful reddish pink color, and brought with its typical, slightly bitter flavour, which exalted hundreds of different cuisines around the Blue.

The two mountains, which were respectively 2326 and 2105 meters tall, managed to hold on their small glaciers throughout the whole year, allowing the people of the village several avenues to conserve their food. And such variety of food there was! The valley a wonderful place to farm, given the constant abundance of fresh water and the regular rains caused by the warm wind coming from the south hitting the mountains. Besides, the higher areas of White and Stone were covered in forests which hosted a lot of wild animals, from bears to deers, from eagles to boars.

The people of Saltyhand were simple, hardworking, honest folk. There were several kinds of interesting jobs to be had on such an island after all, so what need was there to go out looking for trouble at sea? None. At least that was what was thought to the younger generations of Saltyhand Island natives.

Two main rivers were born on the top of White and Stone, and those had been named, maybe without too much effort, Whitorrent and Stonriver, they met at a small lake at the beginning of the valley, and from there Wetroad was born, crossing the whole farming region until the sea.

At the end of the valley, there was the main village, and it was so big that it was almost a town, it was called, without any apparent reason, Toptown. It was barely more than a collection of warehouses and shops of every kind, and it existed only to provide the Saltyhand Island natives with a safe place to trade with each other. No need to risk the coast if they weren't greedy. After all, the Wetroad could be sailed in both directions on barges or even kayaks. In fact, there was even a renting company for boats. Several artisans travelled upstrams on this or that small ship, only to return to Toptown paying a small fee for an hammock on one of the barges, often stopping on this or that village to offer their services during the trip.

While the people of Saltyhand Island was honest and hardworking, they weren't complete idiots. They had always known that the world outside their homecountry was greedy and cutthroat, Age of Piraterie or not. As such, and given the presence of the Wetroad, Toptown wasn't on the coast, but just at the end of the valley, where the goods could be sorted out and properly priced for Wetport, little more than a trading hub where the Wetstone met the Blue.

During their travels, the merchants often stopped to the main trading hub of the island: Wetport. There, the goods were already neatly organized and priced, courtesy of the administrators in Toptown, and so it allowed for quick transactions that didn't slow down their never ending courses.

Matt Watson understood how his homecountry worked, it was simple and effective. Granting to everyone the possibility to travel away from the coast, where the job was more, easier, better paid, but marred by its monotony and the risk of a pirate raid, to Toptown or even the valley, where there were countless different kinds of occupations, but that were paid far less.

"The money is on the Blue!" his father had used to say, and while Matt recognized the truth of his words, he also recognized that to the rest of the world, Saltyhand Island didn't really exist. They hadn't even the eclecticity he heard a drunken sailor grumble about once. Merchants dropped in for a single night or day and left with the following rising tide. The young Watson, like everyone born on the island, distrusted foreigners, trading with your fellow countrymen was granted to be done in good faith, "There is no time for trickery among honest people!" his father used to say.

Matt also knew that trading with outsiders greatly benefited his people, with that money high quality medicines were bought, along with minerals that the island was sadly devoid of. Even so, every time a merchant smiled in his direction, the young Watson couldn't shake the idea that he and his people were being tricked.

He eyed suspiciously the grinning fatso that he had just finished bargaining with before turning his eyes toward the setting sun.

The sunset was almost at its end, torches were already being lit on order to squeeze out of the day every possible deal, but Matt knew to not be greedy, and so moved around the family shop, closing everything and stacking his earnings of the day under his jacket. At the end of the month he would travel to Toptown in order to purchase the goods he would be selling once he finished with the current ones. He nodded to himself, lowering the portcullis and heading towards the beach. He would treat himself tonight, something from the Green Pearl, one of the best Inns of the trading hub.

He was down at the port proper when he heard the first scream of alarm. *It can't be.* Then the bell rang loud across the small port, and Matt felt his stomach quench.

Then the first booms of cannonballs could be heard, and after a brief whistling sound, everything went to hell. The wall of

the shop he was passing by exploded with a thundering mess of shards of woods and rabble, hurling him across the crowded street.

When he came to, only a few minutes had passed, and the sunset's light had dimmed, replaced by the fires caused by the assault, thick black smoke was cut by orange rays of light. His whistling ears recognised screams and explosions, before his throbbing body called back his attention.

It wasn't as much in pain as he was in discomfort, he couldn't feel his body beneath his shoulders, in the madness that surrounded him, it didn't even seem important. He was horrified, stunned by the situation that hadn't set in yet.

When a figure made its way through the smoke, *then*, Matt felt fear.

Barefoot, wide black slacks tied around his calves, an open, white, long sleeved shirt contrasted with the red sash around his waist. The wild smile on his face was bloodcurling, while his red mane shook in the wind, and the axe he was twirling in his hand was dripping.

When Matt saw him starting laughing, leaning to the left and whirlwinding among the men that merchants had bought the services of, cutting them apart, breaking them. He dodged projectiles, hits from blind spots, punched with a strength that couldn't belong to such a body, and if Matt wasn't sure of the sheer impossibility of it, he could have sworn he saw him fly. Then Matt felt himself fall unconscious, and didn't resist.

Three weeks later

The sun was hitting our heads like a ton of bricks, but the wind was harsh enough to keep us from melting in puddles of sweat. I walked with nary a care through the main deck, my feet giving faint thumps against the warm wood, the course had been set, the crew thinned and trained, the ship renamed Wavebreaker.

Frankly, I was surprised by the low amount of resentment the crew felt towards me, as well by how fast they fell in line to follow the orders of the extremely tall 13 years old kid that butchered their companions before effectively taking command of their lives. *But then again, having your stomach full and someone to lead you towards easy prey seems to be the best a pirate can wish on these seas.* I reminded myself. What else could they do? Killing me sounded like a one-way ticket to 'I regret it-land', running away was an option, sure. They could have stayed behind on Swordfish Island. But what then?

Pirates were people that lived off other human beings. Leeches, nothing more. Oh sure, some knew their mansions, but being able to work on a ship was hardly mention-worthy in a world where *everyone* grew up with dreams of open seas. No carpenter knew how to build or maintain a building, no helmsman knew anything but how to keep a course against the will of the Blues. The top fighter of a pirate crew could go bounty hunting, why not. But only if there wasn't a bounty on their heads already.

In hindsight, is easy to see why they have stayed without complaints. I snorted, letting the wind spray my face with seawater, my blindfold keeping me from having to shut my eyes closed. Observation Haki was slowly morphing into something that allowed me to keep track of my surroundings, even if I was far from being able to see everything a *lā* Fujitora. I raised my blindfold, unable to resist the temptation.

Oda knew how to draw 'em. I grinned, openly staring the long legs of my navigator that led from her sandals to her solid 9/10 ass.

"Are you done imagining me without pants, Cap?" Sarah taunted me while turning to smirk at me.

"I'm thirteen, you're lucky puberty hasn't finished settling in properly." I grumbled in annoyance. I wasn't one for rape, but being the Captain of a crew where I would toss out those I doubted the loyalty of, often with violent means, meant that she would only be happy to take my virgin body for a ride, ensuring herself a position of prestige above the other members of the crew. It only made sense that she would try to ensure her survival.

Oda's world promoted Darwinism at its finest, and I was a very dangerous, not completely sane, violent kid that was only going to grow stronger. I recognized that the world I was into was real, at least for me, it felt real. But from there to actually treating others like they were important... it wasn't for me.

Whatever reason dropped me here, I don't care. I realized once again, my hand finding my blindfold and dragging it again over my eyes.

"How long to our target?" I asked.

"It could be a week or a month." I could hear her shrugging. That people had no actual idea of distances in this world still sent me off the deep Blue. Ryōshi fluttered his wing quietly on his perch, recalling my attention, and clicked his beak twice, as to laugh. "Well, it's not like you have any better idea of distances, do you?"

His answer was to turn his head 180 degrees, willfully ignoring me. "Need I to remember you that we met when you got lost at sea and landed bleeding out on my deck?" *That incensed him.* I thought amusedly when I saw him fly away with an outraged squawk.

"A good thing that the last raid had been so successful then." I said, returning to our previous conversation. *It will give me time to figure out another trick or two about fighting.* I didn't remember my previous life, but I never thought I'd be so violent

when granted the opportunity. But then again, it was a violent world. Adapt and survive and all that jazz.

A couple of weeks later, we saw our destination: "Okay people!" I shouted loud enough to raise the dead, "You know the drill!"

"Captain are you sure?" Sarah asked me, "There is a Marine outpost there."

I removed my blindfold and watched as one of the last two male members of the crew lowered the jolly roger before tying the flag of one of the merchants we raided on Saltyhand Island.

"We're only here to purchase stuff with our money, not to go to war, relax woman." I rolled my eyes before tying up my hair, hiding them under the repurposed blindfold and my wide straw hat. I kept my shirt closed and removed my red sash, choosing to forfeit my one-handed ax in order to go around with only a knife tied to my waist and Ryōshi perched on my shoulder, like some parody of a pirate with a parrot. After we docked, I left a couple of my mooks to guard the ship, while the others were free to go shopping with their cut of the money.

I had them roll a couple of barrels of reddish-pink salt upon a cart and I set out to the merchant district. It didn't take long to find one of the warehouses which sold food to the restaurants of the city.

"Hello?" I shouted once inside, "My pa' sent me to sell here!"

"And who might you be, boy?" A gruff looking man, in his forties, hair that started turning from black to grey, greeted me.

"Oh, sir, I'm David Jones, sir! And I have a super deal for you!" I spoke quickly, excited by my own charade.

When the man simply rose a questioning eyebrow, eyeing the owl on my shoulder with narrowed eyes, I resumed speaking: "My pa' traded for this salt while we were still at sea, you see, and we were still going towards Saltyhand Island! But when we arrived, the port was gone!"

"Gone?" The older man squinted an eye at me.

"Gone, sir! The pirates raided them, they didn't leave a single building standing." I frowned, "Pirates are filth." I hissed, before turning back to stare with a huge smile on my face.

"But the loss of the dwellers of Saltyhand is your gain! You won't see much of their salt for months, maybe a year, my pa' said so! But you are in luck because you can purchase both the barrels for 50.000 beli!" I ended my rant shaking my arms wildly.

"And why would your father send you alone, hm? 50.000 beli isn't something a kid should be handling on his own." He retorted.

"Oh, do not worry! I am strong! And last month I completed a transaction worthy 40.000 beli, so it's only right I up my game, sir!" I sniffed, my arms crossing on my chest, which puffed up proudly.

In the meantime, the man had opened both the barrels and tasted a pinch of salt from each: "Still, a young lad shouldn't have such success, in my time... Bah, since I like you, I'm willing to pay 5.000 beli!"

"Surely you jest! I didn't know this was a charity, or that this island was in such poor conditions, I'll have to drag the two barrels back to the ship." I shook my head, refusing to give an inch, and so our haggling began, with Ryōshi flicking my ear with a flapping wing from time to time.

After several minutes, the man slammed a hand against one of the barrels: "I can't pay you more kid, half of this salt will go to the marine base, as a sign of appreciation that the warehouse is safe from arson, you understand?"

I cringed a bit, noticing the fearful and enraged expression of the man. *There is no honor among the lawful enforcers of justice.* I sighed, scratching my head: "I'll tell you what, I'll sell these two beauties for 40.000 beli and if you trade me something special on the side. A case of North Blue Vodka, I see you've been recently restocked: since I'm about to become a big brother and the family will need something exotic to celebrate. What do you say?"

"I'm glad your family is growing, but I can't give you more than 10.000 beli with along with the vodka." the man shook his head, but he was almost grinning.

We both knew what it was fair: "25.000 beli and the case of North Blue vodka for the last barrels of Saltyhand Salt on this sea." I nodded in agreement and stretched out my hand.

No merchant was ever happy to give away money, even for what he knew was a more than fair price.

I returned to the ship stopping here and there to purchase whatever grabbed my eye. I would have liked a revolver of some kind, but sadly they were yet to be invented. *Or maybe thankfully they are yet to be invented.* I rectified my thoughts. After all, the better weapons would be obviously reserved to the Marines. Still, I eyed longingly a couple of guns, before dismissing them and purchasing a wetstone for my loyal one-handed ax. *I refuse to become reliant on a weapon, be it a gun or sword.* I reminded myself. Yet, there was some cool appeal in swinging around a sword. Then I remembered of what exactly I was already capable of without one and left it like that.

Once I manage to eat the lightning logia, I'll build myself a rail gun. For shit and giggles. Satisfied with the compromise, I kept going, purchasing sunglasses with mirror-like lenses and... and? Slowly, I came to the realization that I really didn't know what to buy with the money I had with me. Armor was useless. I didn't need weapons or equipment. Seastone was restricted material, as were actually useful maps, I didn't really care about clothes, my body was still too young to produce the enzymes to properly consume alcohol... There were no videogames or smartphones to purchase, cigarettes gave cancer... I sat on a stone bench near a fountain, reflecting on my misery.

That leaves out food, but I've already given a list to my mooks to replenish our hull. I thought, and I wasn't really hungry.

With a sigh, I rose from my seated position and wandered through the small market, hoping to find something interesting. When my eyes fell on a second-hand shop, I couldn't resist. Once I entered, my heart swelled: it was full of junk! Shit that nobody wanted for a reason or another, and maybe a hidden treasure!

"What do you want kid?" a raspy voice questioned me.

I followed the sound until I found an old woman hidden behind a counter too high for her clearly hunched form. "Only to browse a bit." I shrugged.

"Keep your sticky hands in your pockets kid, the Marines are always eager to punish injustice." She threatened me, gaining herself a big roll of my eyes.

Later, I left the shop with my hands still in my pockets, where a lot of knick-knacks had joined them with the rude old lady being non the wiser. *I would have bought something, if she didn't treat me like a thief.* I frowned. Was it petty? Yes. Did I care? Not. One. Bit. With people, often one obtains what he is expecting to obtain.

I started making my way back to the ship, dragging around a case of vodka for several hours wasn't exactly trying, given my unnaturally strong physique (unnatural for the standard human at least), but it still was far from being comfortable. I reached the port after having dropped in a music store where I purchased one of those magic sound snails to act as an amplifier and a classic guitar. Coupled with the harmonica I stole from the second-hand shop, I could try to teach these barbarians how hardcore was Dylan. Or at least try and recreate the AC/DC, replaying them during the next raid as a soundtrack.

I snorted, I could already see it: Thunderstruck filling the air while I tore through marine ranks.

"Stop right there kid." A male voice called me with a tone of command. But since I couldn't be sure it was referring to me, I kept walking.

"You with the guitar!" the voice repeated, and this time there was a thumping of boots on the street.

At that point I was forced to stop, rolling my eyes at the absurdity cliched scene that was about to happen. I turned for my eyes, hidden beneath the sunglasses, to focus on the source of my annoyance. A group of marines was strolling towards me, faces that wanted to look menacing but barely managed to hide their glee. They were eyeing my vodka.

"What is a kid your age doing with a case of North Blue Vodka?" asked one. Ryōshi took that as his clue to fly away from the impending conflict.

"I'm about to become a big brother and my family will use this to celebrate!" I answered with my most childish voice.

The first marine closed in on me: "Then what if it's poisoned?"

The second walked behind me, no doubt to stop me from running away, while the third barely held back a snicker and pretended to be scared by the possibility. Clearly I was too tall and adult looking to pull off whatever inherent cuteness I may still have held within me.

"In a couple of weeks we'll receive an inspection from a captain, it wouldn't do to have citizen dead from a poisoned case. We'll need to examine it, back at the base." The fourth took the case from my hands without even pretending to ask: I let him take it, what else could I do? I didn't want them to take away other stuff from me.

"Oh, that's very thoughtful! Thank you Mr. Marine, sir! I'll come to the base with the rest of the beverages we planned to use to celebrate before the sun is out, I can return with my aunties at dawn to retrieve the sampled goods, so we can set sail with the new tide!" I spoke quickly, already walking towards the port, a plan taking form in my head.

The Marines obviously laughed: "Tell whoever is posted at the entrance of the base that Lieutenant Grayson asked for goods to sample!" Said the one with my case in his hands.

"Bring your aunties too!" shouted another, but I was already running towards the port, and I could pretend to not having heard his command.

Along my way, I entered a pharmacy and started browsing, once more having my mind blown by the inconsistencies of this world. Seriously, how the fuck did they manage to not have sent people into space but have medicines with active principles clearly printed on their labels?

"Oxycodone, Morphine, Hydrocodone, I have no idea why they actually sell Methadone based stuff, this shit is needed to wane people off heroin." I mumbled to myself while browsing and dumping filling my sash with everything I could get away with before placing the rest inside a sack. I kept adding knicks and knacks until the shop was empty, only then choosing to

approach the vendor.

The sun would go down in a couple of hours, I didn't exactly have a lot of time. Luckily enough, I was going around with a lot of beli on my person, the raid on Saltyhand Island having proved more successful than I had hoped, and the other ship we ripped apart out at sea was filled to the brim with every kind of good I had needed to run my ship.

I dropped 30.000 beli without even blinking, and I left the shop towards the port.

As soon as I was on the ship, I walked up to Sarah, who was overseeing the preparations to sail with the tide: "Change of plans, call the crew to the galley, quietly."

I brought my stuff back in the Capitan's quarters, which were nothing more than a single room with stained glass windows, a desk made for writing a logbook I didn't keep, a wider than normal bed where I didn't fuck in, and shelves that actually were full of my stuff. Everything was obviously either nailed or tied in place.

When I walked back into the galley I nodded, appreciating that everyone was already seated and that Ryōshi was uncharacteristically keeping it quiet, maybe recognizing that it was time to be actually serious.

"So, I know everyone was nervous about roaming the streets in a city with a marine fort." I started, noticing the several nods around the table: "Did any of you have problems?"

At the negative chorus, I smiled. "These marines are all crooks, cap'n." A woman around 25 years old spoke, her frown not quite managing to hide her eyes.

"So you noticed, Helen?" I asked, carefully choosing her name among the several my mind offered. Seriously, I remembered Sarah because she would be difficult to replace, the others... meh. Eye-candy and numbers.

"Difficult not to notice." grumbled Han, the only male I didn't drop off at Swordfish Island. Why? Because I was calling him Solo, and he said he liked it.

"So, the original plan was to sell the food downtown, buy whatever shit you fancied and keep the ear down for a piece of the island where we can have fun without worrying about marines dropping on our backs." Sarah recapped, eager to not lose her position as my 'First Mate', "There are a couple, small chunks of rocks with four trees and enough people to have an inn where the locals go for a drink after a day passed in the fields or mines." she reported.

"Distance?" I asked.

"Less than a week." she quickly answered.

I nodded, dropping the sack filled with painkillers on the table: "New plans, the Marines fucked with me, so we're burning and pillaging, starting with their base."

The outrage was in the air, but I trained my girls, *and Han too I suppose*, to wait for the end of whatever speech I'm making before talking back.

"At sundown, Solo and I will be dragging a couple of carts of alcohol for the Marines to sample, and since we're officially setting sail with the dawn, before that time I promised to the marines that stole my vodka that my aunties and I would be going there retrieving the sampled goods." I explained, opening the sack and letting them look inside.

"So... we're drugging them?" Asked Helen, an hopeful tone in her voice. I really didn't want to touch her past tragic backstory, so I carried on, ignoring her resentment towards corrupted Marines: "What in little doses save a life, in bigger doses kills." I quoted Assassin Creed without remorse.

"So, we poison our reserves of Ale and whatnot, give them to the marines, and before dawn, we'll be welcomed to enter the base where we'll finish the job?" Sarah asked.

"Ha! I like it!" A chorus of assents went over the not totally sane girls I kept on the crew.

"Cap, you realize that we're like... ten?" one of the other girls spoke. It was always her to doubt of my plans. I could have dropped her from the crew, but we *were* actually nine people. Seven women, which were surprisingly capable with their weapons of choice, and Solo, who loved swinging around his mace. They were good, but, human-good, not protagonist-of-One-Piece good.

"Why did you have vodka? You don't drink." Solo asked while starting crushing medicines.

"It was meant to be a gift for the crew, it was some North Blue high-quality stuff.

"Ooh, Cap, you're so cute!" some of the girls squealed, while Han shook his head: "They stole our present! Let's wreck them!"

"The drugs won't be enough for the ale, but we're lucky, the higher ranked and strongest marines will likely hoard the really good stuff." I explained.

"But I wanted to keep my tequila!"

Ignoring the dismay, I left the room to get a bit of shut-eye, I felt like I was the starter pokemon at level 80 when the rest of the team barely reached level 30 and I was about to fight the League.

After a restorative 20 minutes long sleep, I left the cabin and the ship, pushing a cart with Solo up to the Marine base.

The trip was relatively short, and soon enough, we reached our destination. "Lieutenant Grayson told me to bring here the drinks to be checked for poison." I said smiling to the first marine I saw.

The man seemed saddened by the news, but he nodded tiredly: "Leave it here, kid. I'll call someone to bring it inside." he sighed. *Could it be?* I wondered.

Looking at him intently, I took in his defeated demeanor, that together with his less than enthusiast answer pictured something incredible: an honest marine!

A pity that his fellow soldiers chose to fuck with me. I shrugged off whatever fault his existence could have hit me with.

6 hours later

Dropping off the alcohol had been easy, returning to the marine base a couple of hours before dawn was even more simple.

The rabble was giving a truly big ass party, the cacophony was something I would have expected from a pirate 'thanks-fuck-we-are-still-alive' party, but given the corrections I had applied to the different, heavier, drinks, I couldn't exactly blame them. The honest marine from before was nowhere to be seen.

I shrugged, leading my two 'aunties' inside. A black-haired woman named Ella and Helen were the two I had chosen to accompany me in the slaughter: "Remember, leave those asleep for last, they may never wake up again given the shit we've given them."

Their silent nods were all the confirmation I needed. I walked in a wide room that likely worked as the dining hall for the troops, and studied silently my multiple targets: "Find the Transponder Snails room." I reminded the duo behind me.

The Marines were wasted. Clearly, emboldened by the lax and almost hedonistic attitude of their superiors, they had opened all of their reserves: many were slumped against benches, under or over tables, while the ones that still managed to stay awake were singing off tune while swaying heavily on their asses.

I wasn't familiar with the Navy's ranking system, but I knew that in such a backwater place, the garrison was hardly going to be overflowing with people, thusly reducing the need for a long chain of command on the island.

That meant that Lieutenant Grayson was likely the boss of the place, and that the number of drugs we left in the best drinks had likely already killed anyone with the clearance to give orders. Inside the room, I counted 42 marines, 29 of which were slumped, unconscious, or already dead, maybe suffocated in their own vomit.

I brought my right hand to my back and slid my ax out of my red sash. It was going to be messy.

Without any kind of moral justification or higher reasoning, I wanted to kill the marines. That would leave the whole town defenseless, meaning that during the day we could just set sail with a full hull and maybe a cutter or two tied to our tail, just to have some extra cargo available.

I whirlwinded through the fucked up Marines, my free hand falling like a hammer crushed their throats, while the blade of the ax cut through skin, muscle, sinew, and bone like they weren't there. Was it strictly necessary to kill them? No. But it was way easier than only knocking them out or tossing them in their own detention cells. And so I watched myself massacre almost defenseless marines, too fast for their far too predictable movements, too strong for their far too meager resistance. I was a scythe during the harvest.

Even on Saltyhand Island, I didn't deliberately look for civilians, what was the fun in cutting down sheep? The guards hired by merchants were free game, and much more interesting to fight. The Marines chose to put their lives on the line, the guards did the same, civilians chose to stay weak and ignorant of the wide world. Since I chose to put my life on the line the first day I left Swordfish Island, I found more meaning in targeting the first two categories than the third. Not that I was battle-hungry, but what was the point of becoming powerful if that power was without direction? Might as well sharpen my teeth on others that chose to risk their lives on the path of power.

It took me 28 minutes. 42 marines, a few of which had tried to leave the room through doors that I had my companions shut closed.

I snatched a lighter and tossed it over the broken bottles. *That shit ignited in a second.* I noted with a satisfied grin.

I reached one of the closed doors, and I was once more in front of the oak on Swordfish Island. My will was *absolute*.

I breathed slowly, I inhaled, and exploded forward, my fist colliding with the door.

Haki rippled from within, an unfamiliar shiver running around my knuckles: and the door exploded. There hadn't been any room for doubt or afterthought. The hit wouldn't even redden my skin, *I* was punching *it*, not the other way around. I was invulnerable.

I brought back my hand, examining carefully my unblemished skin. It was becoming easier, but it would require years of long work still.

I made my way out of the room and started running towards the sounds of a battle, when I reached the courtyard I was treated to the sight of my crew cornering eight Marines that clearly weren't important enough to be invited to the party. My eyes went over the several bodies on the ground, appreciating the single bullet wounds on each of them. Head, heart, lungs... They had been cheapshotted, likely by the duo I had accompany myself, before the sober marines zeroed in on them just in time for the others to come and help.

I ran towards the marines, flanking them: while I was surpassing the first corpse, I ducked under a stray bullet, picking up a pistol while I was at it. I ran forward, my steps thundering on the ground while I threw my ax forward: while rotating, the flat of its blade intercepted a bullet directed towards Solo. The hit pushed the weapon a bit out of course, so instead of embedding itself in the target's shoulder, it landed on his arm, just after the elbow. It cut through.

The sudden appearance of a flying ax clued in the survivors to my presence, and along with the bloodcurdling scream of pain, it alerted them of my threat level. Not that it helped them.

The pistol I had picked up shot down one, before being thrown against another, impairing his sight for a second: a single second was more than enough. I fell on him like a ton of bricks, a lariat crushing his throat. I used the change in momentum given by the body weighting on my arm to twirl in place, my right hand grabbing the marine by the scruff of his jacket and tossing him against his fellow soldiers.

I charged behind the flying body, the marines stopped shooting because they didn't know their companion was already dead, I ducked towards my left, avoiding a bullet that would have met my hip, rolled forward, dodging narrowly a slash performed with a saber. While righting up, my left hand closed in on an abandoned sword, I swung it upwards with all the considerable strength I could muster, and broke through the hasty parry of yet another NPC, the edge of my blade biting deep into his chest.

The silence and lack of threats to my Color of Observation made me still for a second. I looked around, seeing that with the distraction I had provided, my crew had managed to nail down the survivors.

From when I left the dining hall less than 3 minutes had passed. "Ok, raid all around, but go in pairs and keep your eyes open. Solo and Sarah! To the cells! I want their sea stone cuffs and chains, if there are people licked up, well they are just lucky, free them. Helen and Hella! Since you know the way, steal their transponder snails!" I barked out my orders before turning my back on them and returning inside the base.

"And don't steal alcohol, I don't know what is poisoned and whatnot!" I shouted from over my shoulder while I was running.

I was looking for the Lieutenant's office, given the amount of corruption that ran around the town, I expected to find a load of cash or whatever rare shit the civilians had traded in exchange for protection.

I reached what looked to be the most jumped up the room of the whole base, and given the presence of bookshelves accompanying a single desk furnished with snail transponder, I realized I hit jackpot.

"Aaand there is a half-hidden safe." I noted with glee: it was of roughly 50x50 centimeters as its base and 70 centimeters tall. I had no idea how to break it open, and it needed a combination. I thought briefly how to solve the problem, before smirking: with a grunt, I hurled it out of the window, I would recover it later, maybe the fall from the second floor would be enough to crack it, otherwise, I was sure Solo could go all out with his mace.

After that, I turned, looking around in the room, noticing the stacks of beli orderly piled on a side of the room. My smile threatened to split my cheeks open.

It is great to be a pirate.

Months Later

We had pushed the ship deep onto the sandy beach of yet another nameless and too little to matter island. This one even looked like it was uninhabited, which marked it as a wonderful place for our vacation.

Since Saltyhand Island, when I actually started my career of pillaging and burning, the Sudden Pirates (a name that I picked while drunk after the marine base mess and that stuck somehow) had only found successes. Either pirates too green to be a threat, merchants too stingy to hire proper protection, or marines that didn't expect to be attacked. For some reason, which I suspected was death-of-key-witnesses, we still didn't have a bounty, and I appreciated it: it meant 0 bounty hunters, and that if we wanted to make port in a small village we could, the only tricks necessary were hiding the jolly roger and avoiding going around armed up to the wazoo.

After the last successful raid, we almost unanimously chose to take a short break on the first island available, and do there we were. There was no rush to go to the next island, or to prepare for the Grand Line, nobody in my crew felt like or wished to face the big leagues. I agreed, I was still learning how to adapt to the strangest situations, and until I was sure I could face a Sea King, I would avoid moving forward. I was an unspecified amount of years ahead of the canon events, and so I knew that the One Piece wasn't going anywhere. Besides, I needed to become strong enough to face the lightning logia, so I still had a long way ahead of me. But as I had said before, there was no rush. Ryōshi had been less than amused by being left on the ship during our face off against the marines, but like I had explained multiple times, there

wasn't really a way for him to battle humans able to shoot him mid-air. Not without a devil fruit... *Ok, point of the list of the Great Objectives: To find a useful fruit for Ryōshi to eat.*

We had set up a small camp in the woods nearest to the beach, in a small clearing where the hammocks naturally lulled us to sleep, and I was busy balancing rocks and whatnot.

Sitting cross-legged, pebbles, coins, rocks, sticks, and whatever I happened to land my hands on returned to the growing tower.

"Cap, are you still playing with rocks?" Solo grumbled.

I was startled and my tower of balanced junk trembled, even if it refused to fall, and I removed my blindfold: "Dinner's ready?"

The man nodded slowly: "Sarah is proud to have learned in the kitchen whatever you taught."

I snorted, rising from my position and walking back to the beach, where my small crew had set up a big fire with wood bleached by the waves, that made the flames burn of an eerie green. The girls were singing horribly off tune while drinking heavily, it was a scene that made me smile. I wasn't about to become sappy, and I treated them more like trained pets than friends, but it didn't bother me.

Hours later we reached the hammocks we had set up in the clearing, another small fire set up in the middle, soon enough, I fell asleep to the crackling of the flames and Solo's heavy snore.

Hours later, while I was deeply in Morpheus' realm, the crumbling of my tower of balanced rocks and random junk made me snap open my eyes, just in time to see a dark form slam on my head.

Chains and Storms

Big Ass Timeskip folks, which will be explored through the rest of the story. Have fun!

CHAINS AND STORMS

2 years later

Never have I wished so much for the land, to feel the sweet brown soils under my feet. Sand, even rocks. For the first time, I felt the rage within the sea, as if not only the ocean, but the sky too suddenly had chosen to pound the puny humans who dared defy it into nothingness. Not to teach us a lesson, oh no, whatever we could learn from the demonstration of rage the world was providing us with would be on our shoulders.

I was on the deck, scrubbing it clean when the sky had turned pitch black, swallowed by the endless clouds, a constant gale howling under sudden thunders that shook my bones. Yet, the ship had kept going over the watery fists, that perhaps had the intention of causing enough bruising for the sailors to remember the sea's anger, enough for the sailors to start a sweet serenade of sorrow. But the waves didn't care about casualties, didn't care about who held which title amongst men. Tenryubito, sailor, captain, bodyguard, and slave. All would be swallowed by the heavy, cold water.

On this waters, the sailors tried to prepare for sudden, violent storms, even if they knew it was impossible, it was the nature of the New World, and what could be done to avoid them, often wasn't even remotely enough.

While scrubbing, I felt the eager groaning of the leather whip held by the Enforcer on deck, the constraining feeling of the collar that sat snugly on my throat, it'edge lightly pressing on my skin. Haki couldn't help me, not really. While in the past two years I had somewhat managed to steal moments from the time allotted for sleeping in order to learn, I was far from being Raileygh-level at armament or observation. Sure as hell I wasn't able to rip apart my collar before it killed me, and even if I were, what then? If even I were to survive the bodyguards and other sailors, how would I steer the ship?

While I was sulking over my situation, with no warning, total darkness prevailed as clouds thickened and the sky was stricken, blotting out the moonlight and stars. The wind had arisen to push the once tame waters to choppy ones, which then morphed into mountains of angry waves. The men had struggled to get the sails down and to tie them off. They slipped on the rain-soaked deck. When the others heard and saw how frightened the sailors were, they panicked.

Not the World Noble, oh no, the woman was in her chambers on the ship, uncaring of anything.

The wind slammed the rain into our faces like tiny stones and pushed the hoods back of the raincoats, while my rags whipped against my skin and the chains on my wrists rattled heavily. The ship pressed, first up waves at forty-five degrees, and then crashed down jarring our bones. At one point the waves spun the vessel sideways. We held tightly onto the mast, onto ropes, onto anything. It was difficult to hang on, bodyguards had left their employer under her orders to reel the ship in.

Seeing highly trained men in perfectly ironed suits stumble their way on the wet deck would have been hilarious in any other situation.

The bodyguards slipped and fell out of board, only to try and use Geppou to fly their way back on. But the wind was harsher than anything they had ever experienced before, and it made their attempts futile. So they fell, to hubris and to the world's worst storm that I had ever seen.

The waves had grown so large that the vessel was dwarfed, riding up and down the mighty swelling sea like a child's toy. There was no mercy in the wind, no grace in the water, only wrath and tempest. The air was thick with a briny mist, the deck awash with salty waves.

As the waves rocked the ship almost to a tipping point, everything I was, have been, or ever will be, was concentrated into that tiny string of moments, as if that was the moment in which I was truly born. The wind was strong enough to pick up a man and fling him to the hungry waves. Every sense was maxed out, every muscle already working beyond normal capacity and still, there was no end in sight.

From nowhere, I was reminded of another storm, the other great fight for my life, the one that baptized me and through which I gained my chosen name.

There wasn't any more desolate feeling than the mighty swelling of the ocean beneath one's feet and nothing on the horizon but more of the same. In every direction, there was only grey blue black tempest, laced with white, blends into a horizon of the same hue. There is no rescue from land, sea or air and all anyone could do was give until they are spent. And yet, I remembered myself laughing, roaring my challenge back to both sky and sea, holding on for dear life, while my little boat groaned and cried under the pain it endured to survive the storm.

I blinked, leaving behind the memories of that storm to narrow my eyes against the harsh gales: the second mast must have broken during one of the most recent waves and fell upon a couple of men. Their whole bodies were crushed, their entrails mixing together and splattered all around. Soon another wave climbed its way on the deck and cleaned it.

Since my capture, many times I had hoped that my life was nothing more than a dream turned nightmare, and more than ever I would give anything to wake up, for the storm to be just a recreation of my synapses, another lesson from my subconscious. But there was no waking up from the nightmare. I could taste the salty air, sharp on my skin, feel the harsh and cold bite of the wind, my heart pumping so furiously that I felt it in my throat.

Should I see tomorrow, it will be with a new nightmare... I realized, and like I had done multiple times since my capture, I wondered about Ryōshi's fate. *It is curious, I reflected, that I cared more for him than for the members of the crew.*

If slavery hadn't taught me how little my life mattered, that storm sure did. I had seen my share of bullshit things happen in the New World, hail as big as houses, raining of cats and dogs (literally), weeds that acted as arms for a carnivorous lotus-like plant. But there was nothing of Oda's magic and savage imagination in the storm I was into. Nothing of the colorful world I expected One Piece to be.

Only gray and cold.

Two seagulls were like tossed paper in the harsh wind, which blew so hard I could see ripples in the air itself. There were flashes of white in the black-grey of the sky, which more than ever resembled a roof falling on our heads. Even thunders looked like they were stumbling as they struggled against the gale. Beneath it the sea kept shifting as great, dark mountains, anger in the form of water, turbulent and unforgiving.

Wait a minute. I turned my head, recognizing again the shard of white that were the two seagulls. Well, only one, since the other had been swallowed by a wave with the face of a lion.

Seagulls meant land. I fingered my collar with a pensive expression and eyed the ax embedded into the deck, it was still where the captain had tossed it to cut the sails free in order to avoid the wind dragging the ship for another tango.

Slowly, my mind considered a thought that I was almost too fearful to handle, its sharp edges too clear and crystalline to be considered... *Everyone is busy keeping the ship working.*

I watched again the fewer and fewer men on the ship, the hungry sea was enjoying its banquet, slowly eating its way through the crew. It was like it didn't want to immediately sink the ship, preferring to enjoy its meal.

Another thunder rattled my bones, shaking me from my reverie. "What the fuck am I thinking? The sea isn't..." Then I stopped myself. It could very well be... this sea, or better, this storm, it was alive, hungry and sadistic. It would explain why the waves simply hadn't swallowed us.

I howled in laughter, lowering the second sail and tying it down with a knot that would come undone with a simple pull. I smiled maniacally, unzipping my raincoat and stuffing an indignant owl inside, before zipping it back up and letting the tiller to the whims of the water. I grabbed the rope that secured me to the mast and jumped on the side of the boat. I straightened myself and tensed the rope.

I opened my eyes in time to see my soon to bygone lantern lighten a wall of water. In the moment it hit the starboard of my cutter, I pulled backward, filling my lungs and preparing myself to use each shred of my considerable strength. The boat rolled. My back hit the waters with a slam, and I was down, my heart hammering in my chest. I felt the first crest surpassing me while I was about to be completely upside down.

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *One second.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *Two seconds.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *Three seconds.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *Four seconds.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *I climbed the opposite side of the boat, my feet slamming into the wood like scalpels.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *I was standing on the keel, the rope running from the mast to my side. I pulled on the rope as hard as I could, Four-point five seconds.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *The strength of the wave hammered my face, and I pulled on the rope, leveraging all I had and letting the sea work in favor of my efforts. Five seconds. The boat rolled again, and once more was underwater. I kicked the water, reverse engineering the Sanji's Blue Walk on the fly.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *Five-point five seconds. I was once more on the deck, freeing the secondary sail and rising it in position.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *Six seconds.*

Tu-Thump Tu-Thump Tu-Thump *I grabbed the tiller, and pulled, carefully balancing between where I wanted to go and where the sea was bringing me, rocketing down the side of the veritable mountain of water that had just rightened my boat back again.*

Like one of the waves that swiped the deck, the memory rose to the forefront of my mind and vanished a second later: and

suddenly the choice was very simple.

I grabbed the handle of the simple bearded-ax, unhinging it from the deck. I slid it in my trousers, letting the blade rest out of them, and made my way back inside the ship. *I survived that storm with a cutter and when I was Thirteen.*

In the galley, there was no staying still unless the person was anchored in place, for the "floor" was whatever surface gravity flung me upon. The ship was rolling from one side to the other, I could feel the waves slamming against the hull, ominous creaks resounding all around me.

It was chaos, the few members of the crew whose duties didn't revolve around sailing were running around trying to contain the damage. There was an uncontrolled fire somewhere in the ship. *I conquered my crew at thirteen.*

Swiftly, I ducked my way into the kitchen, there were too many problems for anyone to take notice of the red-head slave walking around. I grabbed a sack and stuck a random number of ration bars in it. They tasted like cardboard, but they would keep me alive. Three canteens of water found their way into the sack, and I continued on my merry way. *I led raids against civilians and marines both.*

Reaching the rooms of the Heavenly Dragon was ridiculously easy. I just walked there, everyone was running around like headless chickens, the ones capable of helping were either on the deck or in the engines' room.

Even her guards had been deployed.

I smiled.

I opened the door without issues, it wasn't locked, why would it? Who would dare wander in there?

Posh didn't quite cut it: the wooden floor was covered by rich carpets, the wide windows that would normally have shown the sea were hidden behind thick velvet curtains of a royal purple.

On my left, there was an aquarium in the shape of a giant fishbowl. It was easily five meters tall, reaching the ceiling of the World Noble's chamber without issues, however, I was more interested by what there was *inside*. On an evershifting floor of white sand, there was a Fishman.

I tilted my head, *A fishwoman then*. I amended my previous statement taking a good look at her tits.

For all of Oda brilliance and imagination, nobody, manga or anime, ever managed to convey the iridescent beauty of the skin of the Fishmen.

It was composed of minute scales, each capturing and reflecting the light in a slightly different way. I could understand why the noble would put it in her 'living room' ready to be exposed to the sunlight.

She was seated cross-legged on the sand, a blank expression on her scales where dark blue with electric blue and white rings, the occasional yellow and blue stripes, with black around her eyes. Frankly, the last detail gifted her a panda-ish appearance. She had a black mop of unruly hair forced in a ponytail at the base of her head, she had a slender build, a respectable B cup with dark nipples, wide hips and long legs, a fack-simile of fins sprouting on her forearms, occasionally contracting. Likely to keep her in place. Her hands were webbed, as were her toes, when she finally opened her eyes, likely only to check again if the ship had already sunk, My eyes were once again attracted to her face.

Her nose was snout-ish, but petite enough to not detract from her beautiful high cheekbones. Her irises were iridescent like her scales, only of an everchanging green.

My eyes then fell on her neck, the collar of slavery lodged between her gills. Noticing her frowning expression, I simply pointed at my own collar, before taking out my ax and oscillating it with what I knew was a bloodthirsty grin. Her expression went from one of slight confusion to one of skeptical surprise. I ignored the fishwoman and walked deeper in the chambers, distractedly taking notice of the tag on the aquarium where there was proudly emblazoned in gold 'Lucky'.

Eh, giving a name to your luck-charm, such an original thought. I sarcastically drawled in my mind. The second room was also the last. Luckily enough, even on a bigass ship the quarters of a noble have to be somewhat restricted. Sure, each room was at least as big as a tennis court, but whatever. She was sleeping. *The motherfucker!* She was easy to recognize, blonde, delicate features, wimpy, like someone who never had to do anything in their life in order to survive.

The ax fell swiftly, my muscles eager to prove themselves to me, my body proud of being still able to fight after the abuse of whips and chains. Skin, muscle, bone, the weapon beheaded the Heavenly Noble without issues, while red blood, *human* blood, sprouted from her neck like a fountain, painting the white sheets, and me, of a much more interesting color.

I moved around the regal room, walking toward the elegant desk from where the Heavenly Noble could see through a wide glass panel, which had heavy shades in plated steel now shut down to protect the room from the fury of the sea. On the polished wood, a twin set of snail transponders was staring at me with flabbergasted expressions. They were awake, even if their transponders were still lodged in their shells. *Curious, but irrelevant.*

Almost taunting me with its chosen position, the key rested over a stack of papers in the first drawer of the desk. I blinked, reigning in the sudden surge of *Burn-Break-Destroy-Shred*, feeling it bubble up from within like a vaporized water from a geyser.

I walked back into the main room with a spring to my step and a wide smile on my face, stopping near the giant fishbowl, knocking my knuckles on it. When the fishwoman inside it turned to face me, I raised the key and pointed at my collar-free neck, before gesturing her to move as far as me as she could.

I returned the ax to its place on my side, feeling it slide slick with blood against my skin, and raised my empty hand in a fist: it came easily, *free-strong-Invincible* rose from within, gleaming black over my hand and easily shattering the reinforced glass.

I jumped aside, avoiding the small waterfall carrying sharp shards of glass over the floor.

The fishwoman was dragged out with the flow of rushing water, but as soon as she was beyond the confines of the bowl, she was on her feet eyeing me warily. I glanced again, measuring her the best I could.

"I am an emperor angelfish-Fishman." She started, raising her hand expectantly in my direction, causing me to grin. I tossed her the key, which she caught swiftly.

"I am a human." I answered while she freed herself with deft fingers, causing her to scrunch her nose in distaste.

Her collar was tossed in a corner of the room, then she walked back into the bedroom: "Chihiro is my name."

I followed her, words that I didn't think of for a long time climbing to the surface: "I'm Davi D. John." the old pride in my identity climbing up. Somehow, with the mark of the Heavenly Noble burned over my skin, the signs of the whip on my back, the scarring of the chain on my wrists, I found myself smiling while the fishwoman plucked the less gaudy clothes from a wardrobe. Then another titanic wave made me stumble, and I suddenly remembered that I had a purpose when I came inside the ship, and that my objective had been reached. I walked back to the corpse of the Tenryubito, distractedly plucking off rings and earrings, my old greed raising its fiery head.

We climbed together out of the ship, moving fast enough that the ever reducing number of personnel either didn't notice or realized that there were other pressing matters to take care of. Once back on the deck, I looked around, noticing that there were only three persons left, in their once ironed suits. "So, how do we survive the storm?" She asked with a huff, her voice sounding strangely subdued.

I looked at her with a skeptical expression, before turning my eyes toward the stormy sea. "Swimming through the storm? I'm a Fishman, not a Sea king." She crossed her arms with an enraged expression: "Did you free me only to have us die torn asunder by the currents?"

I scratched my head sheepishly: "So you can't swim around with me in a barrel?"

Her scathing look answered my last, hopeful plan, causing me to sigh. "Well," I said while sliding the ax in my hands from my ragged trousers "I'll need you to clean up the galley, turn the engines to their top speed, and keep water out of the breach in the hull."

She eyed me with a heavy frown: "And what will you be doing?" she clearly disliked my giving orders like I actually expected her to carry them on. "I'll kill the mooks." I stated, "Then I'll take the helm after having freed the secondary sail."

I did it once. My thoughts thundered in my head louder than the rumbling sky, while I started running toward the nearest NPC my eyes zeroing on his tie. *I had a blindfold on the last time, didn't I?*

White Day

So, the death threats for the timeskip were *really over the top*. I mean, its fucking fiction, grow up. Those responsible have been signaled and I'll go on. And maybe, since so many got uppity and forgot that their opinions do not matter, I'll toss in flashbacks and more time skips. Maybe they'll cause an ulcer in those who, and I quote: *'cannot stand my work'*. Which is a win on my books, since I *really* get pissy when I'm told what to do. But then again, I can't be bothered to change what I write based on threats. So I'll go on like I fucking want.

Update 11-August, I didn't like how the next chapter ended up, feeling it wasn't paced right to contain just... well, I merged inside this chapter what was meant to be the following one, going from 4k words to more than 9k, and I closed it with a final I actually like. So, enjoy!

WHITE DAY

I took a deep breath, starting my steady walk towards the nearest man. Being free from the collar and chains made me... *happy*. Ignoring the danger of the situation I was in was almost easy, the waves, the pelting rain, the almost cracking ship... I felt once more like I could face the world: like I could challenge it and have an actual chance of fighting back when it threw at me its curveballs.

I didn't really know enough to regulate the sails in order to capture a favorable gale over another, so my solution was to let them all unfurl, and hope that either the winds would be somewhat constant, or that my Observation Haki would be enough to give me some intuition in regards of how to steer the vessel I was taking over with the help of my Fish-woman minion. Oh, she would refuse my classification of her role, but it wasn't like I actually cared.

On the Heavenly Dragon's Ship, whose name I couldn't be bothered to remember since I was once more free to do as I pleased with myself and the world around me, there were three kinds of humans: slaves, specialists in a particular field necessary for proper sailing, and guards. The New World wasn't something that could be tackled with a half-assed crew, but luckily, my previous owner refused said obvious idea. So, while undoubtedly the guards could put up some kind of fight while back in Paradise, at least long enough to stall an eventual attacker long enough for an Admiral to come to the rescue, they were vastly in over their heads when it came to facing someone like me.

I had a vague idea of what my limits were before I got captured, while the strange biology typical of the One Piece-verse had kept my muscles from atrophying, I didn't exactly know what my years of secret experimenting with Haki had blossomed into. So when I was close enough to the first guard, the black sheen over my knuckles didn't come as a surprise, what was mind-boggling, was the fact that the Armament Haki kept *rippling* beyond my grasp, bleeding over the ax I was wielding. My will was absolute.

My upward swing was too fast for the guard to follow, and the surprising instinct that brought him to raise his arm in defense didn't stop the black edge of my weapon from cutting him apart. Like a knife through water, I didn't meet any resistance, and the guard fell on the deck in two distinct thumps. For a second I stilled, marveling at the ease through which I had killed him, before resuming my path towards the helm of the ship. Carefully balancing myself, ignoring the pelting rain, raging gales, and the whole *hungry* feel of the storm around me, I dismissed the other two guards, who clearly were still trying to find a way to not die on the deck. Dragging us outside of the storm had priority over my natural propensity towards manslaughter.

I slammed the ax into the wooden planks, anchoring me while a wave tried to swipe me off the deck, and soon enough I was holding the silver handles of the helm. With a last laugh, I closed my eyes and let myself truly observe my surroundings. Like the negatives on an old camera roll, reality was pictured in my head in unnatural shades of white, blue, and black. With my eyelids down, my vision was no longer limited to the natural human width, and I knew instinctively how the ax I abandoned behind me was rolling from a side of the deck to the other, I knew how the raindrops were bouncing off each other and over my skin. But Observation Haki was far more than that. Like Usopp had managed to aim to something he couldn't actually see, I saw that the fire in the galley had been put down, I saw Chihiro, my fishwoman companion, use her unholy strength to force planks of wood to cover holes in the hull, while other desperate people hammered nails to hold back the hungry and unmerciful waters. I saw the veritable mountains of water climbing one over another, crashing randomly, following contrasting currents, I saw the mast that had been ripped away before my venture into the Heavenly Dragon's chambers swirling around the ship like a planet bound to its sun. I knew, and saw, and understood.

Like I did once on board of a simple cutter, I tilted the helm and led us to ride out the storm.

My dreams had been black and without meaning, deep and heavy, it had let me go only after a strenuous fight on my part. As soon as I properly recognized myself as alive and awake, I remembered the last thing I saw, and I instinctively stilled. With my eyes still closed, I focused on my surroundings, what limited Observation Haki skill I held filling my head with details I wouldn't have been able to properly grasp otherwise: the familiar rolling motions of my apparently unconscious body placed me on a vessel, the rancid smell of blood, urine, and shit, I was inside of an enclosed space. Coupled with the cool weights on my wrists and ankles, I was held as a prisoner in a hull.

My right eyelid peeled open of a fraction, and I tried to take in my surroundings. The pitch black environment, along with what I felt was a not inconspicuous bump on my forehead led me to close it again with a sigh, returning to my other

senses in order to understand what I had to plan in order to get free. The How and Why can wait. I decided quickly, pushing back the thoughts on who of my crew had wither failed his guard duty or had deliberately betrayed us.

My awareness swept the inside of the hull, not picking up on any familiar presences: My crew isn't here. The brief instant of panic was summarily ignored and I returned to my considerations: Solo wouldn't have sold me. So I was likely the only one captured... alive. Either I was the last alive member of my crew, and in that case I had been targeted specifically, or the rest of the crew was alive, involved or not in my capture, it didn't really matter. For all their good will and distinct, if the ones responsible had managed to subdue me, the rest of them stood no chance whatsoever in rescuing me. Even if they were to make an honest attempt at it. And given their previous track when dealing with the one responsible for offing their captain... Well, I shouldn't expect any help.

Observation Haki was most useful and distinctive in a combat situation, and while I was surely fired up enough to fight for my freedom, passive reckoning wasn't among my skills. I flexed my muscles one after another, looking for damages of any kind, without finding any. They did a clean work in knocking me out, the only wound I feel is apparently the bump on my head. Simple chains weren't going to hold me prisoner, I knew that. I was way stronger than your vanilla human, and that was without taking Armament Haki into consideration: I rose to a seated position and forced my bleary eyes to open, I flexed my arms, and with a heavy grunt I snapped them apart, the metal rings clinked heavily, almost bending, but did not break. I growled, immediately recognizing that my effort was doomed to failure: Haki it was.

"Awake, are you?" a rough voice caused my eyes to open and look for its source, I turned towards the stairs that led to the deck, in time to see a blurring shape slamming a baton on my face, throwing me back into the realm of unconsciousness.

The squawking of seagulls was the thing that brought me back from the land of unconsciousness. Beyond my closed eyelids, I felt the unforgiving light of an uncaring sun. I kept my eyes scrunched close, trying to postpone the inevitable. The memories I visited while asleep didn't allow me to rest peacefully.

Seriously, of all my memories, I lived again those? I sighed, rolling my shoulders in the sand. Physically, I was comfortable, but the seagulls had taken me away from my dreams of memories. Beyond my closed eyelids, I felt the unforgiving light of an uncaring sun. I kept my eyes scrunched close, trying to postpone the inevitable. With a tired sigh, I dragged my hand... Sand? Why there's sand under my fingers? I frowned and I dragged my hand over my chest, until I found my own face, my fingers shielding me from the unmistakable presence of the sun over me. I groaned tiredly when the sun's heat made me uncomfortable and slowly forced my torso to stand straight instead of sprawled on the sand. Even if it was comfortable.

In the meantime, under the irregular squawks of the hated birds, I recognized the regular crashing of the waves. Sea? Reluctantly, I opened my eyes by a fraction, gritting my teeth when the sunlight proved itself far too harsh. When my eyes adapted, I was met with the sight of an almost cloudless sky, a single, grey nimbus sitting still over me. Even if, unfortunately, it wasn't shielding me from the sun, which was cheerfully slamming on my fucking face. I moved my head, taking in my surroundings: I was sprawled on a beach made of white sand, there was no land I could see anywhere, only broken pieces of a ship that likely got destroyed by a storm while out at sea. Oh, yeah, the storm. I lamely remembered.

Guiding the ship through the storm had been... instinct, and I managed to keep it afloat the battered vessel far longer than it should have been possible, but while speeding down from one of the tallest waves, crashing against jagged rocks hidden just beneath the waters had been unavoidable, I could remember being thrown on the water, hitting it with my face and blanking out. I had fallen off the deck so fast that the sea felt as hard as marble when I crashed through it, so my headache was somewhat understandable.

"So you survived." a voice drily noted, causing me to sit up and look for the source: "Surprisingly though, for a human."

I blinked slowly, bringing into focus the image of the Emperor Angelfish-Woman that was looking at me with a somewhat unimpressed expression on her face. "Chihiro, was it?" I croaked, remembering the name of my fellow ex-slave: "Where are we?"

She sniffed somewhat disdainfully at my question, before gesturing in a grand way towards the tropical-like environment behind me. Once I turned my back on the sea, I eyed warily the unbelievably thick jungle that stood almost as a wall where the white sand of the beach finished. Palms, Eucalyptus, at least it somewhat matches the humid heat. For all my luck, I could have stranded on an island with man-eating mutant flora. "So we don't know where we are, I take it?"

Chihiro shrugged: "It's the New World, we could be anywhere, I heard there are also randomly moving islands, without at last a Log Pose, we have no direction."

I turned back in her direction, raising an eyebrow questioningly: "You don't seem remarkably distressed over being lost in the deadliest sea of them all." It was a curious way to react to being stranded, I knew that I would be freaking out if not for the desensitization given to me by my own origins, "Besides, a direction for where? It's not like we planned to roam this sea." If she had a plan, I was eager to hear it, but she clearly mistrusted my race, and with reason, so I feared that direct questions would have clammed her up.

"I'll find a solution, sooner or later." she started walking along the beach, keeping the sea on her left so that the sun could glare only on her back: "For now, I am free and content. These waters are filled with fish I can hunt with little difficulty, and while I'm not a fan of sushi, I can make do along with algae and coconuts for a long time."

I scampered to follow her, instinctively knowing that sticking together with my fellow ex-slave was the wisest thing I could do for the time being: "You have no problem at all with eating fish while being a fish-woman?"

She stopped briefly to toss me an annoyed glare: "Fishman is the name of my race, human, I am Fishman, not a fish-woman. And why would I have problems with eating fish? from what I recall, humans eat other mammals without issues."

I conceded mentally her point, recognizing that I had been misnaming her race the whole time in my head, but I didn't really care enough to admit it out loud: "I hadn't considered it. Do Fishmankind have vegetarians among them? People that only eat algae or fruit and vegetables grown in greenhouses?"

"Why would you even care about it?" She asked with an exasperate tinge to her tone, bringing me to actually realize what I had been asking about.

"I may be a bit disoriented, maybe I am dehydrated, maybe I hit my head when we stranded. We stranded, right?" I spoke slowly, carefully taking note of a possible unwilling slurring of my words, but with relief, I found that I was speaking just fine.

"Yeah, you crashed us over one of the lumps of jagged rocks near the island, I was finishing patching up an area when the ship just stopped moving, the impact threw me along the hull, I almost died by the way, well done." Her tone was increasingly sarcastic, but since my last memory had been being shot off the deck and into the raging waters, it was safe to assume that she somehow had fished me back to safety.

"Thank you for having dragged me on the island... How did you manage, by the way? You told me you couldn't swim in a storm." My curiosity was a hard thing to quench, I knew as much. *Maybe she has a secret form like the Minks? After all, the Fishmen are the sea-friendly version of the animals on the giant Elephant. It's not so out of the realm of possibilities.*

"We fell in a sort of bay of the island, close enough to the shore that I could hear it, dragging your useless weight around didn't inconvenience me all that much at that point." her dry answer brought me back to the conversation, making me acutely aware that we survived only thanks to a shitload of luck. *I was lucky, lucky to save a Fishman on my way towards freedom, lucky to have her stick around, lucky to have kept the ship together long enough to reach a place close to a shore of some kind, lucky, lucky, lucky...*

I clearly needed to step up my game, for all my skills, I clearly wasn't equipped to deal with the shit that the New World casually threw around. Sure, I had been given a vessel that was standing on its last legs, without a crew to man it, in the middle of a storm, so there were more difficulties than normal, but excuses wouldn't keep me alive: "Wait, you said you heard the shore?" I returned to the extremely interesting part of her brief speech. *Does she know Haki?* I wondered.

"Yeah, what, do you think I can see anything in the water? let alone in the middle of the night and during a storm?" She rolled her eyes: "It's not actually hearing, but every Fishman can feel when there is a big body in the waters near them, it's the evolution of the lateral line system, that is a... collection of cells on the side of fishes that allows the fish to determine the direction and rate of water movement. The fish can then gain a sense of its own movement, that of nearby predators or prey, and even the water displacement of stationary objects." She explained with a tone that made clear how much of an idiot I was.

"I know about the Lateral Line." I said almost offended, "But..."

"I am tired of hearing your voice." She cut me off, and with an annoyed grunt, I shut up, looking for either clues on how the fuck hightail back to Paradise, or at least a spark of inspiration that would lead me to build any kind of crew directly in the New World. *What am I going to do? Better yet, what do I want to do? Getting free was my only objective for so long... I feel lost now that I have reached it.*

Then the memory of silent wings and sharp talons came back to my mind. *I wonder where Ryōshi ended up.* If nothing else, I was sure he had nothing to do with my capture, treachery wasn't among an owl's skillset.

After a few hours of walking without any clear objective beyond realizing the rough dimensions of the island we were stranded on, I couldn't help but become curious and curiouser about my companion. To have her offer any kind of information, I had to give something in return, so I once more introduced myself: "I am Davi D. Jhon, I was a pirate captain back in the Blues, I've been captured roughly two years ago..."

She snorted: "A captain, really?" her voice thick with skepticism: "You are at worse 17 years old, you can't honestly expect me to believe you were a captain at 15 years old, weak Blue or not." she shook her head in a way that almost looked... amused? "If you want to know about me, you

"I've been captured on Sabaody, I am a botanist, I wanted to study the sap from the grooves, for... reasons." She cut off her explanation crudely, stiffing up and suddenly dragging me by my arm into the woods, causing me to become much more alert to my surroundings, but it wasn't sight or Haki to warn me something was amiss, it had been my nose: "I smell fire and smoke." I announced lamely.

"No shit, human." Chihiro hissed back, creeping forward through the undergrowth.

I crouched down and quickly followed her, carefully analyzing my surroundings: we had been moving uphill for a while, the sandy beach had turned into a rocky terrain 500 meters before in an almost too clean line that screamed 'Manmade'. As soon as we reached the top of the crest, we could see that just beneath us, hidden amidst the tall walls of the creek that brought out to the sea, there was a marine base. We were around 100 meters over the level of the sea, and from the hidden port rose a couple of towers that were half dug in the sides of the fjord-like creek, they easily surpassed 60 meters of height, and stood like guardians over the empty port. All around there were Marine flags, with G-7 printed under the

symbol of justice, proudly fluttered in the wind. Only a few men moved in a specific pattern on the fortifications, clearly watching out for possible assaults from the sea. I counted less than a dozen, but it didn't really matter, since the only way for a possible enemy to assault the base was from the sea.

My eyes, however, were glued to the port, the *empty* port. From our vantage point, we could see that there wasn't a single ship waiting to be stolen: that meant two things. Either the base was only a radevouz point for Marine Fleets roaming the New World, or more likely, the fleet stationed on the island was all put at sea. I quietly shared my conclusions with Chihiro, who nodded absent-mindedly before whipping her head to glare at me: "We are *not* taking over the base."

I blinked, outwardly denying that she had just read my mind and explaining my reasoning: "We're marked by Tenryubito, we can live only as either Pirates or Revolutionaries. We're stranded without money, weapons, ship or food. We obviously need to abandon the area clearly controlled by marines, but the whole island likely hosts something the Government is keeping a close eye on."

When she tiredly nodded, meaning that she acknowledged my reasons, I went ahead with my conclusions: "There are likely prisoners we can spring out, they can help with the takeover, say what you want, but if these people are either born or reached the New World, they're strong enough to not be useless. We recover our strength, amass resources, and prepare the base's defenses to ambush the ships once they return, once we've done that we put together a crew and leave before someone actually strong is sent to kill us, either from the Emperor that wants this island or the Government."

"It's a dumb plan, how do you know someone actually strong isn't already in the base? Your reasoning about the strength of prisoners applies to the marines as well." she objected, her hand clamping on my wrist to stall me from creeping forward.

"We're in the New World, the sea, and what is under or over it, is much more dangerous than whatever the men have to face only to keep the base working: the strong marines like vice admirals are on the ship to try and guarantee the survival of the not-so-strong humans in their ranks." I shrugged, in my head it made sense: "Besides, it's not like we can live on this island without getting caught sooner or later, this is our best shot. We may as well sleep for a few hours now, we'll have better chances if striking with the cover of the night." Once I said my piece, I sprawled on the ground, the fatigues from my last exceptional act of survival finally catching up with my body, and making me fall soundly asleep.

The clinking of chains had faded like white noise in the back of my head, if it happened for sheer habit or simply because that way it was easier for me to ignore the gravity of my circumstances, I couldn't tell, and I didn't really care to. My eyes could make out my surroundings, but they were blurry, unimportant, it was like a dream. The colors, while as bright as any LSD-induced trip could make them, failed to capture my interest, and bled one over another, in a meaningless circle that was the soundtrack of my feet moving on the grassy ground. I distractedly recognized what was happening, I had seen it once before after all, but I couldn't find it in myself to care. My own thoughts seemed to slip off the tip of my fingers, even if there was a sharp sensation from time to time. I couldn't tell if it came from my body or my addled mind. I remembered the long period of dreamless sleep like an old man could remember his infancy, I knew it had happened, but clearly it was outside of my control, I knew there had been events that led to it, I knew that it had as a consequence my actual circumstances, but I couldn't figure out the connection among those elements in my mind.

I remembered being led by tugs on a leash, an insistent, if light, sequence of pressure against my neck, following it was natural, resisting only augmented the pressure, and I disliked the sensation. My surroundings didn't matter, since the center of my dream was walking forward, but like every dream, at some point, you start to wake up. It was a gradual thing, like slowly regaining the feel of a limb that had fallen asleep because you slept over it, or like the tide slowly climbing up the shore.

My eyes saw my surroundings, and I could actually ascribe a context to the images in my head, as well as understanding the sounds that my ears picked up: "... your dream-walk makes the job so much easier Maddy dearest." a sickly sweet voice caused my hair to stand up, a shiver running down my spine. I looked at my hands, seeing the bands of steel around my wrists and noting the strange beige-colored bead at the height of my veins.

I blinked, looking around and finally noticing that I was seated in an iron cage inside of a warehouse, other people of all races and ages randomly placed around me, each had his own cell. What the fuck? Was my prominent thought at the time, I was inside of a slaver's warehouse? Just... how? My last memory had been... I've been captured! I realized with a low growl, springing to my feet and grabbing the bars of the door of my cell.

In that moment, everything turned hazy once more, and I happily seated back in the back of my small cell, eager to nap some more.

I awoke from my dream made of memories only once the sun went down. The purple orange light that colored the horizon had failed to keep back the darkness of the night: it was time we acted.

We crept over the edge of the small fjord, our hands and feet tentatively finding their way down the cliff. It was a slow-going thing, since we could use only touch to determine our path toward the objective. I didn't want to start using my Haki until the unavoidable fight, I never tested how long I could go with Observation Haki at 100%, so I had no actual idea of the side effects. I remembered that Luffy had a time limit of sorts while in gear fourth, and it left him weak. I couldn't afford it.

Any form of light, even if Chihiro and I had one, would be easily spotted from the other side of the base, so even having a torchlight would have been useless. After what I esteemed had been an hour-long descent, we were close enough to the

tower to jump down. Eyeing carefully the forms lit by the lamp, the Fishman and I dropped on the marines: I fell upon the group silently, but in the moment my right foot crashed upon the skull of a mook, everyone turned in my direction, one of them already had the rifle pointed at me. I kept moving, my heart thundering in my chest. While the head under my foot was halfway towards the ground, I bent on my right, my arm falling like a ton of bricks on the juncture between neck and shoulder of another marine, making him crumble without a sound. At the same time, my left leg had lashed out, my heel crushing the nose of another man.

In the second and a half necessary to quietly take down the three marines, Chihiro had broken two necks with quick snaps of her far too strong wrists, while she executed what I could tell was a textbook worthy move of Fishman-karate, her open palm at the end of an arm thrust in the direction of a woman, causing blood to rupture out of his nose, ears mouth and eyes.

When the head of the first man I had fallen upon impacted against the ground, I rolled on my right, keeping myself from stopping to evaluate the situation, I rose to my feet a second later, when the leftover marines realized their predicament and started trailing their weapons on me and Chihiro. It was funny to think that less than four seconds before I was still hooked to the side of the small cliff.

I tugged at the closest arm, my momentum working together with the surprise of the sudden attack to unbalance the man and successfully pulling him in the line of fire. My right arm whipped upwards, slamming my punch in the unprotected armpit of my human shield. While he was crumbling to the ground, my left leg straightened with a snap, my toes pivoting on the ground allowing my right leg to move in a high sweep that hit the wrist of a man that was about to shot me strong just enough to delay his trigger-happy finger.

In the night, the white light given off by the lamps gave the situation an overtone of theatre I appreciated, given the almost choreographed way Chihiro and I were dispatching the small team on top of the tower, so I was able to ignore the anguished scream of the man that won the bullet meant for me. I kept moving.

It was almost thoughtless, I moved in a counterclockwise circle while my companion walked toward the stairs that led to our position, ready to intercept a possible new hostile. Taking down mook after mook felt nostalgic, had I oversold the skills of marines in the New World? It was... exhilarating and underwhelming at the same time. The first because I was having fun in organizing my attacks in order to cause a reaction that I could almost always predict and counter with minimal movements, the latter because... there was no way to put it. Too easy? Not challenging enough?

I bent out of melee attacks, using the limbs I could grasp as leverage to turn mooks into meat shields, twisting my wrists in order to use their own weapons against them, I spun, ducked, punched and kicked in moves that were part of a dance without rhythm, a flow full of obstacles. While I was moving, I realized that the music of the song I was playing was dictated by the attackers, the crescendo of a cocked back fist here, the taut violing string of a katana swinging down on me, the light drumming of panic and rage all around me.

And yet, it had been a silent thing. the only sounds to leave the top of the tower had been grunts and screams strangled before they could raise any alarm. Truly, their attempt to gurgle out a warning reminded me more of a barely held back laugh than anything else. The ones with a snail transponder had been taken down by Chihiro, leaving me with the lower-ranked ones.

Nine seconds from the first contact with the enemy, we had subdued them. I quickly dropped my tattered clothes, Ignoring the blandly disgusted expression I received by the Fishman at my side, who had already changed. It wouldn't allow us to pass an inspection, but if marines were to catch us with the corner of their eyes or in the surveillance system based on snail-transponders, it would buy us precious seconds. The shoes I ended up with were too big to be actually comfortable, but there was nothing to it. I donned baggy white pants over my underwear, a couple of pistols resting at the small of my back while another two stood in proper harnesses on a belt that was necessary to keep up my trousers. Over the white shirt, I secured another couple of belts, with another three pistols secured to my chest, with the third, last harness crossing them, I had a way to hold a sabre to my side. I completed the illusion with one of their white caps, where I collected my red mane, and I was ready to go, reassured even by the small switchblade that had found its way in one of my pockets.

"Are you a marksman?" The Fishman casually whispered while we were walking down the stairs, causing me to shook my head silently. I was neither a gun or a sword guy, but if the standard of the men we were about to face was dictated by the marines on the roof, every bullet would be a lethal hit among enemy ranks, and while I had never wielded a sabre before... let's be honest, swords were cool, and I didn't have an ax that I could reliably use.

We moved at a leisurely pace for being two vastly outnumbered infiltrators, but running would be loud, or would bring us in the wrong direction before we could figure out where we were going, so there wasn't a batter plan than subduing floor after floor. Sooner or later, we would figure out where the prison was, and so we could have a proper direction. We quietly subdued another two squads of marines, their perplexity given by seeing two people with their uniform where they shouldn't be buying us enough time to approach them without having them give the alarm.

Then, maybe too soon, it ended, and something hit me. I felt it coming, but I couldn't move out of the way quickly enough, so I simply *folded* on my left. I felt my muscles relax, my body thinning, and the blow went wide. *Kamie is one of the most undersold techniques among the six the Chyper Pol is so proud of.* My attacker hesitated for a second, looking just as confused as I was, but it gave me time to regain my bearings, and my haki clad fingertips plunged mercilessly into the throat of the katana-wielding man. "What was that?" Chihiro asked with a visible frown, while her arms were clamped in a submission hold over the neck of another marine.

I was about to answer when I considered that I could gain something out of our chat: "What was the open palm thrust that killed that marine back on the roof?" I asked feigning ignorance. She huffed, dropping her dead marine and resuming our

walk towards the stairs that led to the next floor: "Fishman Karate is a martial art that is practiced by my race."

Which explains nothing. "The Kamie is one of six techniques practiced by some humans." I answered in kind, like hers, my answer didn't explain shit about the technique, and I added: "I can show you later, if you show me your karate."

"I'm hardly a master, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to teach it." She sniffed, recognizing my attempt to obtain an equal exchange and swiftly refusing it. I shrugged, it had been worth a try. Once we were on the fourth floor from the top of the tower, we found a rough plan of the base, listing the emergency exits in case of attack or whatever disaster befell the island. Then I face-palmed: "We're two idiots, Chihiro."

"Speak for yourself, human." she quickly retorted, but there was no bite in her tone, indicating that she realized that human or not, I couldn't care less about her race, and even belonging to the same species of the Tenryubito didn't make me one of those responsible for her recent enslavement. It was a surprisingly intelligent position to take, even more if one were to consider that she had been free for less than two days. Originally, I had thought that sticking with me had been a choice dictated by necessity, or desperation, but our verbal jousting, as well as the defined but not overbearing ego she sported, made me realize that she wasn't a mook-level of stupid. I stopped for a single second, considering my thoughts about my companion: *I like her company.* I honestly didn't despise her, which was a novelty in this life of mine, even back with my first crew, I considered Solo and the others like well-trained pets, nothing more.

"What are you going to do after we succeed?" I suddenly asked: "I mean, what are your goals, what do you want to do?"

"I'll think about it once we reach that point, it's no use worrying myself about it now." She frowned, considering my words: "This brought you to say that we're idiots?" She asked arching an eyebrow, referring to my previous statement.

That brought me back to my first revelation: "Ah, right. No, but I realized that we could interrogate a marine about the location of the holding cells, it would be faster than simply looking over the whole base."

She blinked, considering my words, before scowling, clearly conflicted about admitting, even in her own head, that my reasoning wasn't wrong: "Let's capture the next group instead of killing them."

Half an hour later, we had successfully discovered the location of the holding cells, and we were making our way there while trying to keep our infiltration off the grid. Turns out that if you threaten to kill a fellow soldier, his companion is more than willing to tell you not-sensitive information: in a surprisingly not-completely-dumb spark of logic, whoever planned the base realized that keeping the cells as far as possible from the port was a safety measure onto itself. And with that knowledge in mind, once we had reached a height of two stores above the ground, Chihiro and I opted to avoid following the stairs and just jumped out of a window.

Since the proper beginning of the night, it had already been at least a couple of hours, and the G-7 base was a big one, we had a big area to cross while remaining undetected, and that was only until they found out the corpses we left in the tower. Without considering the two towers half dug inside the fjord's walls and the warehouses that littered the port hidden behind thick concrete walls upon which rested an intimidating number of cannons, the G-7 base almost looked like a city. Or at least, it resembled a conglomerate made out of three city blocks, each named following the alphabet, with each building numbered from 0 to 7. *If nothing else, I can respect their naming skills, while not original, they allow every new soldier to learn fast his destinations, while not giving away their role to anyone else.*

Even so, Chihiro and I hadn't taken long to discover that the holding cells were situated in an underground section of the block B. The 'city-blocks' themselves did look somewhat imposing, all made of solid concrete painted with the Marine's colors, with windows regularly spaced on each floor and wide security doors placed under a serial number. The roads were in clay, and cut squarely among the buildings, with the regular displacements of street lamps and snail transponders for surveillance, Chihiro and I were aware that the apparently tight security wouldn't leave us much margin for errors.

We hurried among the shadows, using the lamps more to pinpoint the presence of marines than to actually see our path. When we could safely take out a group, we did so, neither of us having concerns with killing those that supported the Tenryubito. The bodies were half-assedly hidden, just to buy us time when people started looking for missing marines. Given our observations from the top of the cliff, the rough map we had seen and the testimony of a soldier who had been *kindly* encouraged to be truthful, we knew that a scenario in which we reached the cells before being discovered didn't exist.

"B-4, we're here." I whispered from my crouched position behind a corner, my eyes evaluating the guardroom placed in front of our access point.

"You do realize that only weak people can be constrained by regular marines, yes? Whoever we manage to get out will be an idiot who is overconfident in the abilities of his Devil Fruit, mooks, or cripples." Chihiro placed her webbed hand over my shoulder, spying carefully the human shapes that we could distinguish from the windows.

I sighed, holding back my sarcasm when I offered my rebuttal: "Ok, first, if you saw any issue with my plan you should have talked earlier, now it's way too late. Two, a single idiot who is overconfident in the abilities of his Devil Fruit, mook, or cripple is pretty useless against a whole base. But all together? With hostages?" I pointed at the marines stationed near our position: "If nothing else they'll buy us time to sweep through the enemy ranks, besides, I remember that the G-6 has 600 members stationed, so in the worst of cases we'll need to face 700 humans. But with the rather conspicuous absence of ships from the port, I'd say that we'll only need to take down 300 marines, and the strongest ones will likely be out at sea." I was annoyed by her sudden getting cold feet, but mostly because of her condescending tone when she tried to shot down my plan exactly when I was about to enact it.

Suddenly, a horn resounded in the night, the Snail Transponders acting as speakers started blurting out a loud message: "Code 4! Flagship returning with wounded, Hostiles hot on their tail! Everyone is to be battle-ready and reach his position! I repeat: Code 4! Flagship returning with wounded, Hostiles hot on their tail! Everyone is to be battle-ready and reach his position!"

By the time the message had been repeated once, a veritable river of marines flooded the streets, while rolling shutters made of what looked like steel covered every window, sections of the road lifted themselves creating a system of barricades that faced in the port's direction. "We'll face 300 of them in the *worst* case?" Chihiro hissed at my side, dragging me back up the secondary alley.

"Well, it seems like they're distracted, the plan stays the same, we'll need people to hide amongst if we want to get out of here." I dismissed her worries. *Not like I can do anything else anyway.*

"They're mobilizing everyone!" she insisted: "You're not getting it, are you? We're in the new world, what do you think has the power to make a whole marine base to run around like headless chickens?"

My mind stalled for a second, recognizing what she was implying before I managed to resume thinking: "It changes nothing, if we free the prisoners, we'll show them we're not marines, we'll show that we're stronger than the prisoners and maybe worthy of being recruited!"

"Recruited!" She repeated after me: "Recruited! It's likely a *Fucking Emperor!* And you're hoping to save us by letting us being recruited?"

"If we run away and hide, maybe we won't be found and the emperor will go away with its crew after sacking the island." I quickly explained myself: "If we're found, we'll be seen with mistrust and as such killed as an afterthought." when she stopped dragging me towards the end of the block to listen to me, I resumed my explanation: "If we show our mettle and it's Kaido, we get a chance. If it's Big Mom, she might try to *collect* a couple of ex-slaves, with Whitebeard we might even be welcome among his own, and Red-hair... I've heard he's a reasonable kind of guy."

Chihiro was left speechless: "Reasonable...?" but she hadn't even the force to whisper it: "You're hoping there is a wounded member of their crew in the cells?" she tried to reconstruct my reasons.

"Or someone they want, I don't know, but I'm not able to build us a ship capable to withstand this sea out of coconut trees, and I don't want to be left here waiting for a miracle that won't come." I tried to convince her again. *And since Jimbe hasn't joined Big Mom yet, she'll want Chihiro among the people of her batshit-crazy dream.* I simply thought the last reason, but it was a valid one nonetheless. I knew that being ex-slaves would **LIKELY** buy us some respite with Whitebeard or Shanks, and frankly, I was out of ideas. The New World was *ruled* by those four, even the Shichibukai here had the protection or at least the tentative friendship of an Emperor, like Doflamingo and Mihawk.

"If it's not an Emperor, is someone who sails under their flag..." Chihiro nodded in my direction, realizing that we really didn't have another option.

After the last group of marine had passed us, we shot through the road and reached the abandoned guardroom, wincing at the imposing security doors bolted in place. "Look for keys or something similar." I told Chihiro while I walked up to the steely frame of the doors, tossing my white marine hat over a Snail Transponder placed to observe the access point to the prison. I soon found it, and cursed my luck, there was a combination pad coupled with what looked like a palm scanner. *How the fuck does technology work in this world? It's fucking insane! How do they not have assault rifles or Nuclear Bombs?*

"Never mind." I told Chihiro, eyeing the hinges embedded in the walls. Erasing the cacophony of the base outside, I returned to when I had punched that oak back on Swordfish Island, running through the conflicts that I had faced since then, easily finding my resolve, willing myself to overcome everything that stood in my path. Without hesitating, I punched the door.

A deafening *clang* resounded in the relatively small room, the steel beneath my hand had crumpled like a sheet of paper, falling in torn pieces on the floor and revealing a dark gray material beneath, it had a dark green sheen to it, almost if... "Seastone." Chihiro noted for me, "Which is indestructible, by the way..."

"Then how did they shape it?" I snarked back, knowing that throwing my haki outside would bring it to a level that I couldn't actually conceive, before discarding quickly that option.

"Let's see if they're dumb like every regular people is in a manga..." I whispered to myself, repeating my previous actions, only that this time, I targeted the concrete wall upon which the door was hinged. A deafening *crash* resounded in the relatively small room, the wall veritably exploded from the point of impact, making me grin at my success. "You missed." Chihiro deadpanned.

"Did I?" I grunted out resuming my position and repeating my action, falling soon enough into a strange lull that made me feel the strain of holding the Armament Haki less and less, until in what felt like twenty minutes I managed to break apart the whole wall that surrounded the hated door. By that time, my ears could pick up the thundering of the cannons, the rattling scream of the gunshots and the *fear*, loud fear that was in every movement I could perceive with my Observation Haki.

"I didn't expect that." my companion brought me back to reality, distracting me from the madness going on outside. "Did you find the keys for the cells at least?" I sagged a bit when my armament left me, suddenly feeling extremely vulnerable.

When she nodded and walked downstairs, I followed, dropping the white marine jacket I had donned and unbuttoned the white shirt I had beneath it, before using the switchblade that never left my pocket to cut away the lower half of my sleeves: I didn't want to be mistaken for a marine after all, and anyway, I ill bore a proper and respectful clothing style.

Less than thirty minutes later, I had delivered my guns to every prisoner capable of fighting, while I had to punt into the ground an overblown idiot that thought I wouldn't kill him only because I looked like a kid (I resented his description, by the way) and like I should have expected from the random group of mismatched pirates that they were, they left the premises in a chaotic rampage, thirsty for marine blood. Chihiro and I exchanged a glance before forcing ourselves to follow the group, the only reasonable action left to us was to see the fight through its end.

An hour later, I was in the middle of the battle, fighting along with random ex-prisoners against the Marines that were still surprised for being backstabbed when without any warning, the world shook: the sky became the ground, while the floor tilted itself in a way that forced me to plunge haki clad fingers into the concrete in order to not being blown away, the air itself twisted, and I felt it pressing against my senses, threatening to squeeze the life out of me: a pressure, a weight, I felt like I had a landslide washing over me, ever-increasing, heavier, heavier, heavier... it was like the sky was trying to splatter me against the ground. *No.*

I saw the crowd around me fall to the ground like spilled milk, but while I wavered, with a shaky breath, I pushed back. I felt like the vertebrae in my spine were being welded together by a blowtorch, my left knee was rammed into the ground, my kneecap screaming murder, my back folding like paper. *No.*

I pushed back, for a single second, the weight of the sky didn't have limits, and it eroded me. My consciousness swayed on the brink of the abyss, my thoughts died, my dreams and hopes crumbled, my name was forgotten, I could only give in and hope to survive. *No.*

I clutched the concrete beneath me, despair evident in how blood started to seep from beneath my nails, my teeth were slammed together, making it difficult for me to breathe properly, my heart was thundering beyond my control, for a single moment, I held the pressure. Black climbed at the edge of my vision, and I felt like I was looking at the world from the bottom of a well. *No.*

I pushed back, my feet trying to find leverage against the ground, my knuckles scraping against the concrete, my muscles on the verge of tearing, my bones almost snapping, my ligaments about to be shred, my soul slowly crumbling over the colossal mistake that was resisting the weight over me. How could I hope to oppose it? An ant does not oppose a mountain. *No.*

I refused to stop pushing back. Like hell I was going to let a tiny thing like the sky kill me. I didn't know if it was possible, but I *pushed back*. It was... Grating. Annihilating. My bones felt like they were ground together, my thoughts slowly slurring one against another like they were moving in molten tar, there was only one task, one purpose, one duty: I pushed. I resisted. Time had lost any meaning, and I too, had lost any sense of self, I was crumbling into nothingness, why did I have to suffer? I could just let go... *No.*

I gritted my teeth, feeling the tang, metallic taste of blood on my tongue, and I was too far gone to feel any discomfort caused by the sweat coursing from my forehead over to my nose, on the point of which it formed droplets that fell on the ground. Beyond the agonizing effort, I could feel my bones trembling, my muscles had forgotten what not being contracted meant, my breath was coming in ragged rasps, for less work, for an *end* to come. My heart was fluttering, blood madly rushing through my veins, washing away cramps that reformed immediately after, but the pain they caused was almost a relief over the white noise of *sheer agony* that I was suffering. I just wanted for it to end, why would I care about anything else? I only had to close my eyes and let go... *No.*

I denied it. I was holding strong against the weight, and it would never defeat me. I pushed as I had never been doing anything else, and for all I knew, all my existence had been pain and the slow eroding of my sense of self, but *that*, that was unforgivable. Weight? I had been able to crush boulders with my bare hands since I was twelve years old. Seeing the world like through a half-transparent curtain because something pushed me down? I had known Observation Haki for years. Feeling my body give in to the abuse inflicted on me? My Armament would break through it.

I would not give up a single moment, a single blink of my eyes, I had been forced to be held in chains for far too long to be bossed around by anything else now. Didn't I prove my cunning organizing my escape? My resourcefulness finding the best path towards freedom? My skill bringing myself and Chihiro near an island sailing a broken, unmanned vessel? My strength overcoming everything I had met on my path? I would do much more, *be* much more, and I would not go quietly in the night after reaching this point, nor I would be nailed down by *anything or anyone*.

I opened my lips, and something *raged* from the depth: "**No.**"

It was a simple word, only two letters, nothing complex. And yet it held my defiance, I said it barely loud enough for my own ears to hear it, and yet, I was as loud as the sun in a clear sky. It couldn't be ignored, it refused it. *I* refused it.

And just like that, a second after the impossible weight had tried to crush me, I breathed in with the reassurance of my position, there was nobody that could force me to bow, nothing that could take my freedom back from me. No chain around my neck, no Slaver to hold a leash, no king, no god, no devil to answer to. There was only me. I held on that feeling, distractedly recognizing as something *more* than it should have been.

With that certainty blazing around me, I rose to my feet, battered, bruised, bleeding, and yet with the countenance of a King. I was calm, for nothing could ever be taken from me, for nothing could be held beyond my reach. I looked calmly at the feet of the base, where the Impossible Weight had made land and ripped apart the island. Only then, my ears

uncorked, and with the chaos of battle rushing back over my senses, I heard one laugh: "**GURARARARARA...**"

Hitch-Hiking

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HITCH-HIKING

Edward Newgate. My mind supplied for me, more commonly known as Whitebeard, widely known as the 'Strongest Man in the World' and the 'Man Closest to One Piece' after Gol D. Roger's death. I knew him from my previous life, but even from my current one I heard scared whispers of his might. I eyed him, for the first time trying to get an actual measure of the man: he was an abnormally large man, with a height that easily bested the 6 meters, and unlike other large-sized humans he was well-proportioned. He had a long face, ploughed because of the advanced age, with many wrinkles around his eyes, and many more scars running along his bare chest. The muscles on his were somewhat veiny, likely because he had just used his devil fruit power.

He wore a black bandanna around his head and had adorned himself with a white captain's coat, which hung loosely from his broad shoulders and I knew it bore his Jolly Roger symbol on the back. He wore light, loose pants tucked inside his large black boots, and a dark pirate sash around his waist.

At his side, resting with the blade embedded in the ground there was a massive Tomoe type naginata, fitting the size of Whitebeard, with a striped pole with bands colored red and yellow, like in the manga instead of the anime. The staff portion ended in a spherical pommel, while the large, curved blade was attached to the pole with a brass bolster, decorated with a relief of a sea snake, and langets protruding onto the blade itself.

His eyes had a yellow iris that bled into gold, and only when I stared in his orbs I found out that he was looking me over.

For a second, what I instinctively recognized as my own Haoshoku Haki clashed against his: in the manga, it had been shown that when two users of that kind of Haki clashed, it caused a rippling or shockwave effect, cracking the air similarly to the effects of the Gura Gura no Mi. I remembered that the shock waves from the Haoshoku Haki clash between Luffy and Chinjao were strong enough to blast people out of the coliseum arena into the water below, while the Haoshoku Haki clash between Luffy and Doflamingo produced shockwaves that pushed Trebol and Law's incapacitated body away from them. I even remembered that Shank's Ambition of the Supreme King had cracked the wood of Whitebeard's ship, showing his might.

None of that happened in my case. The Emperor's Ambition was so vast and encompassing that I never stood a chance, and for another second, it tried to push me down.

No. The thought came clearly to me, my chin rising to challenge him on its own while I reminded myself that the fucker was a splatter of ink on a manga's page. *How dare you?* So I stood my ground, even spotting Chihiro falling to her knees and instinctively moving to place myself between her and Whitebeard. Being so close to me however didn't help and I saw her eyes roll back in her head, signaling that she was out for the count.

In a blaze of blue and golden fire, something landed on my left, just outside of my field of vision. Instinctively, my eyes darted for a split second in that direction, while I pushed my Observation Haki as much as I could: Pineapple-head was a tall, lean, muscular, blonde-haired man with a rather sleepy look on his face and some stubble around his chin. He wore an open purple jacket and a light blue sash adorned with an elaborate golden-yellow belt around his waist. He had dark gray knee-long pants and black sandals, and on his left leg, he wore what appeared to be some sort of straw decoration. But what was clearly attention-grabbing were his arms. Or better yet, the wide wings made of flickering blue fire.

"Such scary eyes." The young man noted while looking me over before his eyes returned to the Emperor: "What do we do Pops?"

And just like that, the Impossible Weight that had me on my last leg disappeared: "Gurararara... we raid and party!"

A crowd of pirates that I had been too busy to notice cheered and swarmed over debris and fallen both, only to leave me some space since I was standing over the unconscious body of Chihiro. Until Whitebeard say so, I was a potential enemy, but having both Marco and Newgate eyes on me was unnerving, knowing their personality or not. They weren't showing me the smiling faces they had displayed for Ace in the manga, no. Whitebeard had dismissed me as of no consequence, and while it rattled me, I was wary of rising his interest, while Marco was staring me like I was some kind of rat baring its teeth to a hawk. Not that the comparison wasn't exact, I was very aware of the fact that I wasn't the one in charge, nor I had any hope to confront The Strongest Man and survive,

The Emperor turned his back on me, showcasing the jolly roger of his 'family' on his white coat, and walked with long strides towards a sandy portion of the port where a gigantic armchair for him to relax had been set up by his people, and a gargantuan jug of sake was already waiting for him. "So," Marco's voice made me snap back my attention to him "How does a kid with the color of the King end up with a Fishman in a marine base?"

I knew that among the four Emperors, I had encountered the less unreasonably violent one, and that if I wanted any kind

of help, I couldn't exactly lead them by the nose, on pain of being found out and killed, or simply by giving them reasons to distrust me. *Even if... if they adopted Blackbeard being none the wiser, I'd say I have some chances of being taken in.* Slowly, to not spook the Mythological Zoan in front of me into burning me to ashes, my left hand opened the unbuttoned white shirt I wore, lifting it from my left pectoral, where the red mark of slavery to a Heavenly Dragon rested. Marco frowned, a glint of rage flashing in his eyes, making them burn gold and blue for an instant before he controlled himself: "I am a medic, can I check up your friend?"

With the same slowness of a feral animal considering his options, I took a step back from Chihiro, clenching my fists and feeling Armament cover them. The implications were clear. I doubted that anything would come to it, but I actually liked Chihiro, I thought she had just been knocked out by all the Haoshoku Haki thrown around before, but having a magical-healing-fire wash over her sounded like a good idea to me. Marco grinned looking at the black sheen over my knuckles, amused by my attempt at threatening him, but it was really all I could do, I wasn't in control of the situation at all, and I didn't quite enjoy the feeling. I had been in control during the storm that had baptized me and through which I had chosen my name, in control of the ship of unknown people when they had tried to take advantage of me, I had even been in a form of control during my slavery, keeping hidden my skills and operating by proxy in order to gain the possibility to become free. But in the New World, I realized that I had no way to control or direct the events around me, there was no safety net that would grant me what I needed or wished.

Marco came over and dragged a hand coated in a blue fire over the unconscious form of Chihiro, her small wounds closing without issues "My name is Marco, I'm the commander of the First Division of the Whitebeard's pirates, who are you?" he asked still kneeling over the Fishman at my feet, causing me to withhold a laugh: *Not a medic, just a user of a totally overpowered devil fruit.* I then forced myself to focus again on the absurd events happening around me... I considered how to answer, it was unlikely that my name had already caused enough waves as to be heard in the Blues, since to my knowledge I even lacked a bounty, I was pretty much anonymous, but I didn't feel like talking, and since the Phoenix-man appeared as he felt pretty at ease around me, I shrugged and chose to keep my mouth quiet. *They can't pry into my life if I can't talk, can they?* I thought by myself. It wasn't like I could introduce myself and start asking favors, could I? *I can imagine how it would go: 'Hey, totally Over Powered people, do you mind providing me with...* In the middle of that line of thought, I stopped, frowning heavily: *What do I want?*

When the man in the violet jacket rose to his feet and gestured as to do the same to me I narrowed my eyes and minutely shook my head, I would keep my insignificant wounds if it meant avoiding being placed under the unknown scrutiny of a mythological power not well defined. The possibility of him figuring out I wasn't from this world wasn't a realistic one, but I preferred to stay out of it if I could. "Well, the party is open to the two of you, so feel free to bring her over, there will be food and ale for everyone." he said taking a step back before sprouting his wings and flying over the inside of the base, surveying the scavenging, looting, and whatnot that the Whitebeard pirates were still carrying on. I rolled my eyes at the patronizing tone and pulled the slumped form of my... *friend...* over my shoulder, walking towards the improvised and evergrowing camp over the sandy portion of the shore that the marines hadn't turned into a port made of concrete.

What do I want? I had developed some kind of tentative friendship with Chihiro in the last days together, it would have been hard not to, and it would have saddened me not seeing her ever again, but still, I remembered my original, if hazy, plan. I wanted the Rumble Rumble fruit, it granted control over one of the basic forces of the universe, and more. The possibilities it could grant me... Hell, Eneru had traveled up to the moon, I could easily do the same. Gravitation, electromagnetism, the weak nuclear interaction, and the strong nuclear interaction, those were the Forces that supported what I knew of the universe. The first fruit was in the hands of Fujitora, which besides being a somewhat alright guy even supporting a genocidal, marine-enforced government, and I had no idea about how to reach it, while the last two apparently didn't exist. Sure, Tatch would somehow gain the Yami Yami no Mi at some point, but darkness and the ability to absorb stuff wasn't really that interesting to me. So the Goro Goro no Mi remained the most interesting one that I had a vague possibility to obtain. Sure, killing Marco and hoping that his fruit would end up in my hands *before* being killed by the several divisions of the Whitebeard pirates was wishful thinking on my part, his fruit likely could grant a limited form of immortality, but it had far fewer applications for my objectives.

Further into the day, music and songs had long since drowned out the grim tone of the destroyed base, and I had been able to eat to my heart content, being treated like a welcome guest among Whitebeard's family members. Around midday, Chihiro left her slumber, rising from the warm ground with a confused expression on her face, and before she could do something hasty dictated by her unfamiliar surroundings I simply nudged her shoulder, handing over a chunk of meat along with a pint of ale. "What happened?" she groggily asked while sinking her sharp teeth into her meal, while her eyes roamed freely the chaotic section of the beach where the ongoing party didn't seem to be going to abate any time soon.

I didn't answer, stating the obvious would be pointless, so I simply reached over another tray of food and brought it closer to us. *It's been years since I properly ate.* I luxuriated in the feeling of savoring the warm food, content of my situation, temporary as it was. *Then again, with music and a full stomach, it's hard to not feel relaxed. The ale helped, I think.* Chihiro accepted my silence and stuffed her face, likely realizing just how hungry she was. At some point, a guitar found its way into my hands, and without really thinking about it, I brought the Asturias into the One Piece world, enthraling the other musicians that were mingling around. The Asturias had always been a piece well beyond my ability to perform, but in *this* world, I could dodge bullets. Moving my fingers with enough speed and precision was almost... underwhelming. I only needed to focus, and the once impossibly difficult music was at my fingertips. All in all, I passed a beautiful afternoon occasionally dozing off near Chihiro, who clearly had enjoyed my music.

As the sun settled beneath the horizon, we were covered by a gigantic shadow, cast by the Emperor itself, who looked at both me and Chihiro with a grandfatherly smile before gesturing at the partying crowd on the beach: "Join my family, and soar the seas under my banner, free as you want to be."

The laid back air I had managed to enjoy up to that moment vanished, and I got serious while I listened to the expected

question. *Is this what I want? Constant, endless adventures with the strongest people as a safety net around me all the time?* For a single second, I let myself actually consider the idea. At the end of the day, I was curious about the world, or at the very least, that had been my starting point so many years before. I wanted to learn everything, understand everything, experiment, witness, do, be, everything I could, and find ways around what I couldn't. Nothing had really changed for me since I first had set out to the sea, no, since I had defeated that first swordfish. *I don't want to have to answer to anyone but myself.* I realized in that moment. No matter how much freedom and safety sailing under Whitebeard's banner would grant me, I wanted to be the only one in charge of my life. Given what happened to Ace, I knew that there was a very hands-off policy regarding what was allowed and what wasn't, even when Newgate himself had felt unease at the idea of Ace chasing Blackbeard, the Mera Mera no Mi eater had done what the fuck he wanted, but still... Hell, I was curious as anyone about the One Piece, but that the Emperor had died in Marineford sat ill within me. For all the talking about making him King, Whitebeard himself didn't look so interested in the search. He had many years to gun for the treasure, surely he would have reached it if he truly wanted?

For all the advantages that bearing his name would have brought me, I really didn't want to settle down with *his* people. An image of my owl flashed before my eyes, reminding me that there was an even remote possibility that I would be able to find him again if I were to sail again that Blue. Wasn't it a remotely good enough reason to accept another's man mark on me? **No.**

I didn't consciously realize it, but the Ambition of the King reared up its head, making me straighten my back and jut out my chin in defiance: **"I've been marked once. I won't let it happen again."** then it was gone, like a wave over the sand, it came and went without leaving a single trace. But a sign that it had been real was there: the Whitebeard pirates were eyeing me with an air of caution now, none of his people had fallen over, each too experienced for an untrained ambition like mine to overcome them, but there was wariness in some cases, while I spotted several pirates sporting displeased frowns, with all probability not liking my comparing Whitebeard's mark to the one of the Tenryubito, but they stayed quiet, waiting for their Captain's answer.

Like I should have foreseen, he laughed: "Gurararara... brats these days..." then he turned his attention towards Chihiro silently asking the same thing. The Fishman, who was a bit wobbly on her feet after my display of Haoshoku Haki and had grabbed my shoulder to steady herself and was frowning heavily, visibly considering the offer for an instant before shaking her head: "I want to... I..." She took a deep breath and started anew: "I've been captured on Sabaody, where I wanted to analyze the sap of the Mangroves, I'm a botanist, you see, and I want to be able to roam without issues, piracy isn't really what I want to do with my life..."

Once again, Whitebeard laughed: "So be it. We travel back in paradise every couple of years, might as well drop you off on Sabaody."

Once he had said that, my head was suddenly stuffed inside a black jute sack: "Sorry kid, but the way in and back from Paradise is a family secret." Marco voice resonated at my ear before I felt a pressure being exercised on the vagus nerve, where the shoulder became the neck. I didn't put up any resistance, and soon I found myself unconscious.

A month later

The office was a pompous one if I had ever seen one. Mahogany desk and shelves, each half-filled with books that looked brand new, a thick carpet that covered polished linoleum in front of a small and almost cozy fireplace that had no place on an island with the tropical climate of the Sabaody Archipelago, while the tall windows were covered by velvet curtains lined with gold. *Gold!* Like it made some kind of sense having velvet curtains in such a place! What manner of impossibly harsh light could ever threaten the peace necessary for desk-work?

I dismissed my disgust and walked over to the big safe in the corner of the room, it needed both key and combination to be opened, signaling that if nothing else the responsible was aware that the people in charge of keeping the environment clean could suddenly develop sticky-hands. *So not a Scooby-Doo idiot, only a regular dimwit.* I thought shaking my head. He couldn't know, couldn't conceive that someone would raid that particular safe. It was, after all, under the protection of Doflamingo himself, the Heavenly Yaksha. *Too bad I don't fucking care.* My fingers quickly found themselves coated in a black sheen and I plunged my hands into the safe without remorse, ripping the door from its hinges with nary a thought, my eyes already scanning the insides of the man-sized steely box.

Ordinately stacked on the lower shelves, there were stacks of beli, tags with the total amount orderly placed at the top of the banknotes which were bound with simple rubber bands. At the height of my eyes, there was a shelf filled with papers which after cursory glance I determined were property acts, either for 'merchandise' or real estates. Either stuff that had been traded in order to cover a debt or more likely simple hunting grounds. Five pubs seemed like a great place where a cunning slaver could drug a remunerative man to sell afterward. I placed everything in different jute sacks I had brought with me exactly with that purpose and dragged a chair in front of the safe. Standing on top of it, I slid out of the top shelf several wooden boxes, stacking them on the ground before running my hands over the inside of the safe, following my gut and looking for any hidden lever or switch. *There is no way a slaver hasn't a secret stash somewhere.*

Soon enough, my fingers got entangled with a small irregularity on the otherwise smooth steel surface, and I pulled, obviously triggering a hidden mechanism that saw the wall at the back of the safe slid open, an oil lamp flickering to life without my help to shine light in the otherwise dark hidden room. I walked into it, noting that there was only enough space for a couple of persons, and that sadly, it was empty. *Maybe a hidden panic room for when pirates come to invade?* I considered briefly before shaking my head. *Sabaody is neutral ground, nobody wants to risk an admiral poking his head around here.* I looked closer, inspecting every inch of the safe until I spotted a black suitcase on the ground, its color clearly meant to hide it among the natural shadows of the room. With a shrug, I dragged it out of the safe, placing it on the

ground and looking over at my admittedly vast loot.

Unable to contain my curiosity any longer, I started by opening the wooden cases, finding them filled with miscellaneous of jewelry and silver or gold coins that had yet to be fused and resold, since the World Government didn't allow other currencies to exist out of the beli they held the monopoly of. While interested in the testimony of places that had ignored the ruling of the WG, the discovery was a bit underwhelming. Everything found its way in one of the reinforced jute sacks, and finally I opened the black case. What I found inside stole a wide grin out of me: delicately held in formfitting foam rubber, rested no less than eight Eternal Poses. "Alabasta, Amazon Lily, Marineford, Mocktown, Minion Island, Sorbet Kingdom, Water 7, and Spider Miles." I read out loud. *What were the odds? Among the Eternal Log Poses, Alabasta points at Crocodile current residence, at least if my timeline isn't really screwed. The Florian Triangle, where Thriller Bark is floating, is on the route from here to Water 7, pointing at Moria, Kuma ruled over Sorbet Kingdom, didn't he? And Rocinante died on Sorbet, which is just North of Swallow Island, which is where Law found Bepo if I remember correctly.*

I guessed it made sense somewhat. Dofla could fly pulling strings from a cloud to another, but knowing where to go to reach a precise destination while up in the sky was no joke. *He left here his google maps so that he could pick it up every time he returned in Paradise from the New World.* I snorted, closing the suitcase and loading myself with my loot, my mind considering how to best make use of the incredibly useful tools I had just found while I quietly made my way back to Shakky's Rip-off Bar, located on grove 13.

Thriller Night

THRILLER NIGHT

I awoke from my nap with a displeased frown, something had already ticked me off. I looked around, Observation Haki sweeping over the small ship that I had stolen on the last island without finding anything and forcing me to leave my wonderful cocoon of coats and waterproof covers to take a look around me.

Soon enough, I realized what had risen me from my brief nap: the mist was wrong. There wasn't another way to put it, it clung to the skin, it dampened sounds, it blacked out even the sunlight, it felt almost as I had run into a cloud, a dry iridescent one. While the ship slowly sailed through the far too calm waters, the mist circled without any apparent pattern through funereal red, disgustingly clammy, directionless white, cool, powdery, foul and lazy, clammy and intensely cold, featureless, pallid, thick and hateful, even of a sick orange. And with the circling of the mist, a dreadful feeling of hopelessness clung to the ship, to me, trying to transmit some kind of misery.

With my eyes closed, it was obvious to my Observation Haki that something was clearly wrong, but it was something ethereal, just beyond my grasp, like I was suspended just above a deep pool of darkness. I blinked a couple of times, clearing my head and checking that the ship was following the direction of the eternal log pose, in the unnatural and absolute silence that hung over me like cold drowsiness, I pushed back. I had practiced it every day since I left Sabaody, but it wasn't as natural as I wanted it to be. I recalled how I had felt when I first met Whitebeard, I forced myself to relive the moment of helplessness where all of me felt on the line, when my only choice had been between kneeling or dying, and I had chosen the third, impossible, unexpected reaction.

Every day I tried randomly to call back on that feeling, to my reaction to 'the strongest man alive' and from time to time, I had succeeded. I superimposed the Impossible Weight of Whitebeard's Conqueror's Haki to the hopelessness that tried to take me over in the Florian Triangle, and as the mist tried once more to cling to me and seep away from my warmth, it happened: I felt it, like water spilling from a glass too full, only that it wasn't nearly as delicate or quiet. I exploded out of me in a wave that rippled through the air and repelled the mist.

My eyes widened at my success and before it could slip from my fingers I rooted myself in that feeling, wrapping the blaze of sheer will around myself. And I looked with an indifferent air at the world around me. Gone was the tiredness, the fear, the despair, the trepidation for the battle I was looking forward for, it was all beneath me. What was going to happen, would happen, the only certainty was that I was going to end up victorious. This world of paper and ink couldn't really understand how... *two dimensional* it was. I smiled grimly at my horrible pun, and steered lightly the helm, following the Observation Haki that informed me of the pieces of wood clearly coming from a wreck of another ship.

I heard it clearly: cracking of old wood, groaning of a keel that can no longer survive, ropes that once held strong against the pulls of the world that had now given up on their purpose, shredded sails that hung like sins over the skeleton of a damned, and above it, my Observation picked up a sense of tiredness that was beyond what I could conceive. Soon enough, I reached the ship of the man I had been looking for, and after throwing a rope to tie my much smaller vessel to his, I boarded it.

As I walked closer, I slid out of the 'forma mentis' that allowed me to keep up the Color of Conqueror King. Letting go was a much easier process than finding it, even more so when there wasn't an actual threat nearby, or when nothing was threatening my free will. "Hello?" I called, letting my eyes roam over the dead, desiccated bodies that littered the ship before stopping on the distinctive form of a skeleton with an afro that was apparently sleeping, but my Observation Haki picked up the fact that he was different from the others skeletons onboard. "It's difficult to tell if you're actually sleeping or not because... well... you don't breathe and nether have eyes."

Brook flayed around violently, falling from the chair where he had been sitting and standing up immediately later, facing the wrong direction for a couple of seconds before turning towards me once I had coughed discreetly. "Are you perhaps a pirate on this vessel?" I asked politely once he appeared to be too flabbergasted to be talking first. He straightened his worn-out jacket before coughing in order to mask his previous embarrassment, he shouldn't have bothered, really, seeing as he didn't have any facial muscles that could express his emotions, nor blood vessels to redden the cheeks that had long since rotten away: "Ahem, *cough, yes, I'm Gentleman Musician, and more recently The Humming Skeleton, but when I was alive, I was known as Humming Brook... of the Rumber Pirates." He concluded with a flourish as he fished out his wanted poster from his worn purple jacket, showing off his bounty of 33.000.000 beli.

I accepted it with a smile, looking it over a couple of times and nodded approvingly: "So, I should introduce myself: I am David Jhon, I managed to stay low key until now, so I don't have a bounty yet, but I've been a pirate captain in South Blue for some months, but I ended up in the New World by mistake and after a series of adventures too long to be shared immediately, I'm going backward on the Grand Line, from the Reverse Mountain I'll hop in the North Blue, since I have a side business to carry over there."

"Yohoho, such a cruel joke to tell the poor Brook, and after that I've been courteous enough as to tell you my story!" he dramatically draped a forearm over his empty eye-sockets.

I shook my head lightly, withholding a snort: "I didn't lie, I promise. Say, Moria should be around, shouldn't he? I'd like to meet him."

Brook straightened up, his bones becoming even stiffer if possible: "Why would you look for such a distasteful creature?"

I widened my eyes mockingly, as if only now noticing his shift in posture: "Why, but to kill him, of course!"

That made him faceplant on the deck of the ship. *Should it be skull-plant?* I wondered distractedly as I poked at him with the tip of my sandals, taking stock of the fact that he had apparently lost consciousness.

8 hours later

After that the skeleton had recovered his wits, I managed to guide him through a conversation in which he revealed to me the last years of his life... or not-not life, as it were. He told me of his shadow and of the mean samurai that had been raised with it, less than a year before. That last detail had been a difficult one to fish out, since the Skeleton didn't have either a day-night cycle, or the usual needs of a living body to measure time with. *That puts me perfectly in time to catch who I need to.* The small group of undead assaulted me with the abandon that comes from being sure of one's own success, and with a black expression, I tore them apart, Haki clad fingers ripping heads open and punching clearly through their chests. I watched with a disinterested air as their shadows slipped away from their bodies, and I let several of them run and call the alarm. While I was waiting, I picked up a katana from one of the zombies I had just faced and gave it a couple of swings.

When the zombies just laughed at my attack, I studied the one I just offed, intrigued as he was putting himself back together. *Well, that explains why the people on the island haven't ganged up on some zombies yet. Oh, wait they did manage to steal back some shadows, simply giving them to Luffy in the manga.* I frowned, considering how I could kill them properly. The only memory I had pertinent to the destruction of Moria's puppets was Zoro's fight, where he somehow managed to set Ryuma on fire with a sword attack. I looked around expectantly, seeing that the zombies were temporarily busy laughing at me to actually swarm me.

I knew someone without Devil Fruit or Haki could do it, I speculated that Zoro flying slashes were a rip-off or an improvement from Chyper Pol's technique, and I knew that the connection between shadow and zombie was weak, since a simple bag of salt was enough to kill them. Experimentally, I forced armament haki to cover my right arm, and made it ripple over the blade, which turned into a gleaming black. I rose the sword over my head, pointing at the sky for a brief moment as the zombies realized that something fundamental had just changed in their opponent. I stilled, as I remembered Kenpachi from Bleach being forbidden from using two hands on his katana because he became too deadly when doing so.

As the zombies scrambled to get close to me, my left arm closed on the hilt of the katana, turning black as well, swiftly, I brought down both of my hands. And something happened: the dirt at my feet rippled, fallen leaves rising for a moment around me. I frowned, I knew I wasn't going to become a swordsman just because I wanted it, picking up a sword didn't change that I had always fought with whatever ended up in my hands: fishing lines, guns, knives, punches, and axes. The only way to properly learn something, however, was doing. And so I started cutting through swathes of the sorry undead. Instead of simply trouncing them with overwhelming strength or speed, I used Observation Haki as best as I could in order to visualize perfectly the relative position of my enemies and using minimal movements to cut them up. As I moved, I lunged, separating a head from the shoulders of one and following up with a downward slash to cut open its stomach, only to keep moving as I turned my last move in a crescent moon on the other side.

I was simply too fast for the zombies to actually react to my attacks, and I was more focused on my moves than I was on everything else. It was an underwhelming fight, having to wait for someone to actually carry forward their attack and try different ways to parry, only to be forced to move at speeds that couldn't really follow to get out of a situation in which I had gotten myself trapped. Every time it happened I grew a tad bit more frustrated, and I had to reign in my growing distinct to simply drop the blade and start digging through the swathes of zombies with my bare hands. *At least they stay dead once I cut them with Haki.*

I quickly lost myself into a frenzy of sidestepping, slashing, parrying, cutting, piercing, and bisecting. After a while, I momentarily slowed down as I tried to use the sword to replicate Zoro's distance attacks. The Rankyaku was a powerful projectile technique, in which the users kicked at very high speeds and strength, sending out a sharp compressed air blade or "Sickle Wind". Turns out that they're much easier to execute with a blade. I slashed horizontally as fast as I could, focusing on the feeling of cutting through the air like I had done on several occasions when using Rankyaku. As the blade moved, the space in front of it bisected, shining briefly. The line I cut tore through the front two lines of incoming zombies, neatly bisecting them and unleashing their shadows to the night sky.

For a single moment, I was surprised that it had taken me so little to recreate what I had seen every single swordsman in One Piece perform, before immediately wondering why it had cut only the first two lines of the undead. The weapon I had taken at the beginning of my one-man war didn't look like anything special, but I didn't need it to be. If Zoro had managed to defeat Ryuma with only two swords and 0 Haki, I could make it work. I idly twirled it describing a small eight with the point of the blade, and I realized that I couldn't learn anything more from fighting the zombies.

I briefly fall into myself, looking for the feeling I had learned how to cultivate since I had left Sabaody.

I opened my lips, and something raged from the depth: "No."

It was a simple word, only two letters, nothing complex. And yet it held my defiance, I said it barely loud enough for my own ears to hear it, and yet, I was as loud as the sun in a clear sky. It couldn't be ignored, it refused it. I refused it.

And just like that, a second after the impossible weight had tried to crush me, I breathed in with the reassurance of my position, there was nobody that could force me to bow, nothing that could take my freedom back from me. No chain

around my neck, no Slaver to hold a leash, no king, no god, no devil to answer to. There was only me. I held on that feeling, distractedly recognizing as something more than it should have been.

As the Ambition of the Supreme King thundered out of me, the incoming hundred or more zombies fell to the ground like puppets with their strings cut, shadows being banished into the eternal night of Thriller Bark. I did not sigh in satisfaction for what I had accomplished, after all it was only the natural consequence of the weak trying to rise too high. I still had two very important things I wanted to accomplish while on Thriller Bark. So I let my Armament fade as the explosion of Conqueror's Haki left me, and I used the Color of Observation on the katana I had wielded during the fight.

I couldn't pick up any difference on it, but I didn't expect that a single fight could be enough to leave an actual mark on it, nor that my Armament had already been enough to change it on a fundamental level.

Half an hour later, as I followed the cobbled path that appeared to lead towards Moria's castle, one of the people I was actually curious about was walking in the opposite direction, his geta sandals clacking loudly on the ground: Ryuma had several bandages covering part of his skull face, which had neither eyes nor nose, and wore a samurai gi with intricate designs with a blue stomach band with a swirling design. He had white hair, and while his mouth was partially covered by the blue scarf he wore, I could tell that he had a displeased expression on his withered face.

"You're no swordsman." He stated with a sneer.

"Well, that's just rude," I frowned, not that it was untrue, but sure as hell he could at least give me the benefit of doubt before dismissing me, couldn't he? "I picked up a sword just to win that beauty you have on your waist off you." I admitted, pointing at Shushui with the nondescript katana in my hand.

He shook his head, bringing his hand to the hilt of his blade: "Yohoho, you have a good eye. This is one of the 21 Great Swords. It is the meito Shusui. It is a sword not seen by many eyes." I smiled when I recognized brook's mannerism, it was strange seeing two different zombies behaving in the same way, "And winning it off me would be a good way to secure Shusui's loyalty, but do not mock me with that parody of swordsmanship you're trying to pull off. I've seen you fight, you use the katana as a hatchet." he reprimanded me.

Or at least tried to, since I was already coating in Haki the weapon in my hand. As soon as I felt the blade becoming black, I shot forward, letting it fall in a downward slash that got parried with casual ease by the zombie. As my sword slid off his, my left hand punched him, only to be stopped by Shusui's hilt. For a second, we both stood still, pushing against each other and gauging the other's skill. It was immediately clear that I was stronger, while the armament haki turned my hands and feet into lethal weapons on their own. His reaction speed told me that while his body couldn't keep up with mine, he had enough experience to play in advance, and the ease through which he dispelled the strength behind my swing clearly displayed his skills as a swordsman. While the only thing that had kept my katana from cutting him apart had been the meito grade sword of his that apparently had been through so many battles that it became permanently coated in Armament Haki.

Ordinarily, would have classified the match as an annoying one, since I was being kept from winning by someone that couldn't even use haki, but the point of the fight itself, besides winning over Shusui's loyalty, was learning some approximation of proper swordsmanship. Not that I particularly cared for a blade's feelings, but I was curious as to what I could discern with Observation from a 'willing' object.

Following my instincts, I widened the distance between my feet and slashed again horizontally, this time with both hands on the sword. Ryuma took a nonchalant step back as he prepared for a lunge under my exposed guard. I saw it coming and I pushed back on the forefront of my feet, grimacing as Shusui came barreling towards my throat. I spun following the momentum of my previous swing, and I felt the black blade come within three centimeters from my throat, while I observed the undead samurai's stance and tried to burn it into my mind.

The zombie growled in annoyance as he repeated the stabbing motion, but as the second piercing attack came close to me, my left hand had abandoned my katana's hilt and slapped away the flat of Shusui's blade.

I hopped back, regaining my distance and assuming the lunging stance Ryuma had during his last attack and cocking back my right arm, my left resting on my waist as I was holding a scabbard: "Like this, right?" Pushing as fast as I could, I extended my arm, trying to replicate the same feeling of when I sent a cut through the air against the zombies. I felt something almost *give in* to the pressure I had exercised in front of me, but to no avail.

"Shameful." Ryuma commented with a sneer, making me tilt my head. "We both know that the body you're into won't be able to keep up with me, so I'm ending up with Shusui either way, wouldn't it be better for the blade itself if it were to be wielded by someone who is not a complete disaster?"

The undead swung his blade on the side with a dismissive sneer, a slash flashing briefly in the air before cutting a mall trench in the ground: "Why should it be my business?" if he could narrow his eyes at me, I knew he would have.

I shrugged: "Only you know if you care enough for Shusui to let it fall into the hands of an incompetent parody of a swordsman."

I came at me with a snarl, the meito blade promising death as it slashed at me: "I'm tasked with fighting intruders, and I can't teach how to properly fight in the limited time this clash will last." I swung sideways, my haki coated blade hitting the flat of his and making it fall at my right side as I pushed forward and rose my left elbow aiming for his head. Following the movement of his weapon, he ducked under my attack and slashed sideways hoping to bisect me at the navel. For me it

was a simple matter to knee thrust his right forearm, robbing his attack of all its momentum.

"Your first reaction is to always use your body after the first meeting of the blades." He scolded me: "You aren't swordsman material." My blade still was raised over my head, and I tore it down to the ground, letting the irritation that his comment caused slip out from my calm facade. Nevertheless, my movement was as controlled as I could make it, and while Ryuma jumped back to avoid being cut, the slash of my blade followed through the air, always as a simple fold-not-fold in the air, with a whistling noise that was telltale of the cutting power of my technique.

As he dispersed the attack with another negligent flick of the wrist, his 'expression' became contemplative: "The sword you wield must be your soul for it to cut as it is meant to. Whatever you did just now... it was better.

And so we battled, as to the Samurai's elegant attacks I countered with brute force Armament Haki or moving away faster than he could pursue. I spun, hit, parried, slashed, cut, avoided, ducked, punched, kicked, and all-around bullshitted my way through our fight, trying to slow down enough to force myself to use the sword as it was meant to, and as we moved, Ryuma insulted my stances, my blows, my way of breathing. "Do you actually believe your blade can carry your will with your elbow placed in such a manner? Don't make me laugh!" or "Ha! If you need to take a breath while you attack it's clear that you should just go home, young fool!" and so and so on. It was far from being a proper school, but I applied every ounce of my Observation Haki to take in his way of moving, and memorized the comments as best as I could, until, inevitably, the match came to an end.

"Before we end this," I asked with a slightly labored breathing: "Why is it that you call the name of your attacks out loud?"

"Exhaling during the blow lends strength to it, and using the names you've given to the attacks make them real." was the cryptic answer.

He charged forward, his voice loud in the misty glow of the endless night of Thriller Bark: "Three Pace Hum Night Slash!"

I mimicked him shouting my lungs out in a scream without words as I pushed my Armament as far as I could.

The swords met as we swung one on the other, a grinding sound screaming in my ears as each blade surpassed the other and found the flash of the opponent. Shusui cut cleanly across my chest, dragging a slightly oblique line through my left pectoral, opening the Heavenly Dragon's mark in two as my Haki clad borrowed katana bisected the torso of the samurai at the heart's height.

"Yohohoho..." he laughed slowly as he fell apart, his shadow almost reluctantly leaving Ryuma's body: "You're unworthy of Shisui..." and as I snarled between the surprising pain and the in my opinion uncalled for insult, he continued: "You're neither swordsman nor King, but you have the soul of a real fighter... so perhaps you'll be worthy of Shusui...one day..."

I handled carefully the sublime weapon, admiring its every aspect and making use of the random knowledge from my past lives to appraise it. Shusui was a black blade with a distinct reddish-purple reverse wave hardening line (or hamon) belonged to a Kanemoto style and its hand-guard (or tsuba) had flower-like edges. It also had no accessories whatsoever on the hilt, and I appreciated the simplicity. Kashira, tsuba, and kojiri end cap were golden, and its sheath was black, decorated with dark red circles split into even thirds. In descriptive terms, I knew that Shusui was a Hira Zukuri katana with a black blade, it had a solid hilt with a samegawa wrapped around it. The kashira was identical to the kojiri found at the end of the sheath. The crossguard had the shape of a flower, with the sides being of a burnt gold while the edge was of a lighter shade. There were two half-circle holes on each side of the blade. A saw hamon pattern adorned the sides of the blade in a shining dark magenta while the hamon of the blade was colored purple, though it was equally as dark as the black bo-hi.

I had known it from both the anime and the manga, but holding it between my hands... it was surprisingly beautiful. I knew that one couldn't just pick up a sword and become a swordsman, but the temptation was strong. I had haki already, and it was steadily, if slowly, improving. What did I need a katana for? *And yet... The more time I spend in the One Piece world, the more I come to realize that truth about the principles that regulated the existence of this reality can't simply be observed in a safe environment. Willing or not, I have learned more about Haki in the three days since my stranding the Tenryubito's ship than what I have been able to discern through years of diligent experiments and study.* Besides I wanted to understand how could Kin'emon set fire to stuff with his katanas? In theory, he did as Luffy and Sanji, using attrition with air to create flames, but knowing it in words didn't satisfy me. In the same way that knowing that kicking the air could let me fly hadn't satisfied me until I proved myself capable of it. And then, experiencing it had revealed more about the how that I could ever be able to with only seeing others do it.

Kin'emon managed to bring fire into reality just like Brook had been able to bring frost, I was sure that in the manga Vista had materialized rose petals against Mihawk. And neither had something to do with their fruits. The first managed to create clothes out of stones, the second simply turned Brook into a soul inhabiting a skeleton instead of a still-living skeleton. Perhaps their understanding of the element had been enough to allow them to express it through swords? Or it simply represented a key part of their personality, and as swordsmen, they had managed to express it in their swordsmanship? In the manga, Brook was all about the power of the soul, both with his music and his fight when in Big Mom's territory, and years spent as a lost soul in the Florian triangle were bound to leave an impact of some kind. I sighed, shaking my head and securing Shusui to my side, right besides the sword I had used against the samurai.

It has yet to show any kind of change, but I literally just picked it up, so it can become something better? I could never resist mysteries. I reprimanded myself, before sighing tiredly and starting my walk up to the castle where the rest of the Shichibukai's crew was waiting for the slaughter.

An hour later, I had crossed the apparently haunted forest and reached the central mansion, and for my walk I had freely exploded my King's Ambition when I felt surrounded, either by zombies, spider zombies, hunted trees, or the fearful people that I perceived sulking around.

Unsheathing Shusui, I held it with both hands, Armament Haki running down my arms and over it. With a surprised grunt, I felt that while it traveled much faster over it, the meito sword felt lost eager to be covered by it, even if the blade remained visible, albeit with her colors taking darker shade.

And I swung the blade.

Breaking Canon

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BREAKING CANON

As the weapon cut through the air, a growl escaped my lips, feeling that the movement required much more strength than what I had expected it to. But the end result was undeniable.

A purple slash left the edge of the blade and traveled through the air until it impacted the tall double doors that granted me access to the mansion. Instead of being cut along the line of the flying slash however, the heavy wood reinforced with bands of iron buckled and bent, like I had clubbed it, and released a low *boom*. I frowned, considering the possible meaning of my failed attack, and experimentally, I chose to try once more, this time trying to cut vertically along the line where the two doors closed.

I rose Shusui over my head and took a deep breath: "Ha!" I let out my breath with the downward slash, and another purple slash left the blade only to impact the doors where I had aimed it to. And once more, a low *boom* signaled that the objective had felt the attack like it came from a blunt weapon. I growled in irritation as I saw the doors fail to sustain the damage I had inflicted and fell inwards, announcing my presence to all the residents.

In Paradise, Haki made you OP in every situation, there was no denying it: as a swarm of animated carpets, portraits, suits of armor, chairs, and whatever came to overwhelm me, I let my dismissive gaze was over them, finding once again the correct 'forma mentis' for my Conqueror's Haki to come into the fray. It exploded out of me like a clap of thunder without sound, or a wave without water. Amidst the falling shadow-animated constructs, I walked calmly into Moria's mansion, my Ambition blazing around me like an invisible storm. How could mooks raise to my level? "Shadows shouldn't try to grab the sun." I spoke with quiet authority, and my words carried over to the quickly emptying halls, echoing with a weight that had nothing to do with my tone, and all to do with my will.

As I walked, Observation Haki let me know of what my eyes had missed, so I took a half step back to avoid a blow and slashed with Shusui, the black blade tearing apart the once invisible form of Absalom.

He fell to the ground without any form of resistance in two separate thuds after I had already walked away. I followed the lead dictated by my Color of Observation and locked in on the biggest presence in the mansion, walking at a brisk pace but without a hurry, nobody was escaping.

After a while, I reached a wide circular room furnished with bright lamps that cast deep shadows with the furniture and the columns that held up the ceiling both, likely it was the battleground chosen by the Shichibukai.

As I expected, in a very dramatic way, a vortex of shadows climbed over a lit surface, soon becoming a well-defined shape and quickly shedding its shadow and staring me down in what I assumed was an attempt at intimidation. *Likely he doesn't know I have already killed Absalom, weren't they on the same crew back when he attempted to sail into the New World?* I wondered, taking stock of his strange form. "Kishishishishi, do you know how many troubles you just fell into?"

Moria was an abnormally large humanoid creature with very distinct, devil-like features. He was almost seven meters tall, and appeared out of a swirling vortex of shadows in all of his strange pear-shaped creepiness. Seriously, which kind of laws were followed by people in One Piece? He had two horns protruding from the sides of his forehead and stitches running vertically from the top of his face and down his neck, which was extremely long and thick in comparison to his body. His ears and teeth were both pointed, while his lower body was relatively fat and stubby in comparison. Moria's hair was red and his skin was of a sickly pale blue, matching his lips, armbands and the edges of his gloves. His coat and gloves were black, while his pants were bright orange with pale window shapes imprinted on them. He wore a fishnet shirt underneath a cravat, a necklace, and a blue crucifix-like ornament with claw-like appendages sprouting out from three of the cross's points. "Didn't you find any better clothes on the bodies you stole from the graves?" I asked with a slight curl of my lip before he could start his evil-overlord spiel.

As he hissed his outrage and straightened his unholy long neck to make clear the difference between us, I whirled on myself and cut the mass of shadows that was creeping over me with a gleaming pair of scissors ready to try and cut away my shadow. Shisui made contact and its black edge enforced by my Armament Haki *cut*. *Surprise attacks really don't hold well against Haki*. I thought dismissively.

Twin screams of pain left the Schichibukai and his shadow construct while I completed the twirl on myself and lunged towards the real Moria with all the speed I could muster. As the distance between us quickly shortened, my eyes trailed over the deep gash over the pirate's chest, which was spilling blood like a fountain. *With Haki the wounds inflicted on the shadow carry over to the real body*. I realized and shelved that info, focusing on my attack.

In all manga and anime, there is never such a thing as a quick battle against an opponent with an important backstory. That is mostly because any author would be pretty annoyed at erasing all the work invested on a character only to

describe the vast difference in power between him and another one. Even when one was clearly OP in respect to another, the stronger one always played around with his pray, taunting and holding back in order to give the other a sporting chance. Or like when Superman faced an absolutely normal opponent which happened to have the only kryptonite made ring of the world. All of that was a nerfing dictated by market necessities.

None of it was valid in my case: faster than Moria could react, Shusui plunged deep into his round belly, and I tore it sideways, gutting the Shichibukai in less than two seconds flat, and as his guts spilled out of his now open-air belly, the meito grade blade completed its trajectory and I called it back to me with a slash in the opposite direction, jumping upwards at the same time.

For a fraction of a second, the panicked, pained eyes of the overlarge pirate widened realizing what was going to happen, and my Observation noticed him reaching out towards his shadow, trying to swap places with it. But his darker twin was still wailing in pain on the ground, and it caused a slight delay in its answer to Moria's command.

It was enough time for me. The blade seemed to phase through the bluish skin of my opponent's neck, and blood started gushing out from the beheaded form of the once-Shichibukai as the head fell towards the ground, the surprised expression going slightly slack during the fall.

I looked at the body, seeing as Moria's head cast a small shadow in the bright lights of the room, and just to be sure, after I cleaned and sheathed Shisui, I took out my other unnamed katana, Armament Haki briefly covering it as I stabbed the Shichibukai in the left eye, making sure that the blade hit the floor. As there were no shouts of any kind, I let go of my Armament, feeling the strain caused by keeping it active for such a long time. It was the same tiredness that would hit someone after an extremely investing game of chess, or a difficult math problem. I was mentally exhausted: the strain of remaining in a conflict ready mentality since I landed on Thriller Bark had paid off. But damn if it wasn't tiring.

An hour later, I was sitting in the kitchen after having whipped up something edible from the surprisingly well-stocked cabinets of the Shichibukai, enjoying the actually good red wine from a fuking silver goblet that I had previously dumped in a pot of boiling water, I didn't want to deal with whatever bacteria the zombies responsible for meals had left around. I had cleaned the wound Ryuma had inflicted me and bandaged it, noting that it was shallow enough that it didn't require stitches. Even then, I wondered if Ryuma aoided cutting deeper willingly or if it had been just my unreliable luck.

Moria's head sill had my sword embedded in it, and was watching me from the other end of the long wooden table, when Brook joined me: "Yohoho, it's done then?" I let the context speak for itself and I gestured towards the fridge: "There's likely milk in there, feel free to join me before the people that lost their shadow to Moria find out that he's dead and invade the place."

With a graceful nod, the humming skeleton accepted my offer and sat with an air that could only be called peaceful in front of me. After a while, he couldn't resist and asked: "What are you going to do now? The World Government will not let you roam freely."

I shrugged, the World Government wasn't going to deploy anyone of relevant strength anytime soon in Paradise, and as long as I stood away from the East Blue, I wouldn't attract by mistake Garp's attention, which was one of the few I was certain I couldn't survive as I was now: "I told you, for now, I'm going towards Alabasta, from there to the Reverse Mountain and then North Blue. After that, I'll finish collecting my crew and wait for a certain lift..." I stopped there, unwilling to tell Brook about my plans regarding the Rumble Rumble Fruit, "After that..." I sighed, considering my options. It had become clear, especially after the battle against Ryuma, that fighting strong opponents was the better way to figure out the ins and outs of this world. Whether they regarded Haki or simple physiology. "I'll set for the New World, take on the Emperors, sink the Red Line..." I grinned when I saw Brook going slack-jawed from the surprise. "Moria had a bounty of 320.000.000 beli before it was frozen, I'm sixteen years old, I'd say I have a good chance at figuring out the One Piece itself."

I want to truly understand and master both Haki and the powers of the Devil Fruit I will eat sooner or later, and it is obvious that conflict make me learn much faster than otherwise, so the road to the top was a must. And since I am already gunning for the top, I might as well take my sweet revenge on the Heavenly Dragons.

As I said those words, I experimentally dug deep into myself and exploded a small burst of Conqueror's Haki, and I saw the skeleton briefly sag against the back of his chair but without going unconscious, if it was because I wasn't deliberately targeting him with the feel of 'you're nothing' or because I was tired from my excursion on Thriller Bark I didn't know yet. "Join my crew." I stated clearly when I saw that he was losing himself amongst his own thoughts.

With a trembling smile on his featureless skull, Brook accepted.

Recruitment Spiel

RECRUITMENT SPIEL

(and light bullying of future employees)

A month later

Without supernatural carpenters, it had taken several days to take up to speed the ship that once belonged to the Rumber Pirates, and even longer to bully into compliance the men that had found themselves back with their shadows but were originally skeptical that a sixteen years old such as me managed to take down the one who had overcome them all. When they tried to attack me, Brook cut them down or I relied on small bursts of Conqueror's Haki to dispatch them.

Once the hull had been repaired to the best of our abilities, I had the mooks that were grateful for their survival with glorious, fat oot. Clumps of gold and silvers, chests of jewels, stacks of beli, whatever we fancied

Brook had proved himself quite the musician like I knew he would, and we bonded over my vast repertory of songs of various kinds, since I had been one of the people that were able to string together some music on both guitar and piano, but lacked the ability to sing along. So, as we left Thriller Bark with random carpenters and pirates that hoped to build a new life for themselves in Water 7 as the makeshift crew to sail the massive galleon, the Humming Skeleton led us along Radioactive, by the Imagine Dragons: which had been tailored because nobody knew what a prison bus was or what radioactive meant.

A week into our voyage, a storm befitting of the Grand Line tried to sink us, but with the many men's manning the ship, I managed to steer out outside of it, keeping our route for Water 7. A few days after, a Sea King tried his luck with us. A snake-like creature twice as big as our ship, with a mane of feathers and a fanged beak, only for me to Moonwalk into the air tear his skull open with my bare hands.

Whatever reservation the men had in following a sixteen years old kid disappeared quickly. And while islands were spotted in more than one occasion, I preferred to keep us going, not broadcasting my position after taking out Moria would make it so that Marines wouldn't be able to predict my route, and soon enough, we spotted Water 7. Thankfully, we were lucky enough to never cross another ship, be it either a marine or pirate vessel.

As we made land on the Rocky Cape, a relatively small "Ok people." I stated clearly, calling to me the attention of everyone. "Grab your shit and leave my ship." I curtly ordered, observing calmly as the assorted pirates left. Not a single one of them tried to steal anything from me nor made resistance to my orders, maybe they were intimidated by Brook silently looming over them, maybe they were extremely aware of their fresh memories of me tearing through Shichibukai and Sea Kings with ease. Anyway, I didn't care. I liked Brook, in my opinion, music was one of the highest expressions of mankind's hopes and dreams. And while his strange random request of seeing women's panties were aggravating, he'd been overjoyed to find out that being the second in command on a ship where we simply hosted miscellanea pirates terrified by me and my power, meant that several of the women actually gifted their undergarments to him.

And soon he was overcome by despair as he realized he didn't have a dick to have sex with. Unexpectedly, that brought the Skull Jokes to an end. *I wonder if this is the beginning of an Oz parody. A skeleton in search for a dick, a pirate in look for a Devil Fruit.* I laughed quietly at the image, quite satisfied by the loot we had been able to store in Brook's ships' hull. Moria had been preparing to invade the New World for years, storing away every penny he could spare.

I left Brook on the ship to guard it and reminded him that with a crew of two we would hardly be able to sail it, so that he should choose which parts of it he wanted to save. "I don't wish to see this ship being torn apart without necessity, captain John." He objected, and after having observed his resolve, I nodded my acceptance: I would find out if carpenters of Galley-La were amenable to keep the ship safe in one of the inner ports, since I knew that it wouldn't be prudent keeping it anchored by itself otherwise. "I'll look around."

As I walked around Water 7, I looked around, marveling at the wonders that the people had been able to build: there were water-ways and canals used for transportation almost like roads, more often than not surrounded by sidewalks on the canals. I saw many of the citizens use Bulls often attached to boats to move around the city. With almost a nostalgic eye, I saw that there were 3 main types of bulls, the 2 smaller sizes only were used for transport. The architecture all around was very colorful, often using a tan or peach color for the walls and roofs while nearly all the roofs were of red color and texture. The houses were tiered to allow for more houses to take up room and were usually made keeping in mind the city sinks. Some Canals were wide enough for ships, but those were mostly just to let some ships enter the city so they may be docked somewhere. The city itself resembled a giant fountain in a volcano shape because of the tiered system of building houses.

I walked around keeping my eyes wide open and my ears peeled to the ground. If my timeline was correct, and it was, I was born around 22 years before canon events started, it was confirmed since I was 13 years old when Jimbe became a Shichibukai, and I was more or less 16 years old now, likely going 17. Time had been wobbly while I was in chains, but that Brook had been captured less than a year before my trip in Thriller Bark, meant that I was in the year when Franky go Pluton Blueprints from Iceburg and Robin got recruited by Crocodile.

After a few hours, I had managed to find a relatively honest buyer for my gold, of which I had brought a sample in order for

the man to set a price that I would hold him to once I hauled the rest of the loot out of the ship to be sold.

I sat down in a cafe and while drinking simple chilled water I fished a used News Coo from a table and looked over the news. It seemed that 'a dangerous red-haired pirate with two swords' had recently killed Moria, but since Shanks' presence had been confirmed in the New World when he 'went on a rampage' after receiving his 4,048,900,000 beli of bounty (I translated with 'threw a big-ass party that destroyed something the World Government liked whole'). The best way to learn important news, however, was always to listen to the people gossip, and Observation Haki made it ridiculously easy.

Among the inane chatter, there was still talking of a pervert thug with light blue hair who had recently stormed the mayor Iceburg's office, before disappearing with a storm of curses and punches thrown at the security.

After that, I moved as fast as I could without grabbing attention to the ship, where I picked up three big chests of loot that I had previously set up, before returning to the gold buyer. I sold the mixture of gold, silver, jewels, and random stuff for a whopping 350.000.000 beli, with the bonus of seeing the shady man crying a bit when he realized he couldn't even try to bargain me out of what I asked. With the big suitcases held in my left hand, I walked towards the scrapyard, blasting with the King's ambition the random thugs who tried to ambush me, and soon enough I had reached the one day infamous Franky House.

"So," I talked politely while entering the doors I had kicked off their hinges: "Who's in charge here?" a memory of a younger me making the same question to a bunch of random pirates surged forward on its own and I couldn't contain a smile.

From what I could see and the confused impressions carried over by my Observation Haki, the Frankly Family had yet to properly start. While it was true that the cyborg was already sprawled on a couch like he owned the place, there were still wary glances tossed around, and a not well-hidden fear of the half-human half-machine that apparently gave orders like confetti. *Should I pick him up too? He sprouts some random Super shit, but at the end of the day, he wasn't a complete pushover, and he was far less annoying than many other in the ship.*

I sat in front of the cyborg, and dropped the suitcases on the table, just in time for every thug, half-mook, and assorted NPCs to dig out their guns and point them at me. As I leaned back and rested my back against a couch, I let go of the control I had forced upon myself. The Color of the King blazed, and everyone fell, while Franky tried to stand only to fall back due to a sudden knee weakness. "Wha... what have you..." he was looking around with eyes that were slightly glazed over, as if he was still fighting against my previous display of Ambition: "I want to purchase your services." I grinned widely.

Once he managed to recover his wit, he looked warily at me, knowing that I wasn't one to be fucked with, nor one that he could simply say no to. Intimidation was a side effect of the King's will. Even so, proving himself to be far different from your common character in One Piece, he squared his shoulders and asked: "It depends on the work and on the pay."

At least he has a spine. I whistled appreciatively before letting an honest smile on my face: "Well, it's more like a set of works, but I can pay well." I opened the two suitcases and snorted when I saw Franky's steel jaw come undone from its hinges and fall on the ground. "These are 350.000.000 beli, I can procure more if needed, but we'll work with this as... let's say deposit."

Franky produced a screwdriver and nodded at me while he was busy putting back in its rightful place the fallen jaw: "It depends on the jobs." he repeated, smelling the opportunity of being paid more than what was already on the table.

"I've never been good at negotiation, I much prefer it when everybody knows which cards are around, so, I'll show you mine before proving that I know yours:" I scratched my head and briefly used Observation Haki to check for not unconscious people or transponder snails that would rely my words to someone else. Finding neither, I talked: "I have a galleon on Rock Cape that needs a check-up and a place inside Water 7 where it will be safe from the Aqua Laguna, with the assurance that it won't be in any way damaged, preyed upon, dismantled, or even looked at in a way that isn't respectful." *Brook you owe me one for this.* "Second, I want you to purchase as much Adam wood as you can and store it." in the moment I saw his eyes shine with a mixture of surprise and hunger for the opportunity of completing his dream much sooner than he expected, I briefly flared my ambition, reminding him who he was talking with.

"Yes," I repeated, "only store in a safe place." I shrugged unapologetically: "And I want you to hold on before starting the project of the next Oro Jackson, since I have other two people in mind besides me that could lend their expertise to better the final work."

At that Franky took offence: "Whoever you've got in mind is not as qualified as me." his face was serious and his tone flat, lacking that vibrant personality he was famous for in the manga. He felt like allowing others in on his dream would be a disservice to Tom's teachings or some such tripe for which I had no patience for.

"Did you know that there are islands in the sky?" I asked rhetorically, "Or underwater?" at his raising eyebrows I kept up my improvised recruitment spiel: "I want a ship capable of sailing the sky, the sea, and its depths. That's why I'm telling you to wait for me to bring together the others."

"Who would these others be?" he asked crossing his arms on his chest: "For that matter, who are you?"

I smiled grimly, introducing myself in a properly dramatic manner: "I'm the one who became captain of a pirate ship at 13, I'm the one that ended up in the New World and came back, I'm the man who tore apart Thriller Bark, home of the Shichibukai Moria, and erased the fucker from existence. I'm the one who knows that there are people building a submarine capable of withstanding the pressures and currents of the New World, I'm the one who as seen an Ark that

managed to fly up to the moon. **I'm the man who requires a ship that will have to surpass the Oro Jackson.**" As I spoke those last words, I pushed as much as I could my Ambition of The Supreme King, forcing it to the point where Franky's eyes fell shut in denial of my presence and the small table over which the money was placed trembled.

A second later, everything was gone back to normal, and Franky was gasping for his breath, even if he fought to not lose its composure, keeping his arms crossed on his chest.

"I want the Red Line, and those fuckers above it, **gone.**" I stated, momentarily losing control over myself: "I want the Ancient Weapons forgotten as they should, and I want you, Cutty Flam, out of the World Government hands, and so as the third job, I want you as the Carpenter for the greatest ship to ever sail Blues, Paradise and New World."

Once again, his jaw fell on the ground, this time carrying his ears with it.

4 months later

In the past months, I had freely enjoyed Paradise, even if the Marine had forced my hand in more than one occasion, either following me to this or that relatively unknown island or simply by spotting the cutter realized for three people that I used to sail around and choosing to attack it. I didn't have a Jolly Roger Yet, since I didn't have a proper ship that acted as an actual vessel for my crew. For some months still, I would roam with whatever I managed to get my hands on, be it marine vessel, a fisherman's barrel, or whatever. After Franky had accepted my offer back on Water 7, he started following my directions, while Brook came with me once I left Water Seven for the next target: Alabasta. Brook had dropped me off on one side of the Sandora river and kept sailing through the country. We would meet once more at Nanohana before sailing again towards the island nearest to the reverse mountain. Frankly, since I knew Crocodile had an organization of bounty hunters operating in the area, I hoped that he would have several permanent Log Poses to Whiskey Peak at least, but given that Vivi and her forgettable companion had been able to reach Laboon to try and kill it, maybe I would be able to avoid the curb-stomping of the NPCs at Whiskey Peak.

In the week that I had spent to find my wits and get used to the place, I learned a few things. The desert heat was oppressive, the sand annoying, and the people *stank*.

Capital or not, it was still a horrible place to live in. Sure, I had removed the cloth that kept my eyes hidden and actually marveled at the beauty of the dawn over the desert, and I had enjoyed the starry sky as well, even if the nocturnal cold had annoyed me greatly. Even with my blindfold on, I couldn't deny the honest beauty of the desert, it was clear as the unmerciful sun: the desert only wished to kill the humans who traversed it.

Insects hid less than an inch under the sand who could unleash enough poison with a single bite to kill an elephant. Sand that suddenly became a hole who would have not let me escape. The *giant* insects that somehow felt my steps and came with friends to feast on me. Oh, and bandits, an unsettlingly large number of them. I had reached the Sandora river two days before, and I walked against the current for two days. Crocodile's stew had been less disgusting than I had believed.

I heard that the Shichibukai had a base in Alabasta, and since I knew he was recruiting, I hoped to cross Robin's path before she struck any kind of accord with him. I was crossing the seedier parts of the capital, my Haki identifying shapes and discarding them faster than my brain could process: I was in luck. Haki read intent, and a man whose looks screamed 'underling for a secret organization' crossed my path less than fifteen minutes into my research. I followed him without missing a step, and once he entered a secondary, empty alley pointing to his destination I rammed my wrapped up walking cane on his vagus nerve. He crumbled without a sound. I lifted briefly my blindfold and patted his form down, emptying his pockets.

Money was always welcome, but a particular wrinkled piece of paper was the one to claim most of my attention. Scribbled, or better yet, smudged on it '...5... 2 ales' *If this isn't a dumbass recognition code I don't know what it is.* I lowered my blindfold and went on, my fake cane tapping here and there on the ground, giving the illusion I didn't know perfectly where I was going. Like every disgusting facade-for-the-black-market-pub, the seedy tavern I had stepped into had even private booths in which people could talk face to face, hidden from the other clients by a more or less thick curtain.

I dropped a random number of bills on the counter and left a finger pinning them down. "Two ales." I grumbled with a threatening smile. The fact that my blindfolded eyes never left the barman wasn't lost on anyone. While the slightly nervous man was busy spilling the beverage, I scanned my surroundings. *Ok, a lot of bad intentions, what else?*

Then I saw her. Steel, hammered around a core I couldn't perceive. Her voice was self-control and viciousness. I knew she wasn't the Straw Hat's archeologist right now. She was the woman who had been on the run since she was eight, killing, spying, and stealing in order to not be robbed, spied upon or killed.

I grabbed a couple of ales in my left and walked toward the booth I had perceived she was in, dutifully tapping my 'cane' to find the way. I ducked under the curtain and slid in front of my future crewmate. *Helpfully, that is.*

"You are not my contact." She accused me, the weight of a knife resting against my jugular. I smiled, she knew what she was doing I could concede that much.

"If you couldn't figure out that much I would have already left." I nodded slowly, "But I am an employer nevertheless."

"Oh?" there wasn't any kind of curiosity nor warmth in her voice, and I was acutely aware of the knife pressed against my throat by hands which had sprouted from the wall behind me.

"My true name, which I hope you'll hold to yourself, is Davi D. Jhon." I said, slurring the D. like usual, with my right hand slowly and unthreateningly rising to remove my blindfold. When my eyes found hers I noticed her raised eyebrow.

I shrugged lightly, careful to not cut myself against the blade on my neck. *A butterfly knife, really?*

"You wouldn't believe how many idiots are willing to pickpocket a blind man in an empty alley, and how many are willing to spare a gulp of water for the less fortunate." I explained.

Her eyes narrowed of a fraction, but the pressure of the knife didn't ease, so I went ahead. "Tenryubitos have this... ah, fetish, I guess, of marking their property with a hot iron in the shape of a dragon's paw. A circle with three triangles upwards and one downwards." At the light curl of her upper lip, I knew that she was aware of the practice.

"Usually, the ones destined to be used as sex slaves receive the mark in the middle of their backs, while the others wherever their new owner chooses." I slowly unbuttoned my shirt, revealing the mark on my left pectoral with a blank face. For the first time since I slid in the booth, I saw Nico Robin blink.

"Why does your misfortune impact me?" She asked, her tone less gravely than before.

"Because I'm going to spin this world **on its ear**." I *spoke*. I poured everything I had into my words, and I felt my will surge forward from deep within, for a single instant, I felt like I did when I had instinctively answered to Whitebeard's challenge. A wave, a blaze, an earthquake, a rumbling thunder that promised the fury of a lightning storm instead of following one... I saw Nico Robin's eyes flutter close for a moment, her shoulders sagging and the knife fell from her summoned extra limbs, which disappeared in a handful of pink petals.

I let my unending rage quiet down, letting myself relax against the wall, smirking at her now wide eyes: "Marejois destroyed Ohara because it feared the True History of the world, including the events during the Void Century, the hundred-year period before the Great Kingdom." with that, I had her attention: "You hide what you fear, organizations are no different, when I'm done, the World Nobles will be buried *under* the Red Line, and not enjoying the pain of other humans at the top."

Robin's hands were gripping the edge of the table, a flicker of fear passed briefly over her before she regained control over herself. "What do you want from me?"

"Why, to join me, and research truth, obviously!" I smiled at her.

She narrowed her eyes in mistrust, causing me to sigh: "I can hardly believe that an eight years old girl sunk a single battleship, let alone six, not with your Devil Fruit." I tilted my head: "Money matters to me only in the measure of what knowledge it can buy. I'm not interested in the Ancient Weapons, frankly, the fewer weapons around, the better. Honestly, I'm more of a free-thinker than a pirate, but explaining it to anyone but you would be pointless." I added., eager to make her relax.

"I gain nothing from joining you, I can keep researching on my own can't I?" She hissed back.

"So you *are* researching?" I pointed out friendly before going on: "I am very knowledgable, I know the position of several Phoneglyphs, among the other things."

"A bold statement..." She sat down again: "What kind of things?"

"You wish to work for a Shichibukai so that his clout will keep you away from the hunters. In short, you want a place where you can let your hair relatively down, which means either being around someone able to hide you from the World Government, which with the Chyper Pol around is unlikely, strong enough to shield you from it, which brings us to an Emperor, the Revolutionaries, or a Shichibukai. The first two would use you, to read the Phoneglyphs and then kill you, to embolden their propaganda with the tragedy of Ohara, while the third would sell you back to the W. G. with their privileged channels, after using you." I summed up: "Curious how much the Emperors' behavior matches the one of the Shichibukai." At her raised eyebrow, I amended my previous statement: "Okay, maybe Whitebeard would adopt you, but he has to consider the impact on the rest of his men. For now, the New World is balanced, but your existence in his crew would mobilize the Admirals, which would damage is beloved sons, so..." I shrugged slightly leaving my words hanging.

"What could I gain from working with you? You cannot shield me like the others you named could. And even if you could, wouldn't you sell me away like the others? If the Emperors do not want the hassle, the Shichibukai can't wait to kowtow to the World Government and the Revolutionaries parade me around for the rest of my life, why wouldn't you follow any of their behavior?" her tone was frosty, but I knew that she was feeling a mixture of fear and rage.

"You've not been listening, Robin, I care about the Truth. I want to understand *everything*, and the World Government is in the way, even more so, they want to keep something under wraps." I fished out from the side of my shirt my own bounty poster, laying it face down on the table as I picked up a pen from my pocket to write over it: The Empty Throne is Not empty.

As her wide eyes rose from the paper to stare at me while her mouth opened in a small surprise 'o', I grinned: "Im going to pick a fight with Crocodile, steal his shit and if you want, accompany you to the Poneglyph while he recovers in a hospital." I offered her my hand to rise from her bench, and before accepting, she turned the paper, reading my bounty, which had only a description and a hand-drawn shape as they had been unable to take a picture of me yet.

It wasn't accurate at all, my hair was way spikier, I dressed better than with a generic grey shirt and black trousers, and I

never used both of the swords I held at my side. They even lacked my name the poor fools, even if the list of my accomplishments was somehow reliable: killed Moria, disappeared after having destroyed his island, I had been credited with the sinking of no less than two Marine Captain's ship and it was said that I traveled with a skeleton puppet. Which was all kinds of wrong in Brook's opinion, but we would likely all become infamous with enough time. For now, I would settle for 350.000.000 beli of bounty.

AN

I know that the whole interaction with Franky could have been handled better, given the timeline, I could have had the MC swipe away pluton plans, but the would make Davi D. Jhon aware of their content, meaning that I, as the author, should pull out of my ass an Ancient Weapon. So I didn't want t touch an element that hasn't been explained or shown in the manga. So my choices towards Franky are mostly from a stylistic viewpoint since I don't wish to write a story that works against the 'rules' set up by Oda.

And catching Robin before she got working for Crocs was simply how I felt like doing it.

And yes, I know what you're thinking: 'three chapters in two days? WHAAAAT?' I had Robin ready a month ago, today I simply played with Franky jaw a bit and set up the next small arc.

What can I say, I'm on fire.

Crocs on the Rocks

CROCS ON THE ROCKS

a week later

Maybe wisely, Robin had chosen to stay under the radar in the capital, while I left to deal with the Crocodile in his crocodile shaped pyramid in Rainbase. So I had crossed the Sandora river once again, leaving the Capital behind me and hopefully my next crewmate.

I entered the pyramid with a wide smile and the blindfold still on, slowly unwrapping Shusui from his leathery case before securing it at my side: there was no need to not make clear my intentions, I wouldn't have benefited in any way from civilians getting hurt. From outside, I noted that the pyramid lacked its giant golden crocodile, but it was likely because it was a few years from Baroque Works to go in full swing.

I followed my Observation, easily identifying the greatest life in the building. And listening carefully, I picked up the relentless greed of an ever-expanding desert. If it wasn't Crocodile, I couldn't imagine who else might be. Like all evil overlords, he was overseeing his quickly growing empire of bounty hunting and random nefarious activity in Alabasta. I quickly found the stairs and climbed up

Crocodile was a tall man with a wide chest, broad shoulders, muscular arms and legs, and a thick neck. He had pale skin and nape-length black hair which is kept neatly slicked back. Crocodile had various battle wounds, most notably a long stitched scar at the bridge of his nose that stretches across his face and a large hook made from a tough gold alloy in place of his left hand. His eyes are deep-set and heavy-lidded, and his thin eyebrows are characteristically drawn upward in the middle. All in all, he was the image of an Italian mafia boss, even if I had to admit that Bege was way better at actually managing a 'family'. Crocodile wore a bright orange, black-striped button-up vest over a long-sleeve peach shirt, along with a blue scarf, dark brown suit pants, and polished black shoes with gold buckles. He also wore a long, thick, dark pelted fur coat.

I freely admitted that he had his own very respectable 'style'. "Hello," I started, "you must be the fucker that's having fun around here, are you not?"

The man immediately sported a thick vein on his forehead, his irritation already bordering on rage because of my lack of any form of respect whatsoever: "I'm David Jhon." I mockingly bowed my head a little.

I jumped forward, ducking under a blade of sand as I somersaulted over another. I spun and wove my way through his attacks with the supernatural awareness granted me by Observation Haki. When he suddenly came closer, I punched him when he tried to stab me with his poisonous hook, Haki enhancing my strength and allowing me to hit the Logia user.

The Shichibukai crumbled on the ground, losing control of his form for an instant and allowing me to slam my heel into his stomach, making his eyes bulge out of pain. "You see, the thing with logia users in Paradise is that they don't bother considering that they can be killed just like everything else." He was still reeling in pain on the ground when I unsheathed Shusui. "And I have to say, Moria had surprisingly enough force me to dodge before I gutted him." I coated the blade in haki and slashed over his face, careful to not kill him, but cutting deep enough to leave a scar.

"You dare!" he roared rising in a cloud of sand in front of me, ready to retaliate: "When you report it to the Marines like the good, loyal dog that you are, tell them, *exactly* how it went. Oh, and I have a message: 'Doflamingo is not the only one who *knows*. Better they tread carefully with me, okay?'. Don't be gloom, you've lost a hand, you'll manage without a leg too." and the black blade fell once more, severing the left leg without meeting any resistance.

As the man howled in pain, the sword's hilt slammed on his forehead, sending him into the realm of Morpheus. And I left as quick as I had come, eager to leave the blasted place. *If humans were meant to live in deserts, they would have scales.* Overconfident shits with their Logia Powers were all idiots. Even ignoring the weakness to water that placed the Sand Logia at the bottom of the food chain, Crocodile was a fucking idiot. *I mean, you want to be king? Stage a fucking coup, don't spend years fucking around for the sake of feeling important. Look at Doflamingo, he did it in a single night!*

I turned on myself, and started to look around for stuff to steal. In less than one hour, I had been successful: like every respectable boss of an evil organization, Crocodile was an orderly man, and I left with a small bag filled with eternal log poses of what I presumed was the first half of the Grand Line, and a much bigger one that dwarfed me which contained gold and valuable knick-knacks.

Two days later, just after the sunset, I met again with Robin near the King's palace, which was conveniently placed to cover the Poneglyph. As we walked towards the secret entrance that anybody with Observation Haki could have found, I told her about the fate of Crocodile. "So you won." She said, her hat hanging low and covering her his chin eyes: "Why did you leave him alive?"

I grinned lightly and blindfolded myself once more, before wrapping a sheathed Shusui in leather once again. It made for a slightly arched cane, and if I kept up with my growth spurt, soon it would be too short for me to pretend it was walking aid for the poor blind me. I sighed, considering my options for a future substitute sword. Sure as hell Brook could make a better use of it than me. But I would need to teach him Haki along with pushing him towards a better understanding of his own powers.

"Well, someone should relay to the WG that I am the one who offed Moria, and I'm tired of not having a proper bounty." I grinned: "So I threatened the World Government." as she looked at me with an unblinking gaze, I simply kept tapping the ground randomly, forcing my Observation Haki to find the secret mechanism that freed the hidden passage to the depths of the ground. "Don't hate the rulers of this kingdom, they honestly believe that they're protecting their people by keeping this hidden."

"Too bad that I'm interested in all of History." she replied walking behind me, and causing me to grimace a bit as we walked down the stairs: "You'll find very little history down here, the hidden nature of the Alabasta Poneglyph is to conceal its existence from the people and not protect it, as Alabasta is an affiliate of the World Government, united against the creators of the Poneglyph... well I'm pretty sure you can guess what it speaks of."

Soon enough we were in the vast underground room, a dejected Robin reading the ancient knowledge as I untied my blindfold to see my first poneglyph. It was... underwhelming: a big square rock. I focused my Observation, already knowing that the only ones to ever been able to hear Sea Kings talk or even get an impression of the poneglyphs had been Gol D. Roger and Monkey D. Luffy. I got nothing, nothing beyond the shape of the big rock.

As I shifted my focus towards Robin, I noted how her shoulders were just a tiny bit slumped, sign that even with her outrageously good control over herself, she hadn't managed to completely hide her disappointment. I walked to her and handed over another bag I had prepared in the meantime: she opened it without thinking, still reeling from her most recent discovery.

"You're the only Scholar of Ohara alive, do you want to be the last?" I asked, curious to see how she would react: "For millenia, scholars and archaeologists thrived on Ohara, learning about history, a course of action that the World Government permitted only until they realized that the scholars were studying the forbidden Poneglyphs and the Void Century, they ordered the island's destruction."

Robin turned towards me with an expression that waded between rage and fear: "Where are you going with this? What do you hope to gain?"

"What value do you think I give to money? Power over others? Prestige?" I countered her questions: "Money is only useful in the measure of what it can buy, why would I care to order around people when I can simply befriend those with whom I share a common cause? Prestige means a bounty big enough that people will think twice before annoying me, leaving me alone to pursue my interests."

I took a step forward, indicating the large sheets of paper and coal sticks that could be used to copy the hidden knowledge, along with a leather-bound blank journal, and the fountain pen I had managed to make Franky craft for me before leaving Water 7. *People here still use either pencils or quill and ink, how the fuck does it make sense?* I was still baffled by the technological contradictions of the One Piece world. *And yet, a portable secure way to write down things looks like something that would enable easier transmission of knowledge... maybe the Elder Stars aren't completely dumb.* "I'd prefer if knowledge of the Ancient Weapons remained forgotten." I stated, "However, it's not up to me to choose what to do with the knowledge that your people was killed for. Will you let it die with you? Will you find, document, prove and divulge the truth? Will you find a new Ohara, and make sure to find people worthy of carrying its name?" I took another step towards the woman, causing her to inch backward, startled by the invasion of private space: "If you die, your knowledge dies with you, and the World Government wins."

I took a step back from her and turned, walking back to the stairs that led outside: "I'll strive to keep you alive, because those who look to understand the world around them shouldn't be forced to do so in the dark of secret ruins. But the choice to come with me and be companions in the search for Truth, keep going on your own, writing down what you know as a seed for another Tree of Knowledge to sprout one day, or let it to rot in the dark, it's only yours."

An hour later, I was sitting cross-legged on the ground with the wrapped Shusui held over my knees, my blindfolded eyes seeing everything with the clarity of an external observer. I perceived Robin climb back out from the ruin, the bag I had given her clutched between her arms and an utterly blank face. But I could see that while her eyes were dry, they were also reddened as they always are after the shedding of many tears.

She walked to my back after having activated the mechanism that hid the passage once more: "I'll come with you... captain."

Two weeks later, after having recovered the spoils from my fight with Crocodile, Robin and I had reached Nanohana, where Brook had made port with our relatively small sailboat.

With the iron self-control of the scary assassin and lone survivor that characterized Robin so well, she didn't even arch an eyebrow when she met Brook. Causing him to be thankful for her not pointing out that he lacked a penis due to his condition, and proceeded to try and perv on her, only to find arms sprout around him ready to break him apart. So, all went well.

Brook then proceeded to grill me because of the time spent incommunicado, to which I had a ready answer. "I have stolen a Permanent Log pose to Twin Capes." I told him simply, at which he melted in a puddle of tears and snot that a skeleton had no business in producing.

So our unlikely trio sailed once more in the Grand Line, and between Brook's ability to run on water, Robin familiarity with the Grand Line's weather, and my own not easily forgettable growing understanding of haki, we sailed for another month without problems, using the vast amount of Sea King meat to fill our stomach, the barrels of vinegar and lemon juice to

keep our vitamins high, and a system of pump and filters copyrighted by Franky to drink fresh water.

As we went and after we completed our respective introductions, I managed to bond with Brook and surprisingly enough Robin over Bob fucking Dylan songs, whose easygoing combination of guitar and harmonic conquered the Humming Skeleton, while the lyrics managed to interest the Devil Child.

The Reverse Mountain was big. there was no other way to put it. We first saw only that the sky in that direction had assumed a darker shade of blue, before realizing that it was actually brown, which revealed itself to be dark red once we were close enough. The Reverse Mountain: where the four Blues gave birth to the Grand Line, where everything in the manga truly began, and where there was a fucking giant whale.

We saw the lighthouse just to hear the eardrum-shattering cry of the whale ramming its head against the Red Line, Brook ran ahead over the surface of the water, violin in hand and rambling something about how cute Laboon looked 52 years before, when it had round teeth and was around the size of a small dinghy, just large enough to carry two or three men.

"Is he going to be eaten by the Sea King we just heard?" Robin guessed, causing me to guffaw: "No, Laboon is just an extremely large whale, comparable in size to most of the Calm Belt's Sea Kings, it's the only remaining member of Brook's original crew."

She looked at me like I was barking mad, but by the time she had finished unraveling the confusing mess that the situation looked like, we were in earshot of Brook, who was perched on a rock and pouring his soul in his music, the Sake no Bin echoing over the waves and causing the shaking of the rocks to stop.

Slowly, as if in a dream that couldn't be trusted, a dark shape made its way up from the depths, and I was reminded that huge couldn't quite capture the beast. His skin was of a blackish blue, coupled with short fins and a fluked tail, his head was crisscrossed with scars, each high enough to be considered a riverbed.

"His interior contains a complex network of metal chambers and tunnels, installed presumably by Crocus the man who tends to the lighthouse. They are necessary to deal with his habit of swallowing ships that challenge or annoy him." I explained to Robin while we looked for a place to make port: "The largest of these chambers should be built into his stomach, and it can receive newly-swallowed ships from his esophagus and allow them to leave through a set of gates leading to his blowhole."

At that lengthy explanation, she simply looked at me with her carefully crafted blank expression: "You know this in the same way you know of the... throne." she accused me, hesitating briefly when it came the time to talk about the Throne, like she was unsure it was even safe to talk about. I nevertheless smiled widely, letting her know that I wouldn't explain myself but that she was on the correct track.

We dropped the anchor along a small outcropping of rocks that looked sturdy enough to keep it from sailing away before walking towards the lighthouse, just in time to see Brook nod repeatedly to Crocus and immediately run back to his beloved Laboon. As we came close to the warden of the lighthouse, Robin likely wondering why the fuck someone would willingly go around with giant petals around the head, my eyes instinctively fell over the small form perched on the man's shoulder.

Crocus has an appearance-based off the flower with the same name, as seen with the petals around his head. He has a rather stocky and muscular body, while being bald on the top of his head, he had white hair with yellow flower petal-like things, that have purple near the bottom of them, and a white beard split in two parts. Like in the manga, he wore a pink shirt with a yellow and green stripe with purple circles in the yellow along with blueish-grey shorts with sandals. He also wore glasses, a seaweed necklace, three gold bracelets, and a green-gem bracelet on his left wrist. Nothing of that truly registered in my mind: my eyes were on the small form of an owl perched on the man's shoulder.

Observation Haki briefly encompassed the surrounding area, all of my attention squared on the avian creature: I was sure. "R... Ryoshi?" I wondered out loud, causing the owl to turn its head toward me, making it twist on his neck by 180 degrees. *Fucking hell it's actually my owl.* I was flabbergasted, which were the odds?

The owl looked at me with a range expression that managed to turn his beak in a threatening snarl, before he blinked a couple of times, opening his wings and stilling in place: "Hoot?"

I could guess that its meaning was 'What the fuck', because I was thinking the same thing: "How the hell did you end up here!?" I shouted as I strode forward and the bird took flight, squawking loudly and flapping me on the head several times before he finally settled down on my extended arm, he's wings flailing wildly as he let out a cacophony of hoots, squawks, clicks of the beak, ruffling of the feathers when he came to a particularly outrageous part of the story, and often hopping from one side of my forearm to my shoulder and back to describe what I assumed had been his desperate search for me once he returned to the camp after his hunt to find... signs of a struggle? Dead people? Dead crew? Dead crew. *How the fuck am I able to understand what he's saying?*

"He landed here more than a year ago, with a broken wing, so I healed him and managed to convince him that if the one he was looking for was alive, he would soon or later pass through here or gain a bounty and thusly give him a direction to look for." The voice of Crocus cut his storytelling short, reminding me of my circumstances.

"Uh," I was somewhat speechless: "Ryoshi, I've got stuff to handle in the North Blue, but it shouldn't take long, I have to leave Brook behind so that he can catch up with Laboon..." I really hadn't planned to bring an owl on my very improvised trip in one of the Blues, but it wasn't something in which an owl could help much, no matter how willing he was to lend a wing: "Ryoshi, could you keep an eye on the sack of bones? He'll be part of the crew."

"You know Haki." the old man suddenly accused me, causing me to rise n eyebrow as to say 'now what?'; "And you'll have Brook train on his own when you could teach him?"

"Yeah, I'll teach Brook Haki once I'm back, but I'd prefer for my crew members to have a better grasp of their Devil Fruit powers before starting on such a time-consuming activity." I shrugged, smiling when I noted how Robin was almost visibly restraining herself from asking questions. It had taken me years to learn some Haki, but I had to figure it out only based on my knowledge that it existed, I hoped they would need much less time.

"Brook will wait here with Ryoshi, so you two will have the time to catch up and he can continue to try and figure out what his power can do, I've already given him several suggestions." that looked to have convinced Crocus that I wasn't an evil meaning mastermind willing to let my crewmates not pushing themselves to be strong enough to protect themselves.

"And how are we meant to reach the North Blue, captain?" Robin delicately asked, managing to sound condescending enough to make me look like the dumbest ass to have ever sailed the Grand Line.

I laughed at her naivety, it was time to start power upping the members of my crew, willingly or not: "Simple," I answered while fishing out two pair of sunglasses from the sack I had on my back, "we go by foot."

Top Gun

TOP GUN

"Simple, we go by foot."

And once that I had said that, I started to run uphill over Reverse Mountain. Soon finding myself executing jumps aided by moonwalk to not stray from my direction. The four Blues met at the top and it was one of the two known entrances to the Grand Line. It was part of the Red Line and from what I knew it was the geographical antipode of Mary Geoise. The mountain had five rivers, four ascending from each of the world's seas, and one descending into the Grand Line.

"Yohohoho, I'll be waiting here, captain." Brook commented still playing its violin for Laboon, with Crocus following merrily the rhythm of the song. And Robin simply stared at me unblinkingly, her copyrighted 'aura of gloom doom' in full blast: "I might fall and die if we do this."

I simply laughed, excited by the possible challenge: "It's an incentive for you to use your fruit!" I stopped with both my feet firmly lodged into the reddish rock, and a single hand to secure me to my position: "Have you considered making forearms sprout from the rock and using them as a ladder?"

In the meantime, I was still thinking about Ryoshi's confused and saddened expression when I left him to keep an eye on Brook. Frankly, I had somehow wished to see him again, not now that I did... having pets while being a criminal was clearly unwise, Lucci and his Pidgeon were the only exceptions to the rule. On my ship I wished for everybody to be able to handle themselves somewhat. I knew I couldn't deny Laboon following us, but it was a fucking behemoth which could take our ship in his mouth and bring us away from danger if needed, the giant whale would carry its own weight in a way or another. What could Ryoshi do? Hoot loudly when his superior senses picked up something the night? With Observation Haki, it would be unlikely.

After I said mine, I turned and kept climbing, pushing my thoughts about the owl to the back of my mind and focusing on the present. So I rose over the rocky wall, slowly enough to not discourage Robin, when suddenly, a single arm sprouted from beside my position, and another arm from its hand, and another. Soon there was a rope-like sequence of forearms that grabbed Robin's hand down at the sea level. With a focused expression, she started putting a for after another on the cliff, while arm after arm retreated into the hand that had birthed it. I was pretty sure that she refused the ladder option only because I had been the one proposing it.

More or less ten meters above me, another of said arm-rope blossomed out of the rock, just in time for Robin to grab it as the first one exploded in a flurry of pink petals. "I still don't know how you plan to move around once we reach the North Blue' shore."

"I'm going to teach you how to fly once we rise high enough." I simply stated. Propelling myself forward with Moonwalk and leaving her behind.

The ascent lasted hours, even at our breakneck speeds, and we had to stop several times in order to drink or eat something from our backpacks. Luckily enough we met small outcroppings of rocks from time to time, and we sat in companionable silence while I waited for her to rest. Her body wasn't as conditioned as mine, and while she was though as any Grand Line dweller, she would need a long time of training in order to gain enough leg strength to learn it as I did. But the point was that she didn't need it, she had one of the most versatile fruits in the world.

After the time skip, she managed to create copies of herself, including clothes. Which indicated the potential of cloning clothes, and given her ability to sprout so many legs to create a couple of giant ones, I clearly saw that her awakening would be terrifying. Make multiple bullets blossom from a single one once it had already been shot, hell multiply a simple grain of dust in order to create a veritable cloud. The applications were... endless. But my mind was focused on the wings she had shown off after the time skip, even if they hadn't been very effective.

Robin started to hobble and falter at some point, likely because of the nebulized seawater that hung around the canal that led to the Grand Line, and I was forced to carry her myself. Fisher Tiger had climbed with his bare hands up to Mare Geoise, but there the Red Line was basically a cliff, the inclination of the Reverse Mountain, even if steep, allowed me to exercise a far better leverage than the Fishman could have, and so, within the day, we were at the top.

So, Robin and I found ourselves looking at the five ways crossroads at the top of Reverse mountain, where the four Blues converged and the Grand Line truly began. It was a show worthy of the climb, if nothing else. The sun was setting in the direction of one of the Blues, giving us an easy way to identify the West Blue, and from it, we immediately determined which was the North Blue.

We sat down on the Red Line Plateau that surrounded the top of Reverse Mountain, eating cold rations and drinking from our quickly dwindling reserves of freshwater: "I'd prefer to attempt the descent during the day, we'll need to stop just beneath the clouds in order to have a good point from which we can start flying." I stated, causing her to frown.

"You may know how to fly, but I don't." Robin stated with her impassive voice. *Uh, she hasn't found her wings yet.* I noted, but perhaps it would give me a way to direct her to a better option.

"You can make any part of you 'blossom', can't you?" I asked. She simply nodded looking at me like I was dumb. "Then why do you use only your arms?" I grinned: "36 square meters of wings can allow a man to glide. Taking into consideration the weight of the limbs you would sprout to create such area, you would need a wingspan of fourteen meters, or something like that."

"You want me to create wings with my arms." she deadpanned, outraged or simply not understanding the suggestion. At that, I grinned more widely: "Your arms are not that efficient in terms of the ratio of surface-weight. But your shoulder blades would work way better, don't you think?"

"I don't know if I..." She stopped, looking at her hand, making her fingers become seven before two of them exploded in a flurry of pink petals that dissolved in the air. A single finger, a single nail. For the following hour, the genius child proceeded to make blossom toes from her elbow, legs from her sides, ears from her knees, arms from her back, a second head from her shoulder which graced me with an unimpressed stare before disappearing. I couldn't tell by looking at her face, but so close to her, and after hours of focusing my Observation Haki on the fellow pirate, I could tell that she was surprised that my suggestion held a positive result and ashamed for never thinking of it.

"Devil Fruits are bullshit." I stated: "Paramencia more than the others are virtually endless in their applications because even if you find a limit to what your power can do directly, there are workarounds. Zoan-type fruits have endless potential for evolution towards combat. Mythological... well, I've no idea of what they can do, but I met Marco the Phoenix, and he can be fucking scary."

She stopped from her experimenting to look at me with what I could believe was an expectant expression. I simply smiled again: "Moria was a bitch and half with his fruit." I lied, "He ate the Kage Kage no Mi, which is a Paramecia-type Devil Fruit that gives the user the ability to manifest and control shadows of living creatures, including their own, as physical and tangible forms. Moria, becoming a Ruler of Shadows, could steal the shadows of other beings and insert them into different bodies, living or dead, which in the latter case enables the creation of zombies. With enough tweaking on his part, he found out how to create a doppelganger from his own shadow, he found out that the shadows he chunked into dead bodies gave to the zombies the abilities of the owner of the shadow, and that he could eat them to assume their power."

"It didn't help him against you, did it?" Robin rose a delicate eyebrow in my direction, the 24 years old archeologist gave proof once more of her control over her facial expressions. "It didn't help him because all he did was using his fruit to overcome obstacles. Red Hair Shanks has no fruit, and he's an emperor, Garp 'the Hero' has no fruit, and if he wanted could sit at the very top of the Marine Hierarchy." I tilted my head: "There are many roads to strength: Crocodile was another over-reliant on his own fruit, but while Logia are powerful, they can be countered by just anyone of consequence in the New World, and they are more difficult to apply in an... indirect manner."

She frowned lightly, paling at the mention of strong logia users: "The Admirals have been trained for a long time to figure out their possibilities, I think that the Marines have found out how to let the fruit reincarnate in their orchards, and so they have generations of notes on their power. Which is why Kizaru can create a sword made of pure light, for example." Seeing that speaking of those who had erased Ohara wasn't a polite topic for conversation, I backtracked: "Crocodile became sand, tossed around blades of sand, a tempest of sand, and nothing else. He managed to figure out how to dry something using the natural property of minute sand particles to drain water. But are sand and dust so different? Grinding grains one against another he could have thinned them until they were motes of dust, and spread those as a sensing system that could easily cover a city, or move a single cluster of sand to speeds that would bury though any regular human, or create enough friction between grains in order to cause electrical discharge in the form of lightning..." I shrugged seeing the slight widening of her eyes.

With those images in our heads, we soon set down to sleep.

The following day, instead of directly attempting our descent, I had Robin practice unfurling her 'wings' which was a collection of shoulderblades, each overlapping only by the tiniest margin with the others: "The albatross has a wingspan that can reach the four meters." I spoke quoting my knowledge of normal animals, "To start flying, he simply has to unfurl his wings and runs against the wind, soon enough lifting itself."

"How does it make any sense?" Robin blankly questioned me, causing me to sigh: "Because air has a weight, the shape of the wings cuts the air in two parts, generating a lift." I knew that the One Piece world didn't have airplanes, but why did nobody ever observe the bigger birds of prey? *Likely because in One Piece they can prey on humans.* I immediately answered. "It's the same principle of a kite, just trust me on this and try running along the Red Line with your wings unfurled."

She acquiesced my request and we spent the following hours making her learn how to flap her wings just so in order to lift herself. At the twelfth attempt, she was lifted from the ground and tossed into the air, losing control because of the surprise and causing her wings disappeared in a flurry of pink petals, forcing me to moonwalk to the rescue. We were on the right track. In another two hours, she managed to consistently lift herself and keep to the air for almost a minute before falling down.

Her child genius status however soon enough shone through, and in another twenty minutes, we added shoulderblades to act as flaps at the end of her wings.

"Are you sure there isn't a better way?" She asked with a visible strain in her voice as I lifted her over my head, my hands strongly holding to her hips as she stood ramrod straight and parallel to the ground, with her pink wings unfurled and ready: "Look for the warmer air and tilt ever so slightly in order to have it bring you up in a spiral, careful to the cold air, that one will plunge you down." I repeated my instructions as I started to run against the constant wind that buffeted the top of the Reverse Mountain. Once I felt that she was weightless, I weakened my hold, and when I felt her tilt slightly in one

direction, I simply let her go, watching as she figured out the ins and outs of her power. She couldn't sprout actual wings, but like hell she couldn't work around it.

By midday, she was exhausted, but I could swear I saw her grinning while she was landing on her own for the first time. And so we spent our first day on top of the Reverse Mountain: me shouting stuff that made sense in my head, and Robin likely biting back on the retorts she had undoubtedly ready for me while she figured out how to implement what I told her. Never before I had so strongly wanted a fucking Devil Fruit to play with. And while I pictured myself with the Rumble Rumble Fruit, my mind naturally fell on my memories of Sméagol and Gollum: *it's ours! Ours! We must get the Precious!* and the answer *Patience! Patience, my love.* I had waited years for that particular Devil Fruit and the flying ship that was yet to be built by Enel.

The following day, I offered my true challenge: "Double your wingspan." *How could she carry me if she can't manage this much?* And from the grin on my face, Robin immediately knew what I was thinking.

After two days spent on the top of the mountain, we ran out of water to drink, and so I decided that it was to either sink or swim.

We were still anchored to the red rock, just below the line of the clouds, with the river from the North Blue running uphill on our left: "Whenever you feel ready." I told her, gaining myself a scathing glare as reward: "You'll pummel down at the beginning, but when you gain enough speed you'll only need to arch your back in order to stay uplifted. In the end, she had needed to Blossom a net made of arms around her torso in order to not have the pressure of the 30 meters wingspan on her back, which would have likely broke her spine. Still, with forearms locked in triangle formations, she had figured out a way to do it.

"And if you'll ever find yourself in need of covering great distances flying, taking out the big wings will serve you better than the smaller ones." I had told her the day before. The only difficulty when using such large wings was that she needed enormous speeds in order to lift, but then, falling down a mostly straight mountain was sure to grant her such speeds.

After a deep breath, she intoned: "Cinqcent Fleurs: Gigantesco Wings!" and started falling as soon as she felt that her gliding structure had blossomed completely. She plummeted for one, two, three seconds, but at the fourth second, she became parallel to the sea, and at the fifth, all the speed she gained while falling was converted into a forward push, with the effect of her skyrocketing over the North Blue, perpendicular to the Red Line. *I still need to figure out the 'naming your attacks and shouting them' part.* I reminded myself

I immediately shot off the Mountain, Relying on Moonwalk in order to not fall to my death as I followed Robin from my much higher position, I let her adjust to the different air and winds. After a couple of minutes, she started an ascending spiral, slowly but surely joining me higher in the sky. Eyeing the eternal Log Pose on my wrist, I corrected our direction, and started to feel the strain on my legs: "We fly to Sorbet, which is just North of Swallow Island! We're looking around those islands for a talking polar bear named Bepo and his friend Trafalgar Law! He has a white and fluffy looking hat!" I shouted over the wind as I considered my options.

I could land delicately over Robin's back, even if laying over her would be more efficient in aerodynamic terms, or I could try to endure, letting her preserve her energies until I could no longer avoid it. The choice was obvious.

I would end up on her back sooner or later, Moonwalk wasn't supposed to work for long-distance travel. So I coated in Haki my left foot, using the vastly increased strength of its moonwalk to shot fifteen meters higher in the air, before tilting slightly forward and keeping up my regular moonwalk, losing a few meters of height after every few kicks to the air. Soon enough I found a reliable rhythm that made a spare use of my Armament, allowing me to tire less quickly. Sadly, it would take hours before I had to rest on Robin's back

And so we flew over the North Blue, my eyes often falling on the Eternal Log Pose, while I was grateful for the sunglasses, and thankful for the One Piece logic that ruled over human physiology, allowing me to not feel my eyes dry up or being irritated by the wind constantly buffeting them.

Two hours later, I shook myself from the lull I had fallen into only to belatedly register and understand Robin's call: "There is a ship on our left!"

I tilted my head, and true enough, a bit off from our course, there was a ship: "Pirates, Marines or what?!" I asked, knowing that she couldn't see any better than I could, but it was more for recognizing her warning than for anything else. *Not that it matters.* I thought, correcting the direction of my moonwalk, the probability of finding a ship on our very first day wasn't high enough for me to ignore such an opportunity.

As I got closer, I grimaced a bit when I recognized the colors of the Marines, but there was nothing to do about it: "Leave the higher-ranked officers to me!" I shouted to Robin, it would be faster and less risky if I managed to take down the strongest with Haki and leave her to deal quickly with the rabble. I didn't wait for her assent, and let myself fall on the ship. It was a cruiser-like vessel with a single chimney that sprouted a small trail of smoke and three masts, two with two sails and one with a lateen sail. It had six cannons on each side of its hull and four larger cannons situated on the bow. A large circular structure was located in the middle of the ship, and the Marine symbol and name was proudly painted on the sides.

As I fell, Observation Haki washed over the ship, before I let the King in my mind come out to play with the lesser mortals that surrounded me. Again as a thunder without sound, as an invisible wave, the Ambition of The Supreme King washed over the marines, many of which didn't even realize there was an enemy until it was too late. I Armament covering the

lower part of my legs, I crushed through the deck, ending up in a lower floor of the ship.

As I left the hole I made and hands started sprouting randomly on the marines that somehow had managed to resist my Ambition, likely more for my distract boasting of it than for any real merit on their part, my Observation picked up something that had remained silent until that very moment. A presence, big enough that it easily dwarfed Robin's one. I turned in that direction and saw the man responsible for every hair on my body going stiff like I was some sort of porcupine.

He was a tall and broad-chested man, with a slightly wrinkled face, a round nose with prominent nostrils, thick lips, and a wide, round chin. He had brown buzz cut-styled hair which connected to a thick beard that covered his entire chin. He had his eyes closed and a cigar in his mouth. He wore a dark brown double-breasted suit with a black tie underneath, all over a yellow dress shirt with a red polka dot pattern, with the black sheath of a katana secured to his waist, he made for an intimidating figure, but mostly because of his marine coat, which I could read thanks to my Observation: on his back, the words Vice Admiral were proudly etched in gold.

As his eyes opened of a fraction and a displeased frown made his way on his face, I summed up the situation: "Shit."

ANI'll not lie, I completed the previous chspter only so that I could publish this one. Yes bitches, it's double-chapter-day! and... 4 chapters in a week? Holy shit, we're running on cocaine and meth here, yahooooooooo!

Iniquitous Exchange

INIQUITOUS EXCHANGE

"I am the Vice-Admiral Yamakaji!" he simply stated, his katana rising towards me threateningly: "Surrender and I won't maim you before arresting your sorry ass."

I simply tossed my backpack to the side, knowing that the eternal poses inside were safely tucked in foam to keep them from crashing, and immediately freed Shusui from its sheath plunging deep into myself and calling forward all that I was. The fear for my life was there, like it had been when I faced off Whitebeard, but it was of no consequence: I stood far above the reach of man, and the motherfucker could be Sengoku himself, I wouldn't surrender. Why would I?

The Conqueror King's Haki exploded once more outside of me, it wouldn't tire me, how could it, when it was simply the expression of who I truly was? I stared down the Vice Admiral who stood on higher ground, ignoring the gasps of the Captain on the ship, who managed to not lose his own senses and remained conscious, albeit on his knees. Observation Haki informed me that Robin had stumbled when I had revealed the King to the world, but she managed to keep going, sweeping through the ship, breaking whoever stood in her way, and more often than not deliberately following those to distant for my OOO to affect.

Everything was part of the blurry existence outside of my sword and his sword. The only two of any mettle were the fool in front of me and myself. I recognized the dry humor of the part of my mind that whispered 'There can be only one' and cast it aside, my world narrowing to my opponent and me. My hands rested on Shusui's hilt, while the will to live that burned so strongly inside my gut sent my heartbeat through the roof, and my Observation Haki made me aware of each minute oscillation of the ship as well as the distinctive way my body shifted to accommodate them.

A second after his declaration, I let go of the weak leash I held on the will of the King, one thing is to remain conscious, another is to remain unfazed, a third is not being surprised: the vice-admiral was surprised. For a split second, his muscled answered with a slight delay on his commands, the distinctive reaction of the human body to the Color of the Conquering King, especially in a random marine trained to follow orders, was to *obey*. And in that fraction of a second, I attacked, letting myself feel the thundering heartbeat that declared '*I'm alive!*' to the world: I poured that feeling in the blade, Armament Haki coursing through my hands and in the already black katana, only managing to turn it of a darker shade. It was a simple attack, nothing elaborate, no twists, no strange animals summoned in the shape of the tear that traveled through the air, the only thing I wanted it to do, was to cut. Following a gut instinct, I called the name I had given to the attack when thinking about mocking others manga and anime, something pretentious, undeniable, elegant, simple, and, in concordance to the King's will, absolute: "Will of the Sky!"

I took a single step forward, Shusui completing a perfectly vertical slash while my arms tensed like they were about to be ripped off. And the air *screamed* in a howling protest when the black blade tore through it. A purplish-black jagged line flew from the blade, reaching the Vice-Admiral in less than half a second. The deck split like it was paper being ripped apart, chunks of wood and splinters thick as my wrist flying around and impaling several still unconscious marines.

Unable to dodge for fear of what would have happened to the men behind him, the marine was forced to defend: a familiar black sheen covered his forearms and traveled along the edge of his katana, his transition much smoother than mine, and countered my blow with an upwards slash that turned those two attacks in a jagged line that soared upwards, cutting roughly through the nearest mast, causing it to basically explode on the point of contact.

If it had been a manga, I would have stayed still to see the outcome of our clash, it was likely that if I was an actual swordsman, and not someone who had been swinging around an overqualified blade for his skill with less than a year of experience I would have kept my position in order to determine who of us was the better one. Neither of those conditions applied there: I ran behind my attack, my thighs contracting like they were about to snap my own femurs while my Armament coated feet plunged mercilessly in the floor giving me better leverage for my leg strength.

As soon as the man had finished deviating my attack, he had to parry another swing of Shusui, this time a horizontal one. By then, his surprise was already dead and he had regained a perfect control of his movements: he took a casual step back and flexed his arms, before straightening them as he spun on his right heel, causing me to follow my katana on its trajectory which had met 0 resistance. "Children shouldn't play with swords." he said condescendingly.

The vice admiral coiled again his arms, bringing back his sword and cutting on my side before I could react. Even with the bright flare of pain, I kept moving, following the now too exposing attack with my whole body as my left foot left the floor and landed on the man's thigh, using it to augment my own momentum and spin on myself, turning my exposed position in the starting point for another horizontal slash.

As the marine, with an unconcerned expression, took another step back to repeat the previous interaction, I pushed on the forefront of my feet as I used my core muscles to torque myself as much as I could while falling on my knees. The man's eyes widened as he jumped back, unable to counter me again because his sword was too high to reach me. I completed the spin and found myself on my feet with the vice-admiral looking at me with narrowed eyes.

I could imagine what he was thinking: 'did he fake the previous exchange in order to trick me now?' *Ha! I have no need for tricks. Stealth is for the weak.* I suddenly followed what my Observation had shouted to my ears and swung upwards, avoiding being beheaded by the quiet and sudden attack from the man. And took a step back when he tried to pin me down with his left foot crushing the floor where I was standing a second before. I folded on my left like I was a piece of

paper when the man tried to punch me with a hand coated in Armament Haki.

I didn't dedicate even a fraction of my cognitive capabilities to bantering, I couldn't afford to: once more I swung, and once more I was countered with a negligent gesture from the man, I followed with a low kick that found his shin as he was taking a step forward to enter my guard, disrupting his rhythm. I kept moving, removing my left hand from the hilt of Shusui and gaining... the world *blurred away* as I was thrown back by the far too strong punch that had landed on my almost unprotected stomach. By sheer dumb luck, my stomach had been shielded by my Haki coated left forearm, which now throbbed insistently.

I moved the fingers, finding out that my arm wasn't broken and quickly discarding the importance of my pain. I held Shusui at my side and brought forth my left arm, the hand half-closed, ready to react to another attack of his. If it wasn't for my katana superb quality, not to mention the savage history that had strengthened it, I knew that I would already be dead. But that was the thing with weapons, wasn't it? They existed to allow weak people to kill the strong. Animal, plant, nature, other humans, mankind created tools to aid survival and better our lifestyle, so the meito grade sword was doing exactly what it had been forged for.

The vice admiral was on me once more, holding his katana with two hands and letting go a guttural growl as it descended on me like a mock of my own first attack. *How dare you?* "Will of the sky!" was birthed by my lips before I could properly register what was happening, my hands joining on Shusui's hilt and tearing apart the air over me. The marine spun and elbowed me in the side, which I covered in haki, briefly tanking the blow while my right arm left the hilt and back slapped the man on his cheek. The sound of an Armament covered hand meeting an Armament covered cheek sounded like a gunshot.

Armament Haki is an extension of will, the will to live, to prevail, to survive. Said will was made by both intent and instinct, and since humans normally act through motions of their hands and feet, the Haki there usually proved itself stronger and easier to manipulate than in other places. Among the other things, training and constant use was the part that caused the Haki to actually grow, along with its user's skills to wield it. The sheer experience of the vice-admiral overwhelmed my Armament, and while his head moved, my hand hurt. A lot.

The exchange brought us to opposite sides of the hole in the deck that I had caused with my arrival, while I refused to hold my side in pain. I wouldn't give him a single inch to indicate that his attacks were having whatever effect on me. Each time we clashed, he had turned out to be the victor. He was a cautious sort, not leaving any unnecessary opening that I was able to spot, and more often than not relying on countering my attacks instead of being the one to strike first. Observation Haki had caused both of us to either counteract or avoid determined patterns of attack, more often than not bringing us to react to the intention of the other instead of a real attack. I could see why it had a time limit for Luffy, it was mentally exhausting.

Imitation game? I wondered, taking another deep breath and denying myself the luxury of stopping to cradle my side. I needed to know, to see, to anticipate. To act faster than he could react, to trick his Observation Haki or to overcome his Armament. It was the first time I actually fought someone with Haki, and part of me found the idea... funny. Since I had first left my island, besides two years in chains during which I had to figure out alternative ways to get free, I was the bigger fish. There was no other way to put it.

Parry, duck, slash, kick, retreat, swipe, punch, scream, rage, lunge, punch. Again, and again, and again. Small wounds found their way over the vice admiral's body, while I quickly became bruised and deeply cut in several places. In exchange for letting me cut his eyebrow, he had slashed along my forearm, weakening my grip and making me bleed profusely. For allowing me to dislocate his shoulder, he cut behind my knee, forbidding me from using that leg to move. When I managed to break his finger, he leveraged his torso against me and slashed vertically on the left side of my torso, leaving a shallow cut that nonetheless stung and managing to use my weight to pop his shoulder back in place.

My will was to survive, no, to be utterly untouchable by the ink made character. He was nothing, how could he actually harm me? Like I had done once before, I let go. There was no sword, no thoughts about Haki, no necessity of keeping the ship whole enough for it to sail, only one purpose, aim, objective, necessary condition, goal: the Vice-Admiral Yamawhatever was going to die. So we clashed again and again. And with every wound we gave each other, I quickly started to amass the more grievous ones, while he was littered by insignificant impairments.

I ducked under a horizontal slash, feeling the edge of his katana graze the upper part of my back, while I managed to stab Shusui right over his knee, and I felt the blade bit the bone. I pushed with my right leg in order to follow up with another attack, but it gave out, and I fell with a wet thump over my own blood while the Vice-admiral hopped back on his sane leg.

As I laid in a pool of my own blood, a splinter thick as my wrist embedded in my thigh, my left arm broken in two parts, and the miscellanea of wounds on my torso, both superficial and internal, something slowly changed, it was faint, less than the shadow of a wisp of smoke, but I knew what I had to do. Calling my revelation a fruit of Observation Haki would have meant doing it a disservice. I simply *knew*. Hobbled, slowly, using the unpriceable meito grade black sword as nothing more than a cane, I rose to my feet, and once more, I blazed my will in defiance, my challenge thundering across the deck and causing ripples in the pools of blood.

He walked towards me slowly, and like I should have done since the beginning, I close my eyes behind the long since broken lenses of my sunglasses. And when the moment came, I twisted my torso, and as the katana meant for my heart plunged hilt-deep into my right lung, I let go of Shusui to rip out my opponent's eyes with black-clad fingers. It was a simple matter for the experienced marine to tilt his head and lift slightly his sword, leveraging the blade in my chest to make me kneel.

So I didn't think, didn't follow a plan, I simply moved with the same instinct that had allowed Luffy to dodge Enel's attacks

on the Ark, and my teeth, clad in a black sheen, closed like a clamp on the marine's throat, and there as no triumph in my heart as I cleanly ripped away skin, sinew, cartilage, veins, and muscles, because I was already unconscious.

AN

So... it's apparently possible to write this fucking much in a single day. Not gonna lie, I didn't want to write again today, I kind of have real stuff to do. But I churned out the first 1.5k words in a single hour, so it was a pity to not conclude it.

It's a short one, and not finishing with a cliffhanger pisses me off a tiny bit. But apparently, you're lucky. This time.

Anyway, three chapters in a day kind of seals the deal, real life is starting again, so until the middle of September I'll likely be gone.

But do not despair, I wrote other shit too, try to give that a try? Or remember that Oda is going all out these days, so read the original, personally, I'm giving another go to Impel Down, one never knows.

New Target

AN

So yeah, I'm back and kicking, and I gave a quick read to my work so far, there are good parts and bad parts, but I still like it, so I'll keep writing this story.

It's been pointed out that I'm shit with new names, and I agree that Davi D. Jhon sounds stupid as fuck, but hindsight is 20/20 and all that, I had chosen it because of the obvious joke with the D, because I felt at the time that the MC would want to stroke his ego a little, and coupled with the resemblance to Davi Jones, I kind of liked it.

I'm not at all satisfied with it, and then yesterday I learnt that Denis Villeneuve is going to give a try to DUNE. He's the movie director of Arrival, by the way, and DUNE, by Frank Herbert, is the greatest thing ever written along with Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert A. Heinlein.

So I obviously went and read again Dune in like... a week. And I got to thinking Muad' Dib is a fucking cool name, and it would meet the MC's criteria of self-importance and will of the D.

So, while I won't go back to correct or adjust this work, I'll likely start another One Piece ff at some point, with a character that will go Marine with the intent of changing the system from the inside while abusing the shit out of his metaknowledge. So... this was just a heads-up.

As for the people asking me about pairings with all the hot chicks and chiselled men, harem with minks and whatever: people, seriously, the MC enjoys a hot piece of ass as much as any amoral character, but given his foreknowledge, he is obsessed with gaining enough strength and power to stay alive, so landing a pairing is not a priority, even if I have something lined up that I haven't read anywhere yet...

NEW TARGET

The hazy shapes around me soon found a meaning in my head: the close-pink were my hands, the cold-gray-weights were shackles with a suspicious detonating charge placed over my wrists, the down-brown was the wooden floor of the stage where I was being shown off, the cold-pressure was a single death-switch around my neck. How the fuck did this happen? I thought. I didn't even react when a strong tug on the chain that led to my collar brought me to my knees: what were the odds that people randomly kidnapped me in one of the Blues? I still hadn't managed to gain a bounty, surely there were more interesting targets?

And how come I can't remember at all the inevitable trip from the Blue to... wherever we are? I looked around, neatly ignoring the humans, and paling when I recognized the place. Human Auction House. Dozens of thoughts started running around randomly in my mind, leaving me more and more speechless. How did I miss the trip? The whole thing? Wait... slowly, I remembered shades of memories, stuff that I wasn't sure had actually happened, and a woman. Fucking hell she has hypnotized me hasn't she? I growled to myself, before discarding the how and why, choosing to focus on how to free myself without dying instead.

Without a key to my shackles, the only way I knew to free myself was to either stumble upon a merciful and crazy strong Haki user... "Sold to the illustrious Heavenly Dragon!" the voice that I had willingly ignored up until that moment startled me out of my thoughts, forcing me to focus on the grim reality of my actual circumstances. What? I followed the chain without complaining, biting on my instinct of using what Haki I knew to try and rip them off. Grimacing when I realized it would be years before I could ever manage to actually harness that kind of power.

Hours later, I still couldn't believe it. I had always known that One Piece was a mess and an all-around horrible place unless you were a character of some renown, but I clearly hadn't considered that the worst could happen to me without any kind of warning.

Ok, no panic. I reprimanded myself quietly, since sure as hell I didn't wish for a whipping only because I used my slave voice in presence of a 'god'. I took a deep breath and started evaluating my options. From a purely economical point of view, the explosive shackles and collar needed to have a key of some kind. The ones with the authority to use them were either slave-overseers, in case a slave died on his own, likely due to exhaustion, and the 'gods' themselves. Which... I really didn't think that they would even consider the idea of freeing someone, but taunting a lowly slave with the idea of freedom? I could see it. Or better yet, the overseers were the ones to do so.

So, either a Fisher Tiger decides to come through and save me, and I doubt that I have affected reality so much to cause such an enormous side effect, or another Heavenly Dragon suddenly goes 'fraternité liberté égalité'. I thought dryly before returning to the dramatic grimness of my circumstances. I needed to develop Haki, while finding a way to get myself the keys as a parallel plan of action. Everything while trying to fly under the radar, every beating I managed to avoid, would grant me more time and strength to focus on my clandestine training.

A sudden commotion stopped my slow walk behind the group that had just bought me.

"Her, I want her!" the Heavenly Dragon shouted, pointing randomly at the one I recognized was among the people to have

kidnapped me. As her companions took a step back from her and the Tenryubito's men moved to subdue the girl faster than she could understand what was happening, I found myself smiling. Four men in suits were quick to slap seastone cuffs on her wrists when one of them started attacking another: "My God, she's a Devil Fruit user." One stated, sending the Heavenly Dragon in a trigger happy spree that saw three civilians dead.

That put a tentative stop to my Schadenfreude only because the one instrumental in my capture would share my fate, but because with a fruit, maybe there was a possibility. Why pay more for an ability user if you didn't wish for said slave to use his, or on that case her, abilities?

I took another deep breath and smoothed my expression, trying to figure out what the powers of the woman were, and how they could help me.

I awoke to the low and constant beeping of a machine that was clearly monitoring my heartbeat, and while my bleary eyes put into focus the IV that forced something in my veins, Observation Haki came to me with newfound ease, sweeping without issues the small room and the following ones. They were somewhat randomly placed around a twisting corridor that led upwards. I blinked slowly, forcing myself to quickly regain a proper level of control over my own body.

The smell of the room was curiously acidic like bleach had been used to thoroughly cleanse the area. And given the fact that I was clearly in what passed for an infirmary, I could understand why. Still, it didn't mean that I had to like it.

My eyes slowly managed to bring the world back into focus and I trailed them where I had sensed my crewmate. Moving my head I had to have made some kind of noise, because Robin lifted her eyes from the thick book she was reading, and she pinned me in place with her stare: "A vice-admiral almost killed you." she informed me. *Like I don't remember!* I wanted to snark right back, but my throat was too dry, and I only managed a raspy gurgle. And since she reminded me of the fight, I frowned, not remembering exactly how it ended.

At some point, the blood loss and pain had likely made me a bit loopy. I moved slowly, carefully checking out each part of my body, looking for damage of any kind, but finding out that besides being sore, and several new scars, I was as good as new. I moved my left arm out of the covers and grabbed the glass of water that a thoughtful someone left on the bedside table, drinking slowly, but relishing in the cold feeling trailing down my throat.

Remembering the fight, I tried to give a sense to those last moments in which I had clung to life and killed the Yama-something as a result, but there was still only a confused haze that clung with determination over my memories: "You sailed the whole ship on your own?" I blinked, before immediately realizing how stupid my question was as Robin made arms sprout from the white sheet that covered my torso, making them take the glass of water and setting it back on the bedside table.

Careful to not open the wounds kept closed by stitches, I slowly tossed aside my covers and rose to a seated position, willingly ignoring my nakedness as I pulled up a pair of boxers from my bag along with a pair of baggy black pants that had an elastic band around my calves, stopping them from letting cold drafts run up my legs. I grabbed Shusui from a corner of the room where it had been resing and secured it to my waist, before trying to figure out if I needed to cover my torso somehow. I also briefly considered blindfolding myself in order to force myself to go around with only Observation Haki as a guide, but the ease through which it had responded to me made me ignore the possibility, besides, I wanted to actually see where the fuck we were: "I'm guessing you found a medic." I told Robin.

She smiled softly, which for her meant that her eyes almost crinkled when her lips twitched upwards: "I'm used to roaming on my own, the Grand Line is a much bigger threat than one of the Blues, and I have more than a passing familiarity with the underworld." She said while I rummaged in my backpack, pleased to find that it survived the battle without issues and looking for something wide to wrap around myself since I found the air a bit chilly. From the Eternal Log poses to clothes, I even found a new pair of sunglasses, no doubt a sneaky gift from Robin, and among that stuff, I was surprised to find, held in a plastic bag, the folded overcoat of the vice admiral. I grinned savagely for a moment when my eyes landed on the bloodstains that marred the otherwise white cloth "Spoil of war?" I gestured with the overcoat in my hands, causing her to shrug minutely, there was nobody to report of your fight with the vice-admiral, so your new bounty reflects only what you've done up to Crocodile's maiming."

I have a new bounty? I grinned, I should look for it soon, it was always useful to know how much your enemy valued your life. Or death is it was the case.

After my words registered in her mind, she visibly withheld a snort: "You didn't tell me you cut off his leg." causing me to shrug unrepentantly, what there was to tell? "I thought that he could manage, he did it with his golden hook didn't he?" I asked as my hand landed on a familiar katana: "Why is Yama-whatever's sword here?" I wondered out loud as I unsheathed it, noticing with glee the numerous scratches and dents that I knew I had caused.

Seeing as I only had a mixture of bandages covering the itching wounds on my torso, and feeling the slight chill of the room, I opted to toss the large overcoat over my shoulders, before my hand reached for the crutch that had been left for me at the foot of my bed.

Robin finished placing her stuff away in another backpack, before donning a new cowboy-like hat, this time of a dark brown that matched her fur-lined leather coat. She then started heading to the door to the end of the room: "In order, Crocodile's hook is merely his weapon of choice, he has a hand, the stump will be a novel experience for him, and I didn't remove the sword in your lung for some weeks. It reduced the amount of blood that would fill up your lung." She explained, causing me to pause for a moment and put away the sword, that I quickly tied to the crutch, feeling that my right leg still twinged painfully when I had fully extended it.

"How long has it been since the fight?" I asked as we left the room.

"It's been little more than a month, it took three weeks to find a medic, a day for him to heal you, and three days for you to recover." Robin spoke from her seated position in a corner of the room. *How the fuck did I survive for weeks with a sword in my right lung?*

Almost like she had been able to divine my thoughts, she went to explain: "I know enough to make transfusions, and the ship had liters of O-, as for the how you managed to not die.." she shrugged lightly, you had another hole in the lower side of your lung, from which the blood that would have otherwise suffocated you managed to exit. The medic told me that the wound had partially been cauterized by friction: he had to remove a small part of your lower lung, before finding a replacement."

One day to heal me? Replacing a lung? I then thought: "You mean you found Law." I smiled widely, I wanted to hug her: "Can I hug you?" her withering glare was answer enough, so I resisted the urge. "It was luck that the marines had a lot of cash on their ship long with a Devil Fruit in a chest, I used it to pay him, and I couldn't avoid him taking an... insurance."

Insurance?... Oh, shit. I quickly moved the bandages that covered my torso, showing the square hole that sat above my heart. I felt completely okay, if not for my eyes, the hole in my chest didn't register at all to my other senses, I could feel my own heartbeat, and its steady rhythmic push in my chest. *Doesn't matter.* "Thank you Robin." I still forced myself to say.

While I thanked her, I removed the bandages left, actually observing myself for the first time. Along with the wounds still held together by neatly placed stitches, I could tell that each one would scar, and I distractedly wondered if was only wounds given with shaky that left permanent signs on the people of One Piece. Once I fully healed, a narrow and straight scar would run from my left shoulder to my wrist, another horizontal one would testify how I had almost been gutted, a third was just a few centimeters away from my neck, and a thin one crossed the one Ryuma left me over the Dragon's Hoof on my left pectoral.

We walked in a relatively peaceful silence until we reached another room, this one furnished as a cross between a living room and a study. But At least I could watch out of the window to the windy day outside, letting Observation Haki take actual stock of my surroundings, breathing in the distance between me and the sea, getting glimpses of the cold, the cutting winds. With a start, I noticed the first snowflakes falling on the side of the cliff from where I was admiring the view.

I looked towards the pirate sitting in a slouch in an armchair. A 21 years old Trafalgar Law was looking at me from behind half-lidded eyes: "I healed you, and this is your heart, so we'll talk about how you can pay me the rest of what I'm owed, or this will find its way into Marine's hands very quickly." he stated, his fingers pressing slightly on the heart in his hand. I felt it, it was only a warning, so it didn't reduce me to a drooling mess on the ground, and it was enough for me.

Half a second later, I was pinning him on the ground with a hand on his neck and my feet on his arms, preventing him from unsheathing his sword as my left hand plucked what was mine and I studied it briefly. Once I had managed to determine how it needed to be oriented in order to fit in my chest, I placed it back, and only once my heart was back in its rightful place, I took a step back from the medic, grabbing a water bottle from a case on the side of his chair: "Now we can talk." I stated simply.

"Is this the kind of emotionally devastating talk that you used to convince me, leveraging knowledge you shouldn't be able to possess?" Robin suddenly asked from her armchair, and as soon as she spotted my grin, she quickly rose from her seated position and walked outside of the room: "I don't need to know." She tossed over her shoulder as she left, bringing her thick book with her.

I waited for her to close the door and sat down, grabbing a bottle of water and poured a large glass for me, I had the feeling it would take longer than usual to push the future 'Surgeon of Death' into the direction I wanted him to: "How did you manage to give me back a completely working lung?" I started off, genuinely curious.

He simply shrugged, trying to playing off the fear that being so quickly overwhelmed had put into him: "I looked for someone compatible, your companion paid well for full healing."

"I'm actually surprised you didn't simply sell me to the Marines." I started, "My bounty would likely have agreed with you more than the money you've been paid."

"I would have." he simply answered, his thumb running over the hilt of his sword, I could tell that he was trying to look unconcerned about how easily I had overcome him: "Your woman proved herself quite lethal with the rest of my people, so I didn't really have a choice. I can heal much stuff, but a broken neck is beyond me." He shrugged, taking for himself the bottle of water and drinking directly from it. "And you know that I killed a Shichibukai and maimed a second." I added, making him go still in his seat.

"You wanted to sick me on Doflamingo, or on his interest somewhere in the world." I continued, sitting back with a wide smile on my face

"How do you know?" he asked, and like I did for Marco months before, I lifted the side of my open shirt, revealing the now scarred mark of the Heavenly Dragons: "I assume you know what this means, yes?" as the light hardening in his eyes, I grinned: "I've been captured when I was 13, in South Blue, and sold in a certain someone's Auction House. I have two years as a slave to pay him back for." I didn't actually remember exactly if it was Doflamingo's place to have sold me, but I could assume it, and let my actual rage at being a slave take over.

"My crewmate has told me you have got a mink among your people." I started conversationally once I felt that the

awkward silence had stretched itself long enough.

His eyes narrowed immediately, and he freed an inch of his far too long sword: "Why do you care?" I shrugged as I answered, "I don't, not really, but I've heard of only another polar bear mink going around, and given what I know, I didn't expect to see him here."

"What do you know?" the medic gritted out, not bothering hiding his dislike for my cheerful ways. I tilted my head, shaking a finger in a joking denial: "This for that, but nothing for nothing."

"But since you've healed me, I'll pass you this one for free: Big Mom killed a mink and crippled another. I thought that the dead one was the polar bear, but since he's here, maybe it's the leopard who' died instead." I said, knowingly acting like I believing Zepo and Bepo to be one and the same. "Do you know how those minks are called?" Law directly asked, and seeing the seriousness in his eyes I couldn't not answer: "Zepo was the bear, and... Pedro, I think, was the... leopard? Something like that."

"Are you sure?" he asked, the intensity in his eyes never wavering, and I nodded seriously: "My pieces of information are always remarkably correct." he cursed under his breath, before looking at me again, his gaze calculating: "How do you expect me to trust you?"

It was a reasonable question, that nevertheless made me snort: "It's curious how much you have to rely on the words of people in a world made by tyrannical governments, anarchy and criminals gallivanting around, isn't it?" And it was true, in this world, no piece of paper was actually binding, no contract could enforce its terms if you were independent enough to ignore them. "How can I trust you?" I retorted before I scratched my head distractedly.

"Join me." I stated before he could speak anything else: "I am building up a crew, I'm in need of a medic, and naturally Shachi, Penguin, and the mink are welcome." when he was about to deny me, I kept going: "You won't be able to even touch Doflamingo by the time I'll go after him." I shrugged, tapping over my heart a couple of times, "You must have noticed how outclassed you are, even with such a powerful fruit as the one you have."

He scoffed, clearly either refusing my words or simply not believing me. "I don't lie very often, since I find the truth to be much more compelling, so listen to me Trafalgar D. Water Law: I'll tear apart Doflamingo sooner or later, along with those who have allowed him to exist. So, I'll make you a deal: join me, and I'll help make you and yours strong. As a bonus, if you manage to grow enough by the time I go after the Heavenly Yaksha, he's yours."

"I am the Captain of the Heart pirates." he stated, forcibly ignoring the declaration of the hazy plan I had for a faraway future, and turning on my face his always calculating gaze, studying me to see how I would react to his statement: "And none of you has a bounty yet, meaning that you're keeping yourself off the radar, smart of you, but it is so only because you know that you're not strong enough to survive your bounties if you were to receive them." I tilted my head, genuinely curious: "Why have you become a pirate? To kill Doflamingo? To stay away from the Marines? To not be used by the Revolutionaries? You can cover every point of the list taking my banner. Once I've got a proper one anyway."

"I still don't trust you." He stated, making me shrug again, seriously, I wouldn't have trusted me either: "I have no interest in selling you out, if that's what you're fearing, and after all the effort I'll put into bringing you up to speed, I really wouldn't want to waste the investment of my time only to leave you and yours high and dry, would I?"

After the silence had stretched for another minute, I sighed, and returned to my flippantly brilliant personality: "Since we're talking about bounties, do you happen to have seen my last one? I've yet to read it, you know." I did a complete 180, looking expectantly over the paper that he handed me: "Davi Dion 380.000.000 beli" I read out loud. *They managed to get my name wrong!? How did they do it?* Then I thought about all the times I had introduced myself, and grimaced a bit when I realized that maybe slurring the d so much hadn't been my brightest idea. *I sound like Gaunter O'Dim. Only, kind of lamer...* "They've been lame with the bounty increase, and I guess they didn't feel like advertising my casual attitude towards taking down the Shichibukai." I grinned, and just as I was about to pressure him into joining me once more, manly through sheer exasperation, I realized how I could definitely make him vastly more interested: "I heard that the Chyper Pol might be in possession of the Nagi Nagi no Mi." I bullshitted him.

Seeing his face contorting in a rictus of rage, I thought that I might have pushed too much on his plate.

Under Law's care, none of my wounds needed ulterior care, only leaving me with the task of waiting long enough for him to take away the stitches, still grumbling about not being able to heal my wounds directly with the use of his devil fruit.

For the first week after our chat, I had exasperated him with my carefree attitude, occasionally dropping references about a certain Calm Calm fruit, of which I had no real information about. Still, between his unresolved issues with Doflamingo and general hate for everyone in his life but Rocinante and the three men that composed the core of his crew, he didn't even think of doubting me.

I had managed to slip out of the infirmary, and I was sitting on the edge of a cliff, admiring the drop before the churning dark waters below. The weather was cold enough to force me to abandon my no-shoes policy, as well as having me keep my shirt buttoned up, along with a hoodie and over those, mostly to have fun, I had torn away the sleeves from the vice-admiral overcoat, and choose to slip my arms into the holes I had left. It was a surprisingly good windbreaker to keep on, its tear-resistant material hanging a bit too large on my still growing frame.

Again and again, I had played my battle against the Vice-admiral in my head, trying to ascertain where I could have done better. Avoiding that ship meant trying ourselves even more before eventually making land, or being spotted at some point

and attacked while we soared just below the lower level of the clouds. I couldn't really find any hole in my strategy, even if I were to get close enough to use Observation on the whole ship before attacking, the Vice-admiral would have found me nevertheless.

The landing had been a must. Attacking like I did? Maybe not. Robin had been exemplary, showing that she had learned much in the years she spent on her own on the sea. Even more so if one considered that she had managed to leave the Blue where she was from and reach the Grand Line, where admittedly, the more chaotic sea was a good cover for her movements.

The Haki of the Conqueror King had been used well in my opinion. I knew that it would keep growing with me, but I still wished to be able to twist it somehow to give me an edge in battle. Sure, maybe against the Vice-admiral it was only wishful thinking, and yet, I *knew* that it could affect objects around me. The manga had proven it several times, even if never in an explicit way like Shank's cracking the wood on the Moby Dick. *All Haki is related to will.* I repeated to myself, trying to find the common thread. *Observation to feel the will of the beings around you, which travels with their attacks, Armament to oppose the world.* "In a way, Observation is passive and Armament is active." I said out loud. *But then, where does the Ambition of the King stand?* It could tame animals, knock them out along with the weak-willed... *There is the key.* I thought again. *Will.* Why would it affect living beings more than inanimated ones? Because there was a will to influence, it was obvious.

But what about the Moby Dick? I frowned heavily, trying to figure out the common ground between an animal and... I smacked my own forehead. "The ships are alive!" I said as I remembered the whole spirit of the ships spiel: "A Klabautermann is said to be a water spirit (or fairy) that dwells on ships and is basically an incarnation of a ship that has been well cared for." I could easily believe that the Whitebeard's pirates took good care of their own ship.

But then again, there was a sword that had eaten an Elephant-zoan, and a bazooka that had eaten a dog zoan, so there had to be something at play with objects being somewhat alive, after all, hadn't Shusui absorbed Ryuma's Armament Haki?

Apparently the building I had awoken into had been cut out of the cliff itself, and it was a succession of chambers that the Heart Pirates had stumbled upon while looking for a place where they could keep their heads low. As the snow kept falling over me, however, I spotted a white something further at sea, and knowing that we weren't expecting anybody, I thought wise to give the others a heads up.

I rose from my seated position and returned to the small door skillfully hidden among the rocks on my left. I climbed down a spiral staircase that had me hunched forward to not hit my head and soon enough I had reached a room where Bepo was busy punching the rock wall: he hadn't taken well the news about his brother. "Sails to the horizon." I announced lamely, and enjoyed seeing him stiffen suddenly before looking over me with wide eyes. Well, as wide as he could make them at least.

His was feeling conflicted about me. On one hand, I had given him news he had been looking for since he had been swiped away in the New World, on the other, they were really bad news. But my presence unnerved his captain, even if Law hadn't pronounced himself one way or another toward my offer to let them in my crew.

The following minutes were characterized by a flurry of movements, with Schachi, Penguin and Bepo chaotically running around while grabbing everything that wasn't nailed to the ground, Robin sitting quietly on her big backpack, reading another tome she had likely pilfered from Law's collection, and the one-day infamous surgeon's flat gaze pointed at me.

I shard with hi the approximation distance, but like everyone in this world, there was no idea about the average speed of the ships, given the vast differences between one and another, along with the way too volubile sea, and the capricious weather: "We have a little ship," he announced, and started walking deeper into the system of caves of the winter island "this way."

As Robin and I made to follow, the room shook slightly, a layer of dust falling off the ceiling, and an echoing crash announcing that when in doubt, the people on the ship had randomly chosen to bomb the cliff. Which didn't make sense. "Why would someone use cannons against a cliff?" Robin wondered out loud, but clearly expecting an answer.

"Well, this system of caves wasn't exactly abandoned when we found it." I heard Shachi mutter to himself.

That makes more sense than a good hiding spot such as this left alone without reason. I snorted at the fearful acting of the man, before noting that Law hadn't commented on it: "Why are we running away?" I questioned the man temporarily in charge.

"Germa 66." was his dry answer as he opened another door that led us on a narrow, rocky trail that forced us to walk a single line. *I didn't think he would have had the balls to attack a force from an established kingdom.* I mused to myself, but then again, while the North Blue dwellers that I had shared the hiding were weaklings when compared to the shit necessary to survive the New World, they weren't pushovers *here*. Not completely.

"So, you're joining my crew Law, or not?" I asked, enjoying the annoyed expression that he shot me from above his shoulder, "because, I may still be a little tender, but my crewmate and I can handle ourselves without fear of me reopening my wounds, but buying you enough time to get ready to leave would require another kind of effort on my part..."

"You want to do this now!?" He stopped and whirled on himself, forcing himself to stare at me from above the heads of Shachi, Penguin, Bepo and Robin, which were awkwardly shifting in place, clearly not wising to be there. Except for Robin, she totally couldn't care less, and if I wasn't reading her completely wrong, she was holding back a smirk. When I

shrugged and stood still to wait for his answer, he actually *growled*: "Fine! But in the moment you don't hold up your part of the bargain, we're out, deal?"

I laughed and nodded happily: "Robin is in charge of you four then, lead her to the ship and set sail. Where is the nearest island?" I spoke quickly and clearly, leaving the mink reeling from my sudden change in attitude. I listened to the answer and nodded: "Set sail West, I'll reach you, before you make land." I ordered, before dropping in Robin's hands my backpack and jumping upwards, my hands easily finding gaps in the rock, my form quickly rising toward the plateau at the top of the island.

Once I was on top, I saw that the ship indeed belonged to the Germa 66, and that given the number of men dropping from its deck, maybe Law hadn't been a complete fool by choosing retreat. As I reached the edge I watched the 200 meters that separated me from them and quickly realized that I didn't need to learn any lesson from my last fight. With a grin and my right hand closing on Shusui's hilt, I jumped forward, using moonwalk sparingly to avoid reaching a speed too high for my haki reinforced legs to handle, and with a crash that made everyone snap to attention towards me, I landed.

Once the men had recovered from the surprise assault, "Drop down and stay still, you're surrounded!" the man clearly in charge shouted at me, a rifle trailed over my chest.

"The only things I am surrounded by," I chuckled, "are fear and dead men." and the King rose to the slaughter.

Confrontation

CONFRONTATION

The somehow enhanced soldiers of the Germa 66 had died slowly, but easily. What they had working for them were the years of boot camp that had drilled into their minds how to work together, and thusly, even with Haki on my side, I constantly had to disengage, splitting my attention evenly among the squads that they formed around me, avoiding bullets, which admittedly was by then more instinct than a cognizant action on my part, and attacking in patterns that kept me from being hit.

The Conqueror's Haki had swiped over them, making their reactions sluggish and slow compared to their usual standards, but it went to their credit that more than half of them kept their wits and didn't simply collapse with foam spilling from their mouths.

I ducked below a last, almost desperate, savage kick, and retaliated with a straight punch to the throat of the man, before recovering Shusui from the body that I had impaled a fraction of a second before, and swiped it with a surprisingly still clean jacket from one of the soldiers.

I counted around forty of them, and there was no way to express my thoughts without sounding either callous or with an inflated sense of ego. "Even with having to be careful about the stitches, I haven't broken an actual sweat..." I sighed, crossed between disappointment and resignation. I couldn't expect any fight to bring me to the brink of death's door, nor I actually wished to end up hospitalized for a month after every battle, but I started to understand why no Emperor bothered with the first half of the Grand Line, and didn't even consider the Blues. What was the point? There was no thrill, no challenge, which ultimately was the purpose behind a life as a pirate. There was no whetstone against which I could grind my skills, no expectation to meet if I wanted to stay alive...

I shook my head and walked around the relatively big galleon that had made land against the rocky beach at the feet of the cliff, eagerly looking for anything of value. Inside the galley, there was a vast amount of canned goods, basically food as tasteless as cardboard, which I really couldn't be bothered to actually taste. Being a military vessel manned by clones raised as lobotomized meat shields, I could understand why it was so, but it didn't mean that I had to like it.

Their holding cells were empty, even if badly washed smears of blood signalled clearly that there had been prisoners in there until recently. The dorms were as organized and orderly as I had expected, no secret porn stashes, no light drugs... Honestly, the ship was revealing itself to be extremely boring. I crossed their map room without really stopping, noting distractedly that they had a reasonably well-drawn map of the North Blue, with lines highlighted in red, which were the usual routes followed by the giant sea-snails that dragged around the Vinsmoke Kingdom.

I shrugged and kept looking around. Like every tyrannical organization with some form of self-respect, the galleon had a vault. Which, after a brief examination, was confirmed to be a 4x4x4 meters of steel. *At least they haven't been so stupid as to place a single steel door over a room with wooden walls.* Sadly for them, it was a combination safe, so, I only had to Observe, and tinker with the knob until I felt the door click correctly. I didn't have x-ray vision with Observation Haki, that wouldn't make sense, and yet, I had a feeling as to where the gears were and as to how they had to click one over another.

It took me, from beginning to end, 4 minutes, and the door clicked open. Inside, orderly cases contained stacks of beli and small chests held small sums of gold. Truly interesting, however, was a single relatively small chest locked with three different lumps of chains keeping it shut. "That's a stupid way to guarantee that what's inside is important." I grinned, stepping forward and taking a closer look. Seastone may have been beyond my ability to break, but I was ready for another experiment.

The whole spiel about 'a sword cuts only what the swordsman wishes to cut' that Zoro went through in Alabasta was a good way as any other to get started on my actually understanding how to use a sword properly. I let Armament Haki out of the situation. *If I do this properly, I shouldn't need it.* I remembered one of the first true-badassery moments of Zoro, his being close to death's door allowing him to briefly Observe his surroundings, albeit in a blurry manner when compared to my own skill with Observation Haki.

I closed my eyes, feeling my surroundings with practised ease, and immediately narrowing down my focus, bringing it all on the chest in front of me. Seventeen links on each chain, three chains wrapped tightly around the wooden chest, the brass linings were scratched from their grinding against the steel chain, while the keys for the three locks were nowhere to be seen. The lock themselves were crafted with steel slightly denser than the chains. Every detail of the chest was bare for me to observe, feel, learn, understand.

Stopping myself from letting my focus expand over the widest area I could cover, as I had always done to look out for targets and threats, was difficult, and I had to start from the beginning several times in order to have a clear mind over which I could properly Observe the small chest in front of me.

Finding the chest was easy, separating my 'feel' of the whole, and letting pass into the stream of my consciousness only the locks, not easy at all. I couldn't help but feel stupid for ignoring something under my eyes, and yet I persisted. After a length of time that I couldn't have honestly measured, everything clicked.

The chest stopped being a single object in my mind, and split itself to reveal the different materials of its components: the

wood, the brass linings, the steel of the chains and their harder counterpart in the locks. There was no song or rhythm for me to listen to, only the knowledge that they were in front of me, and the inescapable understanding of their nature.

Without Haki cloaking the katana, I listened, and when I felt that I could truly hear the locks, I discarded the awareness of the wood from my mind and fell the blade. It cut through the locks like they weren't there, while the upper part of the blade ran against the wood, it left it unblemished. I blinked, surprised by my easy success: "I guess it has been much more impressive for Zoro because of his circumstances, and because he had instinctively found out Observation Haki, without knowing of it beforehand."

My appreciation for my own skill aside, I sheathed Shusui and opened the small chest, finding a swirly fruit inside: like a pomegranate, but with a dark green colour to it, and a corkscrew-like stem on top of a deep brown. I had never seen anything like it, nor heard anything about any such a fruit in the manga, given its position inside of a Germa66 ship, however, I felt safe in assuming that such fruit would never see any use beyond experimenting in the labs of the Vinsmoke kingdom.

For a single instant, I was tempted, terribly so. Eating it and figuring out the hows and whys of its powers, and with it being statistically paramecia, the possibility of finding out what the fuck was awakening. Then the images of myself wielding Enel's powers came through, and I quickly closed the lid on the small chest.

If Luffy had been able to rip away from a ship its figurehead along with a piece of the keel with his bare hands, I couldn't why it would be impossible for me to push a ship back into the sea. So, half an hour after my discovery of the Devil Fruit, , helped along by the changing tide, I dug my feet in the rocky beach and *pushed*. My feet hurt against the ground, my muscles strained themselves to the point where they almost snapped, I could feel my tendons almost give in to the tension, and my fingers started throbbing against the wood of the ship.

After a second, I managed to overcome the resistance in front of me and the vessel slid, albeit reluctantly, back into the waves. Without hesitating, I moonwalked while pushing on the figurehead at a slight angle, forcing the ship to point West, and only then I jumped back on the deck. I quickly reached for the helm, and resigned myself to wait for the sails to catch the wind properly for me to set out towards Law's ship.

A less than a day of smooth sailing later, my Observation Haki pointed out a metallic shape underwater, maybe 20 meters deep. *The fucker hasn't told me he had the submarine already!* I grinned to myself, those were fantastic news: I fished out from the inside pocket of my vice-admiral overcoat a snail transponder and made a quick call.

"Are you the fuckers 20 meters deep under the ship I'm sailing?" I asked with a knowing grin.

The snail transponder made an excellent work in mimicking Law's annoyed expression: "How did you... nevermind, we're coming up." his vice resounded before the call abruptly ended. I busied myself with tying up the sails of the ship, slowing down and I started amassing the valuables on the deck, ready to be moved into the way more cool vessel that was the yellow submarine.

A week later, Law had declared me fit to reopen my wounds doing whatever idiotic thing that came to my mind, and we were almost back at Reverse Mountain, despite the grumblings of being 'not ready' and Law's wanting to bide its time some more.

The Yellow Submarine, that I refused to call in any other way, was extremely easy to navigate with, given the mostly automated controls that regulated the vessel's engine. It wasn't the same submarine that had made its appearance in the manga, it was slightly smaller, and undoubtedly less sturdy, but given the number of improvements Franky would be able to apportion to it, I wasn't overly concerned. Upgrade after upgrade, it would become a scary good ship, even if my plans about it were going to sound outrageous to the people seated around me on deck.

"We could use it to enter the underground market of devil fruits, back on the Grand Line." I proposed reasonably: "Robin, you're the expert there, think you could find out where the nearest rallying point for the random scum is and pluck the Nagi Nagi no Mi if they have it? Or put out a voice that we're willing to pay... let's say... double the standard price for it?"

"I thought that the Cypher Pol were the ones with the Nagi Nagi no Mi." Law objected with a hard glint in his eyes while Robin nodded, accepting my request and signalling that she didn't foresee any problem.

"I said I suspected it, we should split at some point on the Grand Line, I'll deal with the Cypher Pol, snoop around for information or anything useful." I answered Law's objection with a shrug on my part.

"I'm coming with you." stated Law, causing me to furrow my brow and naturally object: "No offence doc, but I don't know if I can keep an eye on you and at the same time complete the task."

He simply crossed his arms and stared at me expectantly, waiting for me to give an actual reason behind my refusal. After a minute I sighed, it would be a good occasion as any to observe what he could actually do with his fruit, and maybe even point out shit I knew he was going to be able to one day accomplish.

Two days after our chat about future plans to find the Nagi Nagi no Mi, we found ourselves riding the currents up Reverse Mountain. Which was as wild as it had appeared in the manga, even if there was a notably higher chance of sudden death due to a variety of reasons, but all in all, I had a reasonable amount of fun getting moderately wasted with morphine. Given the outlandish constitution of my body in One Piece, I wasn't even worried about developing an addiction.

"Brook, Ryoshi, Laboon: I present you Law, Bepo, Penguin and Shachi." I introduced everyone gruffly once we made land at the Twin Capes.

"That's an owl." Penguin pointed out, causing an outraged Hoot on his part.

"You worry about the owl?" Shachi hissed: "That whale is bigger than the island we were hiding in!"

Bepo almost dropped into unconsciousness when he saw Brook introducing himself, and was thrown into depression by a particularly harsh squawk from Ryoshi. At the same time, I was blessed with Law's usually unperturbable expression going slack with disbelief: when I had told them about the rest of the crew, I had been careful to avoid mentioning their races or different states of undead-ness.

"We go to Water 7." I stated once the crew members were done freaking out around each other, "We need to regroup and set up a base of operations, since we're looking for the Nagi Nagi no Mi." If I could get away with it, I would have sent Robin on her own in the middle of Baroque Works, they had likely an already growing smuggling ring, it was a pity not taking advantage of it, but I wasn't going to risk her when we could work it out later on our own.

That evening, we threw a party, mostly on my suggestion, and mostly because I felt like thanking Crocus for having taken care of Ryoshi. Brook had immediately made his the idea and managed to turn the lukewarm interactions among people that had actually never seen each other before into something more genuine, if still somewhat controlled. Crocus seemed indifferent to the whole thing, but Shachi and Penguin, once properly wasted, stole more than a single laugh out of us.

I simply chose to get drunk while I could safely do so, and I sang off-tune with Brook as Laboon moved in the fleebile light given by the stars and our campfire. I even tried to interact with Crocus, asking what he was going to do now that Laboon was going away, and he grumbled something I had immediately dismissed. I really wasn't interested, I had tried to test if he would be amenable to travel with us for a while, maybe dropping some tricks into Law's hands since they were both medics, but to no avail.

At some point, I found the drunk-haze slightly dispersing from my senses, and I noted that our resident skeleton was gone from the large deck of the ship where we had been partying on: "Hey Brook." I said as I joined him at the edge of the ship, looking with a smile at the vast form that was an asleep Laboon. "Captain, what a lovely crew you're putting together, yohohohoho." he greeted me, even if his laugh sounded somewhat subdued. I could understand his being a bit overwhelmed after years spent alone, and I was more than aware that I lacked the magical, plot-based superpower of 'genuine friendship' that coated the whole existence of Monkey D. Luffy, so it would be some time before everyone truly meshed together, but I would make it happen.

"Have you thought about what I told you?" I asked, causing him to nod quietly: "I have."

We had some time before shit actually started to go down, so I wasn't overly concerned with the current strength level of my crew members, but that wasn't a reason to not help them in the right direction. "I'm no swordsman material." I confessed him without beating around the bush: "Ryuma told me I could become one, but... I have other things to do, and I don't get the... elegance, I guess? Intrinsic of swinging Shusui around." and it was true, no matter the sure advantage that a Haki coated super-katana gave me, while I had been able to figure out some of the tricks I knew people were capable of throwing around, I felt more at ease while using whatever ended up in my hands as a weapon, may it be a fishing line or a pebble, I didn't really care. And given my plans of getting the Goro Goro no Mi, whatever effort I now spent into 'mastering' the way of the sword would be wasted.

From my experiences up until now, I could tell that my original speculations about how people brought into the world ice, fire and rose petals through their swords were on the right track: it was a subsection of armament Haki, really, even if I was slowly come to realize that Haki was a misnomer. Observation or Armament Ambition? It worked through the ambition of 'seeing' or 'being indestructible', yes, but it was all a mumbo jumbo caused by your soul, which explained also how Brook had been able to figure out how to bring 'the ice of the underworld' into reality after the time skip without anyone to explain that shit to him.

The king disposition allowed you to impose your will upon others, even if on different levels, it went from complete blackout, to charisma, to general drowsiness and compliance to orders, crossing all that there was in between. Observation allowed you to see through absurd distances and walls, evaluate the 'presence' of others, almost like some form of empathy that bled into psychic powers in Otohime's case, and even bleeding into seeing a silver of the immediate future in Katakuri's experience. Armament was the most straightforward, obviously, going from the black-armor, to the proper 'flow' explained in Wano, in the first case manifesting the 'indestructibility of the soul' (Brook's existence proved that souls existed after death) in the latter... well, I only had a single working theory: letting Armament Haki 'flow' inside something, or in general outside from your body, basically destroyed everything that wasn't your body, because the soul and the body were undeniably linked together, and the soul does not share its space with anything else. But what did it mean, to let your soul flow outside of yourself? Apparently, through the focus, the 'middle man', of either music (in Brook's case) or a weapon, one could more easily bring it in the physical world, or something along those lines. After all, didn't the three admirals shielded Marineford from Whitebeard's first attack?

Apparently the Akuma no Mi brought with them 'the curse of the sea devil' or some garbage akin to those lines, and only after death their power was released back into the world, to mysteriously undergo rebirth in another compatible fruit.

So it made sense that Haki, read: the soul, of someone, would bypass whatever trick the Devil Fruit granted to an opponent.

But then, what about when Luffy used his fruit along with Armament Haki? My best guess was that a devil fruit user could

channel his soul along with his fruit powers. I couldn't believe that Whitebeard didn't have the most badass Armament Haki around, then how did Akainu manage to punch a hole into his chest? Somehow, haki could be channelled through the body of a devil fruit user, and it clearly wasn't limited by the category of the fruit, hadn't Marco kicked Borsalino?

I shook my head violently, leaving the confused, drunken ramblings about the nature of the world and soul in order to focus again on what I was doing: *Oh, now I remember*. I could grow better and faster focusing on Haki, which I was sure would always be useful, and which, given my ramblings, deeply fascinated me. I would be better off spending my time thinking about ways to abuse my otherworldly knowledge to boost my crewmembers and their skills. So, without regrets, I untied Shusui from my waist, and offered it over my open palms to Brook: "I've seen your moves executed by Ryuma, he was scary, there is no reason for you to not surpass him: you could focus on your swordsmanship and you Devil Fruit abilities until I get around to teach everyone about Haki."

The skeleton jaw opened itself on its own as his hands hovered over the sheathed masterpiece: "When used by Ryuma and combined with my fencing style of the Gentle Blade, he managed to create a strong blade version of my moves, making it far stronger and destructive than the original." he whispered, his musical voice trembling with anticipation: "But I fear that my body is no longer capable of improving, so my swordsmanship will stay the same, even if I can squeeze some new tricks into these old bones, yohohohoho..."

He brought the meito grade sword close to his chest, before unsheathing it with a slow movement: and frankly, a three meters tall skeleton with an afro holding a black katana in a single hand, while his empty orbs seemed to shine... take it from me, it's fucking scary. "And I fear that the only power my fruit granted me is to be alive after my death, not a bad result, uh? Yohohohoho..." but his here wasn't in his laugh, his was focused completely on the beautiful weapon in his hands.

I shook my head with a smile, remembering early about the kind of batshit crazy stuff he had been able to pull off after the time skip: "You lost your body after your death, didn't you?" I asked, and after he nodded once I went ahead: "That means that you're not a skeleton, you're the soul inhabiting your skeleton. Why not trying to bring into the world the ice from the otherworld?"

And before he could start objecting or even find himself again, I drowned him in suggestions: "How do you see without eyes? How do you feel pain without nerves? How do you breath without lungs?" *Seriously, your fruit is totally broken man*. "You're a soul, what can you do with the souls that surround you? Perhaps bring them into your mind with music?"

He took a step back at my eager suggestions, his empty eyes leaving the legendary sword only to land on me once more: "If my music had been able to do as you suggest, I..." he stopped, "... I have never really thought about it."

I left him with a grin on my lips, ready to get drunk some more, I kind of missed the heavy buzz of the extra heavy ale we had been consuming. While I was in a gifting mood, I gave to Shachi the Vice-Admiral's katana

Two weeks later, we needed to stop to fill our galley: there was only so much I could whip together from seeking meat and the reserves of vegetables we had stocked on the Yellow Submarine after all. We had left on the technological marvel that I strongly believed had been built by the Germa 66, only to be stolen by Law and his people, leaving the ship we had used to reach the Twin Capes the first time around to Crocus to do with it as he wanted, after all, he had a house inside of Laboon's stomach, and we took it away.

Apparently, while I was in North Blue, he had explained in detail how to take care of Laboon to Brook, who managed adequately, but only because his 'lightweight' allowed him to run over the water in the Giant Whale's stomach, but we would need to find someone in the crew who wasn't a Devil Fruit user and who was willing to help.

The island we had spotted was a temperate one, with hills and a sane Marine presence: "Pomegranate Island." Robin informed us. It was a relatively large one that I had never heard anything about, but apparently, following the One Piece usual pattern of giving either self-explanatory names or joke-based ones, it had a large collection of orchards, and produced everything but pomegranates.

Back in North Blue, Law hadn't started yet with piracy, or at least, not properly: meaning that he didn't sail under the Jolly Roger, and while we had to spend a few hours making sure that Laboon would await us at large, we made land at the port without issues. That should have let us do our shopping, or shoplifting, in peace, but as I stepped down from the ship onto the pier proper a marine shouted: "It's him! Bounty of 388.000.000 beli!" and everything fell under a rain of lead.

Three days later, we were still sailing straight for Water 7, this time with enough food to last us the whole way, and Laboon happily following, occasionally disappearing for hours at a time in order to eat: thanks gods we didn't need to figure out a way to purchase food that appeased her tastes

While we were sailing, one of those strange, hat-wearing seagulls dropped a news coo on our deck in exchange for a small bundle of beli: *DISASTER ON POMEGRANATE ISLAND* was the headline.

The main article narrated how the evil pirates had come out of nothing into the harbour of the pacific and productive island, with the intent of raiding it to the ground. Obviously there was no mentioning of the fact that I had been attacked from the get-go. I sighed: *This teaches me to keep my Observation Haki always on while not on my ship*. The article was less than kind with the terms used to describe me and mine, and managed to sound petulant in the parts where were reported the damages. We had no intention of setting all of their orchards to fire, and they had been the ones to think that Bepo would turn on us if they scared him with a flamethrower!

"The Disaster Pirates have shown no mercy and burned the whole island to the ground, murdering without any restraint all those that they could reach." I read out loud with a veneer of disgust on my face. I may have gone all out against the marines, but they had always been fair game for me.

As I turned the page, the new bounty posters came out: 'Humming Skeleton' Brook, 25.000.000 beli, pictured our resident musician with Shusui raised towards the sky and his off-hand holding its sheath. 'White Menace' Bepo 20.000.000, pictured the mink as his punch threw away a marine, 'Human Dismantler' Trafalgar Law 18.000.000, and 'Drunk Disaster' Jones David 392.000.000.

In all of that, I focused on a single thing: "They got my name wrong? But..." I didn't know how to work with it, I didn't really need a D. name, nor stealing Roger's stitch, but it had been fun thinking it when I started out as a pirate. Apparently, the slurring of my name had been taken as a sign of me being drunk, and from there they had given me a nickname. I sighed... I... I really hadn't reason to care about how I was called, since when how they named me was an issue? I had my plan to follow!

"How comes Law has a bounty lower than Bepo's?" Nico Robin questioned with something that could almost resemble a smile. I withheld a jump, mentally cursing myself from my lack of attention, I couldn't let people just sneak up on me, crewmember or not it wasn't an excuse.

"Apparently, a bounty of over 300.000.000, a skeleton using a katana and a polar bear of 700kilograms have been way more eye-catching than Shachi, Penguin, you, and Law." While Robin had opted to hide her presence, only intervening with random limbs appearing and disappearing faster than the people could notice them, the others had openly acted, and I wondered what their reaction would be.

Less than a month later, I attended the first actual party organized by my crew, only for my crew. It had started lukewarmly but when we were drunk enough, save for perhaps Robin and Law, which apparently were bonding over a chess match, things truly started to look up, and everything bled into a haze of music, food, random declarations, skull jokes, regular jokes, and dumb pranks.

Meeting again with Chihiro had been strangely... warm? I had been relieved when I spotted her on board of Brook's old ship, maybe a small part of me had been wondering about her safety, after we separated months before. She half-heartedly scolded me for having risen hell on the Grand Line: '*Attacking Schichibukai? What was I thinking?*'. I managed to appease her with the several dozens of different seeds I had kept from our visit to Pomegranate Island, while Franky had grabbed all the beli I had scavenged and put on another order for Adam Wood, always through his mysteriously black-market contacts, and Robin had joined him, ready to start poking around in search for the Nagi Nagi no Mi.

We were partying over Brook's old ship, which had been repaired as much as possible for such an antique ship, and had been filled by all the Adam Wood Franky could stick into it. The large ship would need another trip to Water 7 in order to bring away what was left of the special wood and the next shipping once it made its way there, but we had all the time necessary for it.

Hours later, the haze thinned once more, and I joined Robin at the end of the ship as it started sailing towards Little Garden: "It will take some years still." I announced, causing her to lower her book marginally and look at me questioningly. I smiled a bit sadly, recognizing that the genuine affection that she had felt in another life for the Straw Hats would never come to pass in this reality, not for several years of companionship to prove that she was safe in my crew. "I had promised you help in reaching and collecting knowledge of the past, but it will be some years before I can bring you to another poneglyph." And before she could answer, I carried on: "But from there on, the crew will be ready to move and keep safe you along with your knowledge, so that we will be able to counter whatever shit the WG tries to stop us with."

Her face paled immediately at the veiled mention of a buster call: "It's the part of your recruitment speech that I never truly bought... building a new Ohara... it sounds wonderful, but, while I do not enjoy being manipulated, and you evidently lack the skill to do so, being offered empty promises is worth nothing." she was already shaking her head, when I interrupted her. "I'm not good at this friendship thing." I shrugged, "But I offer people what they want, in exchange for joining me. I have no interest in going against my word with the people I'll need to trust to have my back at some point."

"Friendship? Is this what it is?" she asked with a raised eyebrow, causing me to shrug again, unapologetically: "How would I know? I'm figuring it out as I go."

There, she looked at me like I was batshit crazy, and a small smile sprouted on my lips. I was aware of my sociopathic tendencies, and even of my evergrowing greed and megalomania, but, while that only placed me in the 'less sane' half of the pirates sailing the Grand Line, I still wasn't a frothing-at-the-mouth, kill-before-it-kills-you zombie or chtulu-monster: "If I had to draw a line... I don't deliberately target civilians, I'd prefer to not oppose the Revolutionaries, and I'll stick with my crew, come hell or heaven."

"Emotional blackmail and strongarming me with secrets I had hoped to bury years ago don't speak well for whatever this 'friendship' you forced on me will mean for me." She retorted blankly, stealing a sigh out of me.

"Hey, I'm greedy, and I wanted you in my crew." I opened my arms with my empty palms turned upwards. I had never truly expected that my improvised speech would fool her, only that she took that long to confront me about it.

"If I wasn't the last of Ohara you wouldn't have even considered of recruiting me." She countered, causing me to scoff: "If I had hooves and a tail I would have been a horse." I countered, "I chose you because you are you. Denying a part of yourself doesn't make what's left any more or any less worthy of attention, it simply makes it false. We are the sum of

ourselves, our experiences, hopes, beliefs, dreams, actions."

"I hadn't taken you for an actually philosophical man." she quirked her lips upwards, as if she was finding the idea hilarious, and expressing it as much as she could. I shrugged again, she was mostly right, actually thinking about my circumstances brought me to remember that I couldn't be sure if this world was real or not, so I sidestepped her question, trying to change topic: "Building a New Ohara will be possible only in the New World, deep into yonko territory, and if I have it my way, the island you'll choose will be placed far beyond the reach of the marines."

She chose to focus on reining in her emotions, questioning me with a single raised eyebrow. I smiled more genuinely then: "Some clusters of clouds hosts whole islands at heights beyond 10,000meters, with some planning, there is no reason why we shouldn't be able to use one of such islands to build New Ohara on." I carefully insisted on the word New, making it clear that I read it as part of the name of the to be civilization dedicated to knowledge.

"You offered me a dream I hadn't dared conceive, from my understanding, you offered to find the Nagi Nagi no Mi in order to bring closure to our troubled medic, you brought Brook to his beloved Laboon, which joined us... you held hostage dreams we didn't know we had in order for us to join you. I wonder, what will you do with us once you'll complete your collection?" She spoke slowly, almost seductively, but her words did somewhat stung, since they were nothing but the truth. *What should I do about it?*

"I guess I'll get to live." I simply stated, "Maybe gaining your trust and letting others gain mine in return, once that the utilitarianism that dictates our relationship has run its course."

She gave a dry chuckle at it, but it wasn't an honest expression of levity, she simply expressed her incredulity at the idea: "You speak of trust? You? You, who uncovered secrets that have been buried for *reasons*? You, who wield our past over our heads like a sword before and a leash after we capitulate?"

"I never denied being greedy," I answered, slightly annoyed at her perceptiveness and resentful attitude: "But the choice between living only focusing on how I got you on crew instead of why is only yours." I really was spiralling out of control of our conversation, but it felt... more real than a lot of the other events that I had witnessed in the world of One Piece. It felt somehow good, to be honestly confronted with words about my reasons and future plans. She shook her head again, bringing up her thick book once more: "You would ask us to trust you and the rest of the crew when you do not do the same?"

"Neither of us knows anything about trust, not really." I quietly answered, taking a step back and leaning on the bulwark, after a minute, I took a decision.

"Imagine that you were born seeing everything: past, present, future." I started suddenly, paraphrasing my situation as much as I could: "Do you know what you would do?" I shook my hands dismissively: "Not in your specific case obviously, stopping the genocide of your people is obvious. I mean, if you were a civilian in the ass-end of nowhere, do you know what you'd do? Born able to see a whole lifetime of lives, events, their connections, their reasons, the consequences of each fallen leaf and rolling stone?"

She frowned, considering my question seriously for a second before taking a sidwary step back from me, her eyes wide in alarm. I smiled somewhat sadly again, remaining still with my palms turned upwards, in the universal sign of peace: "You'll plan every step of the way in order to become blind." I simply answered, causing her to actually close the book she was holding.

"Can you imagine the boredom?" I asked taking a step forward: "The emptiness of living something like it was a rehearsed tragedy in a theatre?" I took another step, my arms lowering fractionally: "I was tired of this world before I was six, because *everything had already happened*. I was at the end of my path before having taken the first step."

Living in the world of One Piece had clearly removed the idea of impossible from her vocabulary, but it was obvious that she wasn't really believing my implications, and I frowned, I didn't need her to believe me, not really, but it would have been... nice, I guess, having someone other than me who knew my thoughts without deeming me all kinds of batshit crazy.

"Why would you be born knowing everything?" she questioned me, causing me to frown: "Don't be deliberately obtuse, Robin, I haven't said anything about knowing everything, just that I knew almost all the possible interactions between me and the world during my lifetime, and the causes that had brought them forward."

She slowly shook her head: "What kind of devil fruit..." I slammed the flat of my palm against the railing, stopping her. I could understand her disbelief, I truly could, what I was suggesting was alien even for the standards of the Grand Line: "There is a girl, her name is Marianne." I started "Who will be recruited in Baroque Works, and without eating a devil fruit, she is able to write symbols which influence the psyche of other living beings." I suspected it was some kind of mutation of the Conqueror's King Haki, but it was honestly a shot in the dark. "There is a Mako-mermaid on Fishman island, who can see silvers of the future in a crystal ball."

"But why would you..." she insisted, causing me to snort and remember something I had read once in *Dune*, by Frank Herbert: "Deep in the human unconscious, there is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic." I straightened from my position against the railing: "I have told you the truth, do with it as you wish."

"Are you telling the truth? Or is this another of your random spiels that get more confusing and convincing the more one listens to them?" a dry voice interrupted us while I was turning to leave.

I rolled my eyes towards Law, I didn't truly care that he choose to eavesdrop, in his place I would have done the same, and my meta-knowledge was bound to come out in a way or another at some point:" The respect for truth comes close to being the basis for all morality. Nothing is born from Nothing. You should recognize it as profound thinking if you understand how unstable 'the truth' can be."

AN 1

I've been reminded time and time again that the MC is too robotic and emotionless to be relatable, and that it makes for a shitty character. The whole dissociation and general amorality of the MC was something I was conscious of, that I wrote willingly, and with a purpose, the whys and hows start to emerge in this chapter, which is scary long.

And let me tell you that it has been extra difficult to make it 'flow' properly. Even now, I'm not exactly pleased with all of its nuances, but I don't hate it.

AN 2

Yeah, I skipped pomegra-whatever island' events as much as I could, it was an excuse to reveal to the world that the MC has a crew, as well as a way to start out with the bounties. Like I said at the very beginning of the story, I can't be bothered to write about every single island, and up until now I have been avoiding random adventures as much as I could.

That is for two reasons: one, the MC knows what's going around him most of the time, and such plans around eventual madness as much as he can, two, I'm not pulling an Oda. I can't, I'm not him, I don't have his resources, his time, his willingness to write whole arcs just to gain another crew member, nor the average level of dedication that a story like One Piece likely deserves.

Skipping all the parts not strictly necessary for this story to work has been the only compromise I have found between not writing this ff at all and trying out an SI-OC in the One Piece world. So, to the ones that pm me asking for chapters on this or that island, suggesting new OC or canon crewmembers... until I get down to setting up a pal tre! on! or something, I won't be doing any of those.

Anyway, I've started to return to the MC a measure of sanity, and settled for David Jones as a name, or Jones David as the people in One Piece write. Why, you may ask? Because I kept forgetting his name myself.

I wanted to avoid calling him David, as it's the same name of the SI-OC of my first ff, but at this point, since I'm unwilling to go back and rewrite, for reasons that vary between material ones (I don't have the time), or spiritual ones (it's a ff, I'm not rewriting something I do as a hobby), so I'm forced to stick with David Jones.

Canon is definitely crippled by now, we will see if I manage to kill it and torn its dead body asunder, I sure as hell I'm going to try.

I don't know if my explanation of Haki has been exposed by someone else already, I spent like... a week? something like that, trying to reconcile the mechanics of the world with the shark-woman on fisherman island seeing the future and the redhead kid in Baroque Works pulling off her magic mumbo jumbo without Devil Fruit. In my mind, powers come either from Devil Fruits, subcategories of Haki, or a combination of both, so King's disposition, which imposes your will upon others, could maybe (I hope so) mutate to grant Marianne her superpowers, and Observation with a crystal ball apparently allowed the shark-mermaid to see a confused version of the future.

One Piece is not really a universe meant to make sense, but I'm still trying, we're still some years before the beginning of canon, and I should reach that point by chapter 19, if I manage to follow my schedule, before December.

As to why I haven't put Renju on the crew? She is content playin' princess-superhuman so the MC had no offers to make, he is a generally no-nonsense person, and teetering to the whims of a royal only because she has tits and spits pink venom doesn't really compute in his mind.

What is the fruit taken from Germa? a lucky finding that allowed Robin to have something to barter for the Nagi Nagi no Mi.

Why would Law be interested into Rocinante's fruit? Apparently, in the One Piece world there is some sort of myth that states that the past users somewhat live on in the following users, at least I have understood it that way from the way both Luffy and Sabo scampered to reach the Mera Mera no Mi as soon as they heard about it. I took my clue also from how Blackbeard takes the stance to mimic Whitebeard to use the Gura Gura no Mi power.

It's likely been done to add some shock to the sudden power, and given the working theory I have on that Devil Fruits have something to do with souls, I don't see why it couldn't be so.